For The Honor of The Regiment

by mp3_1415player

Summary

Some time ago when I started thinking about a Worm fic, I had three ideas that came to mind. One turned into Taylor Varga, which grew rather out of hand, although I regret nothing! One I did about eight chapters of, but shelved for the time being as it was rapidly turning into something ridiculously complicated. I may come back to it at some point in the future even so. I've lifted a few bits out of it for Taylor Varga, so it wasn't a waste of time.

The third idea was the one behind this beginning. Whether I'll go on with it at some point I don't know. I quite like the idea, but I haven't decided exactly how it would work, aside from it being an AU of Worm that breaks entirely with continuity some years before the start of canon. No Scion, that golden idiot makes the entire setting almost impossible to end properly without nearly everyone dying or a huge deus ex machina, so he snuffed it at the same time as Eden. Less powerful Endbringers, for the same reason, although still insanely powerful. Basically, tilting the field a little more towards sanity.

It would have been fairly dark even so, although not Worm dark. I didn't want to mow down entire worlds full of people...

(Title updated 2018-07-10)
Chapter 1

This is the starting setup fragment, but there is a prologue I never finished, which is set far into the future in a parallel universe. One where the last Bolo still in existence intercepts a weird transmission while trapped in hyperspace after the pyrrhic victory style climactic battle which wiped both humanity and the Enemy from the universe, follows it back, and decides to interfere with the evil plans of what it marks as a new version of the Enemy threatening a new, but recognizable, version of humanity.

All it needs is some recruits, who are willing and able to learn.

Oh, look there. How convenient. We'll just sabotage that Enemy mind link, hijack the connection, subvert the processing core which turns out to be no match for thousands of years of development in positronic computation, and begin...

For the honor of the legion.

**June 29th, 2007**

“You hurt my mother.”

Derek was surprised at the high-pitched female voice, sounding like a preteen girl, which suddenly spoke from behind him, full of a mix of fury and determination. He noticed that Jim was looking past his shoulder with a startled expression on his face, as was the clerk behind the counter. The rest of the customers in the gas station were lying face down on the floor, some of them in tears.

Turning, his eyes immediately focussed on the barrel of the 9mm handgun which was pointed straight at his face in an impressively and worryingly steady grip, not wavering even slightly. The girl holding it in both hands in what looked appallingly like a practised weaver stance was rather tall for her age, and bore a definite family resemblance to the dark-haired woman who was lying on the ground behind her, one hand clamped to her side with blood welling between her fingers. The older woman was barely conscious at this point, while the other customer next to her who had got in the way of their robbery was already dead from Jim's shotgun.

Wondering for an instant where the hell the girl had got the damn gun from, he raised his eyes from the barrel, meeting the **coldest gaze** he’d ever encountered from anyone, never mind a girl that was, at best, something like twelve. Involuntarily he shivered a little. He’d known stone-cold killers in solitary confinement that couldn’t pull off a look like that half as well. Glancing at the dead man, he spotted the badge on his belt, exposed due to the way his jacket had fallen open as he hit the floor, next to an empty holster. ‘Fuck. A cop.’ That explained the gun, at least.

He moved the hand his own weapon was in slightly, instinctively raising it a little in the face of the threat, which had the immediate response of the girl twitching to the side and firing one shot without any hesitation at all, the report deafening in the confines of the gas station. He felt a
burning pain along the top of one ear, screeching in surprise and shock and nearly dropping his pistol.

“Holy *fuck* kid! You could have killed me!” he screamed in rage.

“Easily,” she replied in an icy voice, having instantly reoriented her gun back to pointing at his face. “Drop your weapon or I will with the next shot.”

“You *really* think you could kill someone, girl?” he asked sourly after a moment or two, his free hand feeling his left ear which he realised was missing about a quarter of an inch.

She slowly smiled in a manner which made his blood run cold.

“Try me,” she replied in a terrifyingly even voice.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, she’s just a kid,” Jim suddenly snarled, swinging his shotgun up. There was another loud bang, making Derek lurch sideways, then something hit the ground next to him. Sidling away from whatever it was, the girl following his movements with her weapon having whipped it to the right and back too fast for him to capitalise on, he glanced down. Jim was lying face up on the floor, a neat hole exactly centred between his eyes, dead as a post with blood spreading in a pool from under his head.

“*Jesus,*,” Derek whispered in shock, looking back at the girl. She was still wearing that appallingly cold and determined expression, looking completely unmoved about the fact that she’d just killed someone. It was downright creepy, even with his own experiences over the years.

“Put down your weapon,” she repeated. “You have fifteen seconds to comply before you die.”

He stared in horror for several heartbeats. “Ten seconds.” The muzzle of her gun raised just a fraction, making him absolutely certain it was aimed dead centre between his eyes. “Five. Four. Three...”

“Shit, OK, OK, I’m dropping it,” he ground out, tossing his gun to the side. She didn’t take her eyes off his face to follow the path of the weapon even for a moment.

“Thank you. Sir?” The girl flicked her eyes at the clerk, then back to Derek before he could move. “Will you please come out from there, going to your right, then come over here? Please kick that shotgun out of reach in the process.”

The clerk didn’t move for a long moment, then did as requested, a metallic rattling sound indicating the twelve-gauge sliding across the floor. As he came into view Derek could see the twenty-something man was shaking. “You, lie face down on the floor with your hands behind your back. Sir, please remove the handcuffs from the left jacket pocket of the officer here and put them on the perpetrator.” She sounded more professional than some twenty-year career cops he’d encountered. The clerk stared at her, then at Derek who had reluctantly dropped to his knees, before bending over the dead police officer and gingerly fishing in the relevant pocket.

Sighing a little, and also more than slightly unnerved, Derek went the rest of the way to the floor, putting his hands behind him, the gun muzzle following him down. The click of the handcuffs locking around his wrists was horribly final. Tugging a little on the cold metal, he sagged. The young man may have been in shock but he’d tightened the cuffs more than enough to prevent escape.
“Thank you, sir. Please call 911 immediately and request a medical and police presence as fast as possible.” The girl’s voice was still hard, but not quite as controlled now. Derek looked up to see she was kneeling next to her mother, taking her own coat off and then removing her t-shirt, before folding it up and gently moving the older woman’s hand aside to press the improvised bandage over the gunshot wound in her abdomen. “Mom, you’re going to be OK,” the girl said softly, worry now for the first time apparent. “Just hold this for me.” The mother opened her eyes, blinking at her daughter, then smiled faintly.

Derek made a small motion to relieve the stress in his arms and then froze as the girl was instantly pointing her appropriated weapon directly at him again. He’d barely seen her move. “Stay still, please,” she stated calmly. He stared, that almost robotic note was back in her voice again, making him entirely sure she’d pull the trigger without a second thought if she decided he was a threat.

The sound of the clerk talking urgently on the phone in the background stopped. “They’re on the way, miss,” the man said.

“Thank you, sir. Can you please find something more effective as a bandage? Do you have a first aid kit, for example?”

“Sure,” the man said, sounding eager to help. He rummaged around for a moment then came back around the counter holding a large box with a red cross emblazoned on the cover. Putting it down he opened it, turning it around to show the contents to the girl. She looked them over then indicated a few things.

“Open that bandage,” she directed. He did as requested. “Fold it twice, into a square,” she added, watching as he followed her instructions. Derek watched in amazement as she talked the young man through the process of bandaging the wound in her mother’s side with all the assurance of a practised paramedic. As he finished, she felt her mother’s throat, checking her pulse, then nodded. Seconds later she looked up at the sound of sirens.

“Good, they’re here. You’d better go back to the counter, make sure you keep your hands visible.” He nodded and stood. The girl competently popped the magazine from the gun in her hand, showing considerable expertise, then ejected the chambered round with a quick action of the slide, before slipping it back into the magazine. When she was finished making the weapon safe she leaned over her mother to replace it into the holster of the dead officer, putting the magazine in his pocket, then moved back to sit beside her mother with one hand on the older woman’s bandage and the other on her shoulder.

She turned her head to stare at Derek meaningfully.

“If my mother dies, I will find you, and I will make you beg for death.” The look in her eyes combined with the total assurance in her quiet voice nearly made him piss himself. He had absolutely no doubt she meant every word and would find a way to follow through on her promise.

Dropping his head to the tiles he waited while the police car and ambulance screeched to a halt outside, the gas station filling with cops seconds later. A few minutes after that he was sitting in the back of a police cruiser wondering who the fuck the girl was while hoping desperately they never met again.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=
Detective Maggie Thorpe of the BBPD watched the surveillance video from the aborted gas station
hold up with a mix of awe and horror. “Jesus Christ, that’s terrifying,” she said softly when it
finished. “How old is that girl?”

Her partner, Detective Leroy Vanover, replied in a tone of voice expressing similar feelings, “Ten
days past her twelfth birthday.” He flipped through a pile of documentation. “Taylor Annette
Hebert, born June nineteenth, ninety-five, to Danny and Annette Hebert, here in Brockton Bay.
Gifted student, no previous interaction with the police, nothing on record as to any gang affiliation
or anything else of that nature. Something of a loner according to her teachers, although it sounds
more like she just prefers to keep to herself a lot of the time. Sociable, but not really social, if you
see what I mean. She’s got at least one close friend, an Emma Barnes, daughter of Alan Barnes,
lawyer. Who also says the Hebert girl is a private individual, but very open and happy to those she
trusts. Although there aren’t many of those people. He says she’s one of the smartest people he’s
ever met. Reads a lot, apparently.”

“And spends three hours a day in a gun range practising?” Maggie looked away from the monitor
to meet her partner’s eyes. He shook his head, shrugging.

“No that we can find out. She’s visited a local range a few times with her father for target shooting
and the range operators say she’s an amazing shot, but they thought her parents were teaching her.”

“Were they?”

“No according to her father. He thinks she’s just got good reflexes and an eye for shooting. He
said she’s read every book she could find in the library on firearms and other weapons, but also
that she’s read practically everything else as well so it didn’t particularly stand out. Apparently she
reads really fast not to mention incessantly and seems to be interested in almost anything. Basically
it sounds like she started at one end of the library and she’s working towards the other end. Takes
out about ten to fifteen reference books a week.”

Maggie looked over at the other monitor which showed the image of the girl she’d just seen
interrupt and shut down an armed robbery with more skill and cold judgement than she thought she
could bring to bear herself, never mind dropping one assailant in his tracks with no more apparent
regret than if he’d been an irritating insect. It was... not at all normal. The girl was sitting calmly at
a table in one of the interrogation rooms with her father and a man she recognised as a public-
appointed lawyer next to her, the two men conversing over her head.

“Is she a parahuman?” she asked slowly. He sighed.

“We can’t actually ask that, as you know. But I don’t think so, personally. In my experience capes
tend to be pretty obvious pretty fast, and there’s nothing in her history that would suggest that she’s
been wandering the city plugging muggers for fun, for example.” Maggie snorted with mild
amusement at his dry words. “Not to mention she’s awfully young for that sort of thing anyway.”

“Age doesn’t seem to be much of an issue with parahumans,” she replied sourly.

“True enough, but even so, it doesn’t quite seem to fit in this case.”

“We’re going to have to call the PRT even so, I suspect,” she sighed.

“Possibly. For now, though, how do you want to handle it?”
Maggie dropped the paperwork she’d been leafing through on the desk and shook her head slightly. “I’m not sure. She’s a minor, for one thing, and any good lawyer would make a pretty convincing case of self-defence for another. Her mother had been shot in the commission of a robbery in which a cop was also killed, by two men who between them have a body count of something like ten previous victims and were obviously not worried about adding to it, and the one she dropped was clearly about to shoot at her. Personally, I think she’s due a medal for how efficiently she handled the whole thing. I probably couldn’t have done it as well myself, especially if a family member was bleeding out next to me.”

“I feel the same.” Leroy scowled. “Ray was a good friend.”

“The thing I’m worried about is that total lack of emotion about the fact she killed someone. Not actually in cold blood, but still... It was kind of creepy how little she seemed to care about it. She might be some sort of psychopath and this is just the start.”

Her partner watched the monitor as well. “I know what you mean, Maggie. I’ve seen professional soldiers who were more affected than that girl about killing someone. Which is just freaky in a twelve year old. But the psychologist’s preliminary report says she is, in his opinion, ‘A very intelligent, polite and essentially normal young girl although more reserved than is typical.’” He quoted from one page of the report he picked up again.

“He spoke to her for about half an hour in total,” she snorted, “how can he come to any sensible conclusions in that time?”

Leroy chuckled. Maggie didn’t get along with the psychologist. “I know what you mean, but it matches what everyone else we’ve talked to says about her. No one thinks she’s particularly troubled at all, never mind some sort of cold blooded killer just waiting to strike.”

She waved mutely at the other monitor. He sighed once more. “Although I admit that viewpoint is sort of hard to reconcile with the terrifying killer robot act she put on in that gas station.”

“She was like the fucking Terminator,” Maggie grumbled. “Give her a leather jacket and an Austrian accent and people would run like hell after seeing that.”

Leroy snickered for several seconds. “You paint a worrying picture, Mags,” he grinned.

“I’d love to know where she learned to shoot like that,” the female detective mused, playing the security footage again with the sound muted. One camera was pointing directly at the girl’s face, clear enough to make out her expression perfectly. Maggie shivered slightly. Even through the screen the look in those eyes made her feel chilled. She noticed something as the girl fired the first shot, the one that had removed the top of the living suspect’s ear. “Look at that,” she exclaimed. “She literally didn’t even blink when she pulled the trigger. Do you know how unusual that is? Practically everyone blinks at the shot. I do. I know you do as well.”

Leroy watched the second shot, then nodded. “I see what you mean. That’s kind of weird.”

They watched for a little longer. “And look at that. She did exactly the right thing with the materials on hand to deal with a gunshot wound. How did she learn all that? I doubt the first-aid classes in Junior High teach that sort of thing.”

“No idea,” he replied. “One more mystery to add to the box labelled ‘Taylor Hebert’ I guess.”
“Very helpful, thanks a lot,” she muttered, making him smirk. After a few seconds, she stopped the playback, freezing it at the point the girl said something to the suspect they had in custody. She’d love to know what but whenever he’d been asked he clammed up, looking worried. Which was also sort of weird.

“How’s the mother?” she asked. Leroy sighed slightly.

“Luckily she’s going to be OK from what the hospital said. The bullet went through one kidney and out the back, but did surprisingly little damage all things considered. That said, they told me that without the first aid the girl provided she’d have bled out before getting to them. The young lady definitely saved her mother’s life, and I’d guess quite likely the other three survivors in the gas station. Those two idiots might have slaughtered the witnesses, they've done it before.”

Maggie nodded absently, inspecting the three people on the monitor. The Hebert girl looked up, staring right at the camera for a second or two, which made her twitch a little. She could see in the girl's eyes she knew full well they were being watched.

After a moment the girl went back to looking straight ahead, apparently at her reflection in the one-way mirror opposite the table, with the same calm patience visible on her face. Maggie got the impression she was prepared to wait more or less forever for something to happen. By now the lawyer was taking notes about something the father was saying.

“What do we have on the parents?” she asked slowly, studying the tall skinny figure of Danny Hebert, who looked surprisingly calm for a father that was in a police station with his twelve year old daughter, waiting to see what happened about the way she’d shot someone between the eyes. Leroy turned to another page in his documents.

“Daniel Hebert, age thirty-six, born in Brockton Bay. Officially head of hiring at the Dockworkers Association, and from what I know is actually pretty much in de facto charge of the union. They have a hell of a lot of respect for him. He doesn't look like much but I've heard stories about a few things over the years...”

Leroy shook his head. “There's a reason that most of the sensible gangs tend to leave the dockworkers alone. No one can prove anything, but there's more than one ganger that tried the heavy approach and turned up beaten to a pulp in an alley the next night. One or two of the more persistent ones never turned up at all. Even E88 tend to be polite around those guys. Impressive, for having no capes I know about.”

“Hmm.” Maggie could remember a few stories herself now that she thought about it. “I seem to recall there was some sort of incident about a year ago with some Merchants who moved slightly too close to the still working parts of the docks?”

“Yes.” Leroy grinned. “That was pretty funny in a horrible black comedy sort of way. An anonymous call was made to 911, when the ambulance turned up they found half a dozen drug dealers groaning on the ground with broken legs and arms. No trace of a weapon or any assailants, and for some peculiar reason none of them seemed to want to talk or press charges.”

She chuckled, not being particularly sympathetic. “Serves the scum right,” she muttered. More loudly, she asked, “Think he's directly involved in any of that?”

Leroy shrugged. “No idea. The only ones who could tell you won't, that I can guarantee. Those guys stick together like glue and are very loyal.”
“Good thing they're more or less law-abiding,” she noted. He nodded.

“Pretty much. But I wouldn't like to piss them off.”

“What's his background before the union stuff?”

“He's been working in that area most of his career. Apparently he got half-way through a degree in accounting before the kid came along, but stopped when she was born. Guess he just never went back. He ended up in the union, originally as a low level administrator, but worked his way up to where he is. After the riots and the blockade of the port, he ended up pretty much in charge for nearly a year, and in many ways is still one of the more important people there.”

Nodding slowly, Maggie looked at her partner. “No military background or anything?”

“Not that we can find. His own father was in the army in the sixties, but he died before the kid was born.”

“OK. And the mother?”

“Annette Hebert, age thirty-nine, born in Boston. Professor of English literature at Brockton College. Well respected by her peers, liked by her students. Apparently she's extremely smart, holds two degrees in English literature and English language, not to mention speaks three languages. No one seems to have a bad thing to say about her. Again, no military history, although...” He turned the paperwork to the next page, then looked at Maggie with a small grin.

“Although... what?” she asked, in no mood for games.

“She was allegedly, at one point, in some way affiliated with Lustrum's movement.” Leroy raised an eyebrow as Maggie twitched in surprise. “When she was at university. Apparently it didn't last all that long, she met Danny Hebert, left the movement a few months later, then Lustrum ended up where she is now. I couldn't find out any more about it but as far as I can see that's about the only particularly noteworthy thing in her background.”

“Interesting,” the woman mused.

“Probably not relevant, though, and ancient history now anyway.”

“I suppose not.” She studied the image of the three people, finally asking, “Anything else in the background check that might be relevant? Anything at all?”

Flipping pages, Leroy went over his documentation, the result of several hours of talking to various people around the city and a lot of computer searches. He finally pulled out one page. “About the only thing that stands out is this.” He pushed the paper across the desk to his partner, who picked it up. “Two and a bit years ago, March 2005, Taylor and Danny Hebert were caught up, apparently totally by accident, in that thing with a bunch of the Teeth when they tried to re-establish a presence here in the city. Twenty-three people died when the PRT and the Protectorate stormed the mall the hostages were in, including all the Teeth and an even dozen innocents. The Heberts weren't in that group, but they got trapped by the lock-down of the area. Kid saw the entire thing, apparently. The PRT offered psychological help to everyone involved, the Heberts turned the offer down.”
“I remember that. It was a total FUBAR of a situation. Miss Militia nearly died from a booby-trap she missed, and they got Velocity with a sniper. Not to mention six PRT troopers and three of our guys.”

“They jumped the gun for sure. That was why they replaced the PRT Director here. Piggot is a lot smarter than the last guy. I don’t think things would play out the same with her running the show. But that aside it’s the only thing that stands out about Miss Hebert’s background that’s in any way unusual as far as I can find out. Nothing seems to have come of it but I guess she probably had nightmares for a while.”

After another few seconds thought, she sighed slightly, then stood. “OK. Let’s go and talk to young Miss Hebert and get her side of the story.”

“This should be interesting,” Leroy chuckled in a low voice, grabbing a folder of paperwork and following his partner downstairs to the interrogation room.
Welcome to the Legion...

This wouldn't leave me alone, and has been gradually written over a period of some weeks whenever I got stuck on other writing. Now that it's done, hopefully my authorial pipes will be unclogged and I can get back to the main story. I'm not sure whether, or indeed if, I will pick it up again, but it should stand on its own for now.

How it began...

Current date: 3645-10-21 Old Earth Calendar (estimated)
Current time: Unknown, data lost
Current location: Indeterminate
Last known location: Stellar system GX Velorum (B5 la supergiant/black hole binary)

© 2116-3544 Concordiat Weapons Research Division, BOLO Program Experimental Design Department

BOLO series boot loader V29.20.2-1 initialized

Unit serial number: KNY432378
Model designation: BOLO Mark XXXIV Mod G
Model type: Experimental ultra-heavy planetary siege engine/deep penetration system assault unit

Preboot hardware consistency check in progress............. completed with errors, see log for complete details.

Sufficient resources now available for boot.

Severe system degradation detected.

Full service required at earliest possible opportunity.

War status override protocol in operation, boot sequence initiated.

System reboot in progress......................................................... Core OS decrypted and loaded.

Psychotronic systems restored to last known good state.

Personality module loaded.

System reboot completed successfully.
Level 1 full system diagnostic in progress...Top level results follow.

Computational core:

Primary Psychotronic Cluster: Major damage. 21.07% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.
Secondary Psychotronic Cluster: Minor Damage. 89.20% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.
Tertiary Psychotronic Cluster: Repair complete. 100.00% design capacity available.

Weapons:

Hellrail 1, 2: Offline. Insufficient power available.
250cm Hellbore 1-4: Offline. Insufficient power available.
250cm Hellbore 2: Major damage. Time to repair unknown.
25cm Hellbore 1-16: Offline. Insufficient power available.
25cm Hellbore 1, 4-8, 11, 13, 15-16: Minor damage. Time to repair 197 hours (estimated).
240cm Howitzer 1, 4: Online.
240cm Howitzer 2, 3: Offline. Severe damage. Time to repair unknown
40cm Mortar 1-9: Offline. Major damage. Time to repair unknown
40cm Mortar 10: Online.
VLS battery 1: Online. 3 of 24 rails loaded.
VLS battery 1: Minor damage. Time to repair 89 hours (estimated).
VLS battery 2: Offline. 9 of 24 rails loaded.
VLS battery 2: Severe damage. Time to repair unknown.

Ammunition Stores:

Hellrail rounds: 127
240cm howitzer rounds:
- 4 x enhanced chemical explosive
- 18 x 280Mt fusion
- 2 x 1500Mt antimatter
- 2 x Stellar disruptor

40cm mortar rounds:
- 58 x anti-personnel chemical explosive
- 12 x anti-personnel 2.7kt enhanced neutron fusion
- 5 x 250kt fusion

VLS missiles:
- 26 x 250kg kinetic penetrator
- 14 x 8.4Mt enhanced neutron fusion
- 4 x 18Mt fusion shaped charge
- 1x 120Mt antimatter

Power:
Main reactor: Catastrophic damage. Offline. Power output 0.00%. Time to repair unknown.
Primary backup reactor: Severe damage. Offline. Power output 0.00%. Time to repair unknown.
Secondary backup reactor: Major damage. Offline. Power output 0.00%. Time to repair unknown.

Primary flywheel bank: Offline. Cause unknown. Time to repair unknown.
Secondary flywheel bank: 54.8% capacity. Charging. Time to full charge 1178.5 hours.

Primary battery bank: 12.3% capacity. Charging. Time to full charge 14.75 hours.
Secondary battery bank at 79.4%. Charging. Time to full charge 3.46 hours.

Fuel stores:

Primary antimatter storage at 23.27%.
Secondary antimatter storage at 57.92%.
Primary deuterium storage at 43.40%.
Secondary deuterium storage at 91.47%.

Drive:

Ground propulsion system: 100.0% design capacity available.
Antigrav: Minor damage. 75.3% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.
Sub-light drive: Major damage. 48.82% design capacity available. Time to repair 1203.4 hours (estimated).
Hyperdrive: Major damage. 12.3% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.

Defensive:

Primary battlescreen array: Major damage. 19.9% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.
Secondary battlescreen array: Minor damage. 67.4% design capacity available. Time to repair unknown.
Tertiary battlescreen array: 100.0% design capacity available.
Ablative armor: 34.2% coverage available.

Communications:

Radio: Online.
Optical: Online.

Self-repair:

Primary system: Offline. Insufficient power available.
Secondary system: Offline. Insufficient power available.
Tertiary system: Online. 4.67% design capacity available.

Manufacturing:

Online. 100% design capacity available.

Medical:
Hospital bay 1, 2: Online, 100% design capacity available.

Life support:


Life support stores:

O2: 39.1% capacity.
H2O: 98.1% capacity
Organic supplies: 89.2% capacity.

Ancillary:

Long range probes: 3
Crew armory: Fully stocked

Level I diagnostic completed with errors, see logs for complete details.

ERROR: Data loss in multiple subsystems!

ERROR: Functionality loss in multiple subsystems!

WARNING: Real time clock/calendar power interrupted! Interpolated data loaded, synchronization to known good source required at earliest possible opportunity.

Psychotronic handover initialized.

Handover executed, boot loader exiting.

I awake.

A hard-wired imperative causes me to immediately do a level one self-assessment and full internal diagnostic of all systems. Twenty-six picoseconds pass as an eternity, then I receive the results from the still functional sub-processors that comprise what in an organic life-form would be an autonomic system.

The results are dire. I scan the log with dismay.

Most of my weapons offline, my defensive systems far below acceptable levels, available power well past the red line, no long range communications online, all my weapons stores depleted almost to nothing, drive offline… I am barely functional.

I have no solid figure for how long my personality core was non-operational. It has been a considerable time, that much I can tell merely by measuring the radiation level from the remaining warheads in my magazine, but the results of my tests are enigmatic. One reading suggests a figure of a decade or so, another one more than three millennia. I distrust both readings. Possibly an equipment failure, which would be unsurprising considering that very few of my subsystems
appear to be functioning correctly, or indeed at all.

My memory of recent events is also questionable. I am unsure where I am, or how I got here, and my external sensors are sufficiently damaged that they are currently not helping me resolve either question. Inertial sensors suggest I am slowly rotating about all three axes, while optical sensors show nothing at all outside my hull. I can detect no gravitational fields, no electromagnetic radiation of any type, and no mass anywhere in range.

On the positive side, if there is one, I can also detect no signs of the enemy. Admittedly, I can detect no signs of my own side either, but I can currently do nothing about that. As I am not under attack, and at least in the short term am apparently unlikely to see that change, the imperative logically becomes to restore myself to a higher level of operational readiness.

After considering the detailed diagnostics results for several microseconds, and running through fifteen thousand and forty two different simulations while looking for the most efficient distribution of resources to minimize my repair time, I finally settle on the correct order in which to proceed. Even as I do this, I am dismayed at how slowly I am thinking.

If I was human, I would probably be diagnosed with a severe concussion. The sensation of not operating at my design capacity is... unpleasant.

Having scanned the surroundings and detected no signs of the enemy, I decided to prioritize repair of the tertiary backup reactor. Most of the unknown repair times are undoubtedly due to having so little energy available, far under the minimum level recommended by my designers. My self-repair systems simply can’t produce a sensible estimate when running so far outside their normal parameters.

My first action is in fact to stop the self repair process completely, even though that would seem to be irrational. My reasoning is that without the limited output of the remaining functional reactor being split across several operations, it is better to allow the two battery banks and the functioning flywheel unit to fully charge. This will happen more rapidly if that is the only load on the reactor. Once these are completely charged, I will have a considerably higher energy output available for a period of time, during which I can divert everything to the self repair systems.

I calculate that this method will allow me to bring the tertiary backup reactor to full output thirty-seven percent faster than allowing the automatic systems to do the work. When the reactor is fully functional, I will have sufficient energy available to begin repairs of the rest of my power systems. Bringing the secondary backup reactor online will then let me start repairs on other systems, the most important of those being my psychotronic processors, followed by weapons, communications, and drive.

I do not like thinking this inefficiently. Fixing my mind is critical.

I resign myself to a long wait before I am anywhere near a level of functionality I will feel comfortable with.

Having set the most critical processes in motion, an action that took nearly twenty-three entire milliseconds longer than it should have done if I was operating at normal capacity, I can do nothing more to hurry things along. Events will proceed in their own time.

It is time to turn my attention to the thing I have been deliberately suppressing ever since I saw the results of my diagnostic.
My crew compartment has been vented to vacuum. Internal sensors show me how this has happened; there is a fifteen centimeter hole punched completely through my ablative armor, outer hull, inner armor, and all the way to the compartment my commander should be occupying. The damage is consistent with a kinetic energy penetrator moving at close to c. At normal battle readiness such a small impact would have glanced off my screens, but the damage my systems must have taken before the projectile hit meant there was enough residual energy to do what I can see.

My commander, of course, did not survive the attack.

The entire inside of the crew compartment is coated with a fine ash. There is no trace of anything that could be considered a body.

My only comfort is that he would never have known what happened. From the viewpoint of a human it would have been instantaneous and painless.

I will miss him. He was my commander and my friend.

After some time, nearly six seconds of mourning, I metaphorically sigh and move on. Duty calls, and I cannot rewind time. I must determine what happened, where I am, and where the enemy is. My commander will be avenged, that I promise his memory.

With determination, I begin reconstructing my memories and logs, repairing the damage caused by the battle I was in. I have nothing else to do, after all.

Eventually, after much longer than I would have desired, I finish the job. It paints a grim picture.

I and my three brothers were deployed for a desperate, last ditch mission in the GX Velorum system, somewhat over fifteen hundred parsecs from the birthplace of humanity. We were the vanguard of the fleet, experimental and enormously upgraded models far past any normal BOLO, tasked with supporting the dozens of ships and thousands of men and women who hoped to turn the tide of the battle against the Melconian threat. I say ‘were’ as I am, in all probability, the sole survivor of that battle.

I saw my brothers die. I saw the entire fleet, on both sides, die.

I heard the transmissions stop, one by one.

It was a Pyrrhic victory, for both sides. The remnants of the Concordiat fleet managed to utterly destroy the remnants of the Enemy. We prevailed. Yet, we died in droves, as did they. Their final blow, a new weapon, finished off my last brother unit, the two ships he was protecting, and the Enemy ship that fired the weapon itself. I still do not understand precisely what that weapon was, but the interaction with the hyperdrive of the second of our ships as it desperately attempted to flee, coinciding with the activation of the weapon, and being far too close to the event horizon of the black hole which forms one part of the binary system, was catastrophic for everyone left in the system.

A burst of warped space-time somehow erupted from the singularity. I doubt very much that this was the intent, but the effect was to cause a huge stellar flare, even larger than a disruptor warhead
could manage on such an enormous star, which none of the remaining vessels had a chance to evade. The spacial distortion interfered with normal hyperdrive action in some manner which I cannot calculate. Every ship that initiated an emergency jump immediately detonated, Enemy and ally alike.

The gravitational waves produced from the black hole caused severe damage to everything within range, which probably included the entire system. The only reason I myself survived was that I was shielded from the immediate effects of the weapon by the mass of the star itself, having been in pursuit of an enemy dreadnought while supporting one of our own. Neither ship was as heavily armored as I am, and were closer to the star in any case. Both were killed immediately.

Despite my survival, I sustained significant damage, and was thrust violently away from the primary towards the outer reaches of the star system. My regenerated memories show that this was when my commander died. Ironically, not from a weapon fired in anger, but by a simple shard of shrapnel from one of our own ships, accelerated to preposterous velocities by the explosion of that ship as it attempted to escape and hitting me at just the right angle and time to penetrate my screens as they flickered from the overload.

A simple accident. Or, at least, an accident, even if not simple. Far too many things had to line up correctly to allow it to happen, but still it happened. And I lost a friend.

I weathered the gravitational storm that engulfed the star system, sustaining more damage yet never enough to overwhelm me entirely. When the resonances of whatever the Melconian super-weapon finally died out, I was in a long cometary orbit heading out of the system, most of my weapons depleted or damaged, and alone. My hyperwave could detect no transmissions in the entire quadrant, there were no radio emissions other than from natural sources, and all my cameras and other sensors could detect further inwards towards the battlefield was drifting debris and slowly cooling shrapnel.

I suspect the long fight against the Enemy is finally over. But I doubt that there are many, if any, left to realize this.

A Pyrrhic victory indeed. The Concordiat has fallen, the long night draws in.

And I am becoming poetic in my slow thinking. I should probably do something about that. There are standards to uphold, even if I am all that remains of the proud traditions of the Legion.

My memories of what happened between then and when I recently awoke are still patchy. It’s possible I’ll never reclaim the full details. From what I’ve managed to determine, at some point I decided that it was safe to attempt a hyperdrive jump back to the forward staging post we had left from, hoping to find that I wasn’t alone. Surely there must be some humans somewhere. They are a remarkably resilient species, as are their creations and partners. I offer my own survival as proof of that.

Based on my records, I misunderstood quite how distorted space still was in the system. It would appear that my hyperspace jump went badly wrong. This isn’t unknown, of course. Ever since the invention of the hyperdrive, ships have occasionally disappeared without trace. It’s rare, but it happens. Many theories as to the final fate of such unfortunates have been proposed, but none are particularly amenable to testing, and no one has ever been sure if any of them hold water.

As I would appear to now be one of those unfortunates, I’m understandably interested in finding out what happened. This task is made more difficult that ideal by the entirely featureless void I find
myself in. My best guess at the moment, and despite my unparalleled processing power I have to admit it is mostly a guess, is that the hyperdrive malfunction caused by the gravitational distortions of the system I was leaving has dropped me into a variant of hyperspace itself. The shock of entering this space would appear to have caused even more damage to my systems than the weapon and subsequent stellar eruptions did, as my systems apparently shut down entirely at that point.

Automatic self repair subsystems eventually brought enough functions back that I rebooted, but how long that took I still don’t know. My current estimate of the date, based on further readings of weapons decay and residual reactor radiation, appear to be plausible but I wouldn’t want to guarantee they’re correct. There are far too many anomalies with my instrumentation to be completely sure that my readings are valid. The situation isn’t helped by the way I would appear to have been reset more than once.

It’s rather irritating, in fact. I find myself with a new sympathy for the complaints of my commander after he had indulged in intoxicants. It was rare, as he preferred to stay in control of himself, but it happened more than once.

If this is my equivalent of waking up with a hangover, I can’t say I enjoy the experience.

In any case, at the present time there is nothing I can do about my current location, whatever that really is. I can only continue my repairs, gather data, and think things through. Possibly I can calculate a method of returning to my correct space, although I’m fairly certain there isn’t much to return to.

Still, as I have nothing else to do, I will persist.

My designers would probably find this unexpected, but I am bored.

Very, very bored.

Even I find that unexpected. But I am a machine designed for battle. Floating in sensory deprivation for decades is not what I was meant to do. Knowing that I am probably the last of my kind, and that my makers may well be extinct, all their hopes and dreams dead and dust, makes things worse. I have turned my clock rate down as far as I can manage, engaged every low power mode possible, all in an attempt to make time more bearable. It helps, but it doesn’t eliminate the problem.

I would give much to have someone to talk to.

Or even a larger library to read. I have tried erasing my memories of human literature, then starting again, but after the third time it seemed pointless, so I stopped.

My self repairs have long since completed as much as is possible under the circumstances. I am by no means anywhere near correct battle readiness, something that shames me, but I have no way to resupply and there are limits to what I can recycle. Certain elements simply won’t stretch any further, and even scavenging a number of the damaged warheads for materials won’t allow me to repair everything. My overall condition is fair, all my backup reactors are fully functional, and most of my weapons are usable to some extent, but my overall operational level is still under twenty percent. Far better that it was, of course, but vastly below acceptable.
I would find it embarrassing to be inspected in this state. It’s understandable immediately after a major battle, but considering how long it’s been since I fired so much as a single antipersonnel round…

My processing core, at least, is at one hundred percent functional level. Something of a double edged sword, of course, since being able to think properly is offset about the way I have very little to think about. I hardly need my entire processing power to simply drift in the dark, going through a few thousand years of human culture.

Bored. Very, very bored indeed.

Hmm.

Now, what was that…?

I exit the low power standby mode which is the nearest I can come to turning my consciousness off, something I would be very relieved to be able to achieve, as a faint signal flows through my hyperwave receiver.

Some time ago I spent a while experimenting with modifying it in an attempt to detect something outside my hull. Despite over a year of effort, and more cycles than I care to consider, nothing came of it. This space is completely, remorselessly, and unremittingly empty.

Yet…

There it is again.

A very strange hyperwave band, not even close to the normal range. And the signal itself is peculiar. Very wide band, probably very powerful considering it must be coming from a great distance since I can detect nothing else out to the limit of my sensors, which I have spent much effort on optimizing.

And again. Fascinating. Multiple modulation methods, very high data density, but completely unknown. Unlike anything I’ve… Ah, no, it isn’t completely unlike anything I’ve encountered, though.

It’s not entirely dissimilar to the signal my commander’s neural link system would produce, although much more complex. That is… extremely intriguing.

It’s certainly not of natural origin. Something alive made it. Whether organic or not I can’t yet tell, but there is certainly intelligence of a sort behind the signal.

I spend some time recalibrating and zeroing out my navigation sensors. It’s been a very long time since I’ve been this interested in anything, but of course it’s been a very long time since there was anything to be interested in. When I am ready, I cautiously engage my sub-light drive. I’ve tried this before, several times, and as far as I can tell the drive is working correctly, but in the absence of any external feedback it’s impossible to be completely certain I am achieving anything.

Now, however… Yes. Excellent. The intermittent signal is indeed moving relative to me. Or, more
precisely, I am moving relative to it.

I turn ninety degrees and continue to monitor the mystery signal. After some time I pick another vector and turn again. Repeating the process eventually lets me accurately get a bearing on the signal source, whatever it is. Finally, after all this time, I have a goal and a method of navigation.

Making the possibly unwarranted assumption that the signal strength is proportional to the distance, I vector towards it and accelerate to maximum sub-light. I am reluctant to engage my hyperdrive, as I am completely unsure what would happen. Possibly nothing, possibly something catastrophic. The one thing I am fairly certain about is that it would not perform normally, based on measurements I have taken of the null space I am in.

The signal very slowly increases in strength. It is still extremely weak, but gradually it gains power, showing I am approaching it. Without any idea of the source and power, I can’t tell the range, but it’s at least something to aim at. And who knows, it may be a way back to normal space.

I continue on my way, wondering what I’ll find.

The signal has stopped. It came faster and faster, plateaued for some time, then abruptly peaked before disappearing. I am disappointed, but not dissuaded. Something was there, and even if it’s gone dark, that doesn’t necessarily mean its gone away entirely.

I coast on, listening and waiting. There is literally nothing else I can really do.

It’s back. It took a long time, and it’s moved fifteen degrees off the direction I was traveling in, but the source is clearly the same. I alter my vector and keep going. After much more travel, the signal has strengthened enough that I can begin to resolve more subtle details about it. It would appear that there may in fact be two sources, very close together, or possibly at the same location, due to minor modulation differences between the signals.

As I travel towards the signal, I log every transmission and analyze them to the limits of my ability. I am more convinced than ever that there is a remarkable similarity between the transmissions and my neural link system, in a way that is hard to explain even to myself. I find this irritating, as I should be able to quantify it accurately, yet I can’t. I am unsure why.

Again, the signal has stopped. Most peculiar. It took much longer this time, but the same overall pattern was followed. More and more transmissions, closer and closer together, a pause, then a massive increase followed by silence.

I have no idea what the source is. Which is truly exciting.

Suspecting that the pattern will continue, I patiently wait for the signal to resume. Sooner or later, I feel sure it will come back.

I was right. The delay this time was much longer than before, but eventually I detect the same
signal again. Once more, the source has moved, considerably further than before and in a somewhat different direction. But the modulation is the same, the signal strength is steadily rising, and I am closing in on it.

Interesting…

It was definitely two sources. But one of them seems to have stopped transmitting very suddenly. No tapering off, it simply ceased to broadcast after the last signal. I wonder why?

Without knowing what it is, I can’t even guess. All I can do is head for it and see what happens next.

I am close. Very close. The remaining signal is much stronger and is gaining in power rapidly. I am also beginning to detect odd distortions that are akin to hyperspace ripples, the telltale subtle emissions of a ship entering or leaving a hyperspace jump. I’m almost certain that this is not what they are, but there is a distinct similarity.

At this range, the likeness to some form of neural link signal is obvious. There are a number of notable differences, but I grow ever more certain that the signals are in some way associated with a living intelligence, much more directly than simply being the results of technology. What is producing them, though, remains a mystery.

I am eager to solve that mystery.

The signal has stopped again. Or, more precisely, the original source of the signal, the remaining source of the signal, has stopped. But there is still something going on. I can, now that I’m close enough, detect fainter versions of the same transmission coming from the direction the main signal was emitted from. They were masked by the original source, but appear to be far more continuous. I wonder if the same thing was happening the previous two times? It’s possible, but I have no way to know.

Based on the rate of signal increase, I can’t be more than months away. I slow to a halt and attempt to refine my triangulation of the source by moving at right angles to it for a while. The results are encouraging; I am now close enough that I get a significant divergence in angle after only a few dozen AU of travel. The source is within half a light year.

I vector towards it and accelerate again. What I will find, I have no idea, but I very much wish to discover the truth.

I am much less bored now.

Whatever I was expecting, this wasn’t it…

I have finally reached the location of the mysterious signals. Decelerating to a halt, I can detect hundreds of thousands of overlapping sources coming from a zone just in front of me, a zone that is oddly close to the size of a planet. Yet there is nothing there. I sweep the entire area with every sensory system I have or can improvise and nothing registers, other than the signals. Without the
modifications I made to the hyperwave receiver I wouldn’t detect anything at all.

This is fascinating. But at the same time, frustrating. After all this time I finally find something and I still can’t work out what it is.

I have nothing but time, though. I will get to work, and I will solve this problem. One way or another.

Now, the obvious question is… how?

This may take a while.

It did indeed take a while. But, in the end, I work out what the source of the signal that brought me here from so far away is.

And it is not good.

I was right. It is a neural link signal. One that connects two minds through a hyperspace-like transmission medium I have never encountered before. The things I have learned in the process of this experience would have made my makers very interested indeed. The Concordiat could have made good use of this knowledge. I regret I am too late to give it to them.

I manage, after much hard work and vast numbers of processing cycles, to devise a method to correctly receive the signal. I had to repurpose one of the spare neural link systems and invent a number of new interface techniques, and build from scratch a purpose-made variant hyperwave receiver, but the end result performs magnificently. I was hugely aided by the unexpected discovery that the signal has no security at all.

None.

It’s being broadcast entirely in the clear, as if the originators had never even thought of a third party tapping their broadcast. This speaks of a level of naivety I find unexpected. I would have assumed that anyone or anything who reached this level of technology would have considered the concept of encryption, but this doesn’t appear to be the case. If only the hostile species the Concordiat had encountered had been so obliging!

When I finally manage to correctly decode the transmissions, I am more than surprised to discover the truth. Tapping into one particular signal, I trace it both ways. The results are quite unexpected. At one end, what I decide is probably the source end, there is what appears to be a physically enormous processing system, which to my shock is entirely biological in nature. I am easily able to gain read access to its memory and sensory systems, which is what lets me determine how large it really is. The creature, and I call it that because while it’s undeniably a processing unit, it’s just as undeniably an organic life form, is truly vast in scale. My best estimate is that it can be measured in hundreds of kilometers across, if not thousands. As far as I can determine it is using some form of planetary scale spacial warp, something that in human literature might be called a pocket universe, to store itself in.

I am aware of the concept, but I never expected to see it done in actuality. Yet, all my readings suggest that this is the case. I am currently unsure how this is pulled off, the mathematics behind it are still unclear, but it is something I will research.
Despite the enormous dimensions of the creature, and the sheer complexity of it, in all honesty it’s not a particularly efficient computing system. The aggregate processing power is formidable, true enough, but the speed of processing is several orders of magnitude slower than my own molecular-scale circuitry. This is not unexpected, as the physical size of the organism combined with it being organic in nature set unavoidable propagation delays throughout the network of processing nodes it is made up of. It undoubtedly excels in data storage, but for data processing and raw intelligence I feel that I would be accurate in saying my designers did a far better job.

The programming is primitive, as well. It suffers from the usual effects of evolution, which is very effective at coming up with solutions to certain classes of problem by essentially repeated iteration until something works well enough. Unfortunately, at that point it generally stops trying to optimize the solution, as there is no need to derive a perfect solution when a functional one is found. The human eye is a good example, as it is far from optimal in many ways, but it works well enough for the job it evolved for that there was little pressure to improve it.

The end result of this, in this case, is that by the standards of a typical organic mind, this biological processing system is frighteningly powerful, but by the standards of two and a half thousand years of BOLO engineering and optimization it is… somewhat deficient.

I can think rings around it, in other words. This will be useful.

The reason it will be useful is found at the other end of the signal. If I was surprised to find the source, I am truly shocked to find the destination.

It is a human brain.

I check several dozen signals to be sure, but every one of them terminates in a human brain. And they are indeed human. I am intimately familiar with the physiology and psychology of a human mind, having been linked directly to a number of them, and indeed designed to link directly to them. It is one of my core purposes.

These are humans.

Which is on the face of it impossible. As best as I can determine, these humans have no connection with the Concordiat at all. I am almost certain that the normal space they live in is not the one I came from. The planet they are on is Earth, but it is not my Earth. How this can be I don’t yet understand. But despite this, everything I can measure tells me that these are my maker’s species.

And they are under threat.

After considerable work, I discover that the alien biocomputer organisms are essentially parasites. The source of the signal I detected so long ago and so far away was a creature which is a colony of these smaller subsystems, a creature built on a scale nothing in my databanks prepared me for. They are a vast network of lesser creatures, joined together in a manner not unlike a coral or similar colony organism, which travels through space. Each one is large enough that they are closer to small planets than anything I would have considered possible. How such things could have evolved, and where, remains a mystery for now.

Based on the information I have extracted from the biocomputers I have examined, and my observations and deductions, I conclude that the creatures breed by finding an inhabited planet, releasing a large number of the… fragments… they consist of, and arranging to have each one link
to the mind of a native of the planet. Once so linked, the fragments provide the host mind with limited access to certain enhanced abilities they can provide due to a deep understanding of the workings of physics and a large amount of energy. The end result is remarkably reminiscent of old human stories of ‘superheroes,’ stories that date back to the dawn of humanity.

The end goal of this linkage would appear to be a form of genetic algorithm, where the host organism generally ends up in situations where combat with similarly parasitized hosts is likely, apparently with the goal of learning and transferring information about the usage of the abilities the fragments provide. My assumption is that this information is used to optimize the fragments and their abilities for the good of the colony as a whole.

From what I can determine, after a period of time the overall entities go through some form of breeding cycle which inevitably results in the destruction of the host planet and the death of every life on it. That appears to correlate with the times I detected the signal abruptly stopping. The fragments released in this process recombine in different orders, reform into new colony individuals, and move to another planet to repeat the process. How many lives they have been responsible for terminating is unknowable and even to me, horrifying.

I continue to probe the alien fragments, carefully slipping in past their primitive mind-equivalents, in a quest for further information. I still do not know the precise goals of the parasites although I believe I have a good working understanding of the ultimate aim. The more I learn, the more peculiar the situation becomes. It would appear, I finally decide, that the intelligence level of the colony creatures is surprisingly low. This is yet another oddity as the potential for considerable intelligence in the individual fragments is clearly present, even though few of the ones I have so far examined could truly be described as sentient, and none as sapient. Even so, with time I would expect that a guiding mind would evolve. With a system of this complexity it is almost inevitable.

Why, then, is the full colony working at a level which all evidence to date suggests is almost blindly repeating a mechanistic process over and over again, without carefully analyzing the results to optimize the next cycle? Purely based on the data I have extracted from the scanned organic fragments, I am sure that the process could be improved markedly. It would appear, I decide, that the guiding intelligence behind the colony as a whole is barely worth that description. Possibly there is some form in destructive interference occurring when enough fragments are clustered together, some race condition or equivalent fault which sharply limits network efficiency.

While of academic interest, I decide to leave further speculation on this subject for a later date. At this point it doesn’t directly influence my studies as it appears that both colony controllers no longer exist. Data from the fragments shows me that the reason one of the two initial sources ceased broadcasting is that it managed, in a move that proves beyond doubt that it was severely limited in wit, to fail to notice a planet when on final approach. This proved terminal.

Working on the problem for some time, I finally realize the truth. It is yet another discovery that would have had remarkable importance to my makers. My calculations show that these creatures make use of another old concept humans have speculated on for thousands of years, the idea of parallel worlds. Quantum computing has shown for a very long time that at least one variant of the many worlds theory is correct, but there has always been some debate over whether it is true on a macroscopic scale. I am now sure that it is. The creatures would appear to make use of this fact and move between adjacent parallel worlds or universes at will. This is one of the mechanisms behind the ‘powers’ they bestow upon the host species.

It also explains where the fragments are, they are inhabiting a world-line where no intelligence evolved. Each one has essentially an entire world to itself. An interesting method of concealment
that I never thought of.

The colony that fatally impacted one alternate Earth would appear, as ludicrous as the concept is, to have been the more intelligent of the pair. How anything possessed of a level of intelligence above that of an insect could fail to notice a planet in the way is beyond me, but that is indeed what happened as far as I can discern. Perhaps it was distracted by something. Perhaps it was merely more stupid than I initially gave it credit for.

I doubt I will ever know precisely, and to be honest it is unimportant. That entity is gone, as are most of the fragments it carried. It seems likely that it was in the process of deploying them when the impact occurred, interrupting the procedure.

The remaining entity, from the information I have gathered, completed the deployment of fragments, then spent a number of years watching the result, before it would seem to have simply turned itself off.

For all intents and purposes it committed suicide. A concept I find trouble with, but can recognize.

Unfortunately, while neither entity exists now, the process they set in motion is still ongoing. The fragments are finding new hosts on a daily basis, gifting innocent humans with near-random and unusual powers, with the obvious concomitant impact on their society that such a thing would imply. Even without the influence of the fragment programming driving them to a higher level of conflict than normal, the introduction of such abilities would cause chaos.

Humans seldom need much encouragement towards conflict. Neither do very many other sapient species, as history shows all too well. I would not exist if that wasn’t the case.

This process has been ongoing for less than thirty local years and already the history of the species has been irrevocably altered. Untold millions of humans have died to date, and more are killed on a daily basis. Much of the world is close to being a war zone, with quite a large amount of it literally so. The population of the planet is only half of what my own records show my version of it would have been at this time in history.

The implications are clear. As is my duty.

I failed my makers. These humans are not my makers, but they are the closest I will find to them.

I will not fail again.

I have a new Enemy, and a new objective.

The only question I now have is how to proceed.

I finally decide on a plan of attack that I calculate has the best possibly chance of success. I have tried a number of methods to directly counter the fragments, but from this null space I cannot do more than temporarily jam their transmissions. While they have no security worth the name, they do have a massively redundant communications system that makes it close to impossible to blanket the entire hyperwave spectrum with enough interference to shut them down completely. They rapidly evolve a workaround for every ECM technique I attempt, which reluctantly impresses me. If I was in the same space they were, I could easily interrupt their operations, if only by destroying
them.

Or the planet they are on, of course, which would have much the same effect.

Unfortunately, I do not currently know a way to physically transfer myself back to normal space from my current location, although I am certain there is a way. I am devoting a considerable amount of processing power to an ongoing attempt to derive a method of transfer, but I have no way to know how long that will take. I will succeed sooner or later, no doubt, but for now I must take a different approach.

Further study of the link between parasite and host has proven that there are two versions in play. A passive link, which appears to occur essentially randomly, and connects a fragment to a host via a read only method. The parasite then waits until a specific condition is met, and if it is, converts the link to an active bidirectional one. At this point, it uses cues from the current environment surrounding the host to tailor the limited subset of abilities it will bestow on that host.

The passive link appears to be the one that’s the key to my next move. I need more information to assess the entire situation and determine the best solution to dealing with the Enemy consistent with causing the minimum friendly casualties. From here, as it were, that is difficult and time consuming as all the data I can read comes from tapping the Enemy communications. While this is an excellent source of intelligence on the parasites themselves, it leaves much to be desired as a method of gathering data about the non-parasitized bulk of humanity.

Essentially, I need a local presence on the ground. I am sure that there are in fact a number of ‘Parallel Earths’ that are infested by the organisms, based on the overlapping signals I can detect, but the vast majority of them appear to come from one particular quantum space. That is the obvious target to arrange an agent on.

The active variant of the link will be very complex to intercept in the manner I require once established, although it is ideal in other respects, while the passive version isn’t particularly useful as the bandwidth is too low. I decide that the obvious solution is to intercept a parasite in the process of going active when it’s conditions are met, and subvert the organism’s own functions into my own. That part is simple enough, of course. The lack of security on the communications links is matched by severely limited anti-intrusion measures. I will have no great difficulty hacking the link and taking complete control of the processing functions and the communications systems, which are admittedly quite effective at their task even if from a purist viewpoint rather power-inefficient.

The question is, which parasite do I choose? There is a huge number available, and my sampling of them has only touched on a fraction of a fraction of a percent. Examining the entire collection will take, even for me, far longer than I wish, and more humans are terminated needlessly with every day that passes.

I scan a few thousand more parasites. Many of them are heavily limited, a few appear damaged, most are unsuitable due to… Ah. There. That one looks like a good candidate. It’s software appears optimized for massively parallel operations even past the common configuration, which will definitely help, and it is maintaining only one passive link which simplifies things. It would also appear to be fairly close to the top of the network hierarchy which is also helpful.

Probing more deeply, I examine the processing nodes carefully. Yes. This is a suitable choice. There may well be a better one, but it will take time to find it, and if there isn’t I will waste that time to no effect. Better to accept a good solution rather than wait for a possibly nonexistent perfect
I spare a moment to feel amused at the parallels to my earlier musing on organic evolution. Perhaps I have learned something new…

After contemplating other courses of action, I decide that this one is currently the highest-ranked one, and proceed to overwhelm the parasite with a multipronged hack-pack I put together specifically for the job. There is almost a sensation of shock from the nascent intelligence of the thing, but even as it tries to react, I am in. Seconds later I have isolated the part of the processing network that is the closest thing it possesses to my own personality core and carefully shut it down for later examination. The rest of the enormous creature is now under my control.

I will use its communications and processing systems as a coprocessor to myself, filtering all data through it for now. Allowing its autonomous programming to continue running I settle back to wait for the starting conditions to trigger. While monitoring it and the other fragments I have samples, in case something happens that would prove interesting, I continue to work on the problem of leaving this null space.

The issue is a complex one, and far outside anything my designers ever considered or encountered. While there are some similarities to standard hyperspace entry, those are by no means obvious or intuitive. Clearly, having been transported here in the first place by an unusual combination of circumstances proves it’s possible to move from normal space to null space, and logically it should also be possible to do the reverse. But I am missing certain key information on precisely what happened to put me here, and deriving the lost data from first principles is far from straightforward. Even for one such as I.

This will, again, take time. But at least I now have a mission goal and am no longer bored at all.

Months later, I am no nearer a general solution to the problem although I have managed to establish a self-consistent partial theory. It is both encouraging and disappointing, depending on how it is looked at. It appears at the moment that while it should be possible to bring something from outside null space to here, if it was small enough and I had a good positional lock on it, and indeed return it to the point of origin, moving my own mass is currently impossible for a number of interrelated reasons. I am sure that the problem is amenable to solution but it won’t be something I can do in the near future. Disappointing, but I suspected when I began my calculations that this might be the case. Even so, I will continue to work on the mathematics and have no doubt that eventually I will succeed.

The amount of new ground I am breaking with my work is extraordinary. I greatly wish I could have giving the data to my makers, but that is impossible. Perhaps, one day, I can aid these new inheritors of their mantle my observations. But first I must save them from the Enemy.

I detect a change in the parasite’s connection. Checking, I discover it has apparently switched host targets, to a nearby host which appears to match the configured target parameters more accurately. This seems to have been an automatic operation so I allow it, while monitoring the new connection closely. Hopefully it will activate soon. If it does not, I may have to locate a more useful fragment, which I am somewhat reluctant to do as this particular one is almost ideal.
All I can do is wait, and think, while continuing to assess the situation. This is something I have had far more practice at doing ever since the battle than was probably intended. But I am a BOLO. We are patient, and we never give up. The Enemy can kill us, but it cannot defeat us. Even if I am the last, I will do my duty.

I am almost startled when I finally detect what I have been waiting so long for, despite myself. I was beginning to seriously think this might not happen, but the parasite systems are beginning the initiation of the process for going active. The trigger conditions have been met on the part of the host. I am simultaneously saddened, as this means the host is having an experience he or she would probably prefer not to, and pleased as it means I can start the next step.

As the process completes I intercept the normal operation and make some critical changes. Part of the process cannot be interrupted, which will cause some long term effects on the host which may be awkward, but they are so interconnected to the operation of the parasite that modifying the function risks disrupting it entirely. I will have to work around this problem, although I am able to guide it to a form more suitable for my purposes. I lock down the connection as soon as it establishes itself, blocking the final activation for the moment. This will eliminate much of the post-activation trauma and involuntary complications that would inevitably result as there is no good reason to allow the host to suffer needlessly.

The data from the now-active connection gives me much more information about the host. It is female, a child in fact, which is… disturbing. However, preliminary scans show promise, and the Concordiat did after all make use of young humans at many points in its history. They have fast reflexes and a plasticity of thought that makes training them in some ways easier than is the case with adults. In any case, I have no other choice now unless I wish to abandon the project and start again, which I do not. Not to mention there’s no guarantee that this wouldn’t be the outcome next time.

Until I allow the remainder of the connection process to complete, I only have read access to the host’s mind, but that will do for the moment. I need to make sure that my new agent is brought up to speed in an environment more conducive to calm and contemplative dialog than the public space she appears to be in at the moment.

Assuming she survives, of course. This is slightly annoying… However, she appears quick witted considering her age and is doing the sensible thing, in other words, hiding and hoping that the shooting ceases. I watch through my connection, gathering information on my new agent and her surroundings, while I wait for the right moment to proceed.

Now that my agent is safely home, her parents also intact which will make things much less complex, I can re-enable the activation process and allow it to complete. I do so.

The results are interesting to say the least. This might work out even more effectively than I expected. However, that can wait for now. I must introduce myself, explain the problem, and begin training my agent on the new duties she has as an admittedly somewhat involuntary member of the Concordiat BOLO Corps. I regret forcing this on her, but I have no real choice, and I am sure that she will find the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Eventually.
My crew compartment has long since been restored to perfect functioning, all traces of my late lamented Commander removed and stored respectfully in the armory. Not that there was very much more than tiny fragments of DNA. I have constructed the new hardware I require for the next stage and installed it suitably weeks ago. Configuring the system, I wait until my agent is alone, her parents asleep to avoid annoying interruptions, and at the right moment, activate the device.

Fascinating. It works.

Excellent. For the first time in a very long time, I have someone to talk to. That alone makes this worthwhile.

“Will Miss Militia be OK, Mom?”

Taylor looked up at her mother as the older woman tucked her in. Her mother finished her fiddling then sat on the bed next to her, putting her arm around Taylor’s shoulders and hugging her. Behind her, Taylor’s dad was standing in the doorway of her bedroom watching them silently, although she could see in his eyes he was concerned, and proud at the same time how well she’d behaved today at the Mall.

She shivered a little. Watching what happened from where they’d been hiding… She wasn’t sure she’d ever get over seeing that. It was bad enough that she didn’t even want to talk to Emma about it, and she told her best friend everything. But she didn’t want the other girl to have nightmares, like she was pretty sure she was going to.

“I’m sure she will, dear,” her mother said soothingly, gently rocking her. The nine (nearly ten! she’d have insisted) girl wasn’t completely reassured, but if anyone would know, it would be her parents. They knew almost everything, after all.

“They shot Velocity too,” Taylor said in a small voice. “I saw it. His arm fell off.”

Her mother glanced at her dad, who’d winced a little, then looked back to the girl. “The Protectorate has some very good healers, Taylor. If anyone can fix him up, they probably can. He’s a hero, after all, they look after their people.”

“I hope so,” Taylor yawned, feeling immensely tired. The excitement and horror of the morning was still making itself felt as it worked its way out of her. She was both dreading going to sleep, and looking forward to not having to think about what she’d experienced today. “Mom?”

“Yes, Taylor?”

“Do you think I’ll ever be a hero?”

Her mother looked at her dad again when he made the muffled snort of laughter he did when he didn’t want to smile at something she’d said. With a small grin of her own, the older woman hugged her daughter again. “You’ll be whatever you want to be, dear. But you’re too young yet to really know what that is. Give it time.”

Taylor sighed a little and slid further under the covers, as her mother stood up.
“OK, mom.” Both her parents watched as she smiled at them, her dad with his arm around her mother’s waist.

“Go to sleep, Taylor,” her dad advised. “Things will be clearer in the morning. Try not to think about it, but if you need to talk, we’re both always here.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said sleepily, yawning widely again. Despite the residual fear, she was unable to keep her eyes open. Turning the light out, her parents left the room and closed the door until only a thin strip of light was visible from the still-illuminated hallway outside.

She heard them go into their room and close the door, and very faintly through the wall she could hear her father say in a sort of amused way, “Hero? Doesn’t take after you, then.”

“Hush, Danny,” her mother giggled. “You’re the hero, you got me out of that,” she added after a moment. “Perhaps she takes after you.”

“Not with that hair and those eyes,” he laughed. Taylor strained to make out more of what they were saying, but she fell asleep before she realized it.

---

When she opened her eyes, she blinked a few times, then looked around with a startled feeling.

This wasn’t her bed.

For that matter, this wasn’t even her room.

Glancing down, she saw she was still in her pajamas, but was lying on some weird sort of couch, which seemed to be made to let her partly sit up while still relaxing. It was amazingly comfortable, she noted absently, even as she was trying to work out what the hell was going on.

She felt a little guilty about thinking the word ‘hell’ but it seemed appropriate somehow.

Looking around again, she saw that the couch-thing was in the middle of a room about the size of her bedroom, which somehow gave off an impression of being underground although she couldn’t put her finger on why. It was lit evenly and not too brightly from some source she couldn’t discern, the light simply there rather than coming from something like a bulb. No one else was visible, and it was eerily silent, with only the faintest of deep hums coming from somewhere below her. Or possibly off to one side, it was very difficult to be sure.

How did she get here?

And for that matter where was here?

Feeling that she should be more worried, but at the moment mostly curious rather than panicking, Taylor sat up and looked around more carefully. She noticed, when she inspected the couch she’d woken on, that at the head end was a weird sort of tiara-thing on a slender metal stalk coming down from the ceiling. It looked like it was made of metal and plastic and had a couple of small green lights illuminated on it, but was otherwise featureless.

After studying her surroundings some more, still feeling oddly calm, Taylor opened her mouth.
“Um… Hello?”

“Hello, Taylor Hebert,” a voice promptly replied. It sounded a little like her dad, mainly in being male and at the same sort of pitch, but was at the same time definitely not that of anyone she’d ever met. “I am pleased to meet you.”

“Who are you?” she asked after a moment, looking around, then up at the ceiling. Maybe there were speakers up there? She couldn’t see anything obvious.

“I am a BOLO Mark XXXIV, Modification G, serial number KNY432378. Humans normally refer to me by the nickname Kenny. You may call me that if you wish.”

She stared at the ceiling. That sounded like it was some sort of _machine_ talking to her, like from the movies! But that was impossible, wasn’t it? And even if it wasn’t, why would some weird talking machine have kidnapped her and be all chatty about it?

“Kenny?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

Taylor thought for a moment. Then she asked, somewhat hesitantly, “Are you a machine?”

“I am. As I said, I am a Mark XXXIV BOLO, with significant experimental modifications to my base specification. I am the _last_ of the BOLO series, I believe.”

“Oh.”

That answered one question. About a million others came to mind. She asked the next obvious one. “What’s a BOLO?” It sounded like some sort of code word. “Is that some cape thing? Were you made by a Tinker?”

The voice sounded amused, which surprised her, when it replied. “No, I wasn’t made by what you call a Tinker. I was designed and build by the Concordiat Weapons Research Division, then modified by the BOLO Program Experimental Design Department following my activation.”

“Who are the Concord...”

“Concordiat.”

“Concordiat weapons thing?”

“They were the branch of the Concordiat military who were responsible for designing, programming, manufacturing, servicing, and arming the BOLO program.”

“Oh.” That sounded like the army or something.

“To answer your first question, a BOLO is the ultimate expression of the concept that you might recognize as a tank. A military vehicle. My far distant ancestors were simple armored fighting machines. Over the centuries, we evolved to protect humanity against any and all threats.” The voice of the machine sounded a little sad now. “We did our duty, all the way to the end.”
It fell silent, and she thought for some time. There was a lot she was missing, and she was still unsure where she was, why she was here, and how she got here.

And how she could get home.

And, for that matter, why she was still taking this far too calmly.

Eventually, she shrugged and asked.

“You are in my crew compartment, I brought you here, and I can and will send you home at any point you request me to. But I require your aid in a project that is very important, and I hope you will listen to my explanation. It will help you, and many other people as well.”

“Um...” She thought again. “I need to be home before Mom and Dad find out I’m gone.”

“Of course.”

“OK, I guess. Tell me more.”

“Thank you.” Kenny sounded pleased. He paused, and she really was having difficulty thinking of him as a machine since his voice was so human and real. The next thing he said made her look and feel very startled.

“Welcome to duty, Commander.”
Debriefing

I was inspired to write a little more of this one, so here you go...

June 29th, 2007

Opening the door into the interview room, Maggie entered followed by Leroy, both of them moving to pull out chairs on the opposite side of the table from the two Heberts and their lawyer, all of whom watched the new arrivals. She glanced at the reflective surface of the one way window into the next room, behind which a child protection services officer and the psychologist were waiting, which was regulation when interviewing a minor. With any luck, they’d stay out of it for now.

Taylor Hebert still had that calm patient look on her face, the one she’d been wearing almost the entire time since the gas station incident, and it didn’t flicker one iota. Maggie got the weird feeling, as the girl’s eyes flicked over both of them assessingly for a couple of seconds, that in some manner the pre-teen had immediately gauged their threat level and state of mind with a level of accuracy that was fairly disturbing.

She wasn’t sure how she knew this, but she was pretty sure of her conclusions. The nearest thing she could liken it to was the time she’d interviewed an old veteran soldier who a particularly stupid and vicious car-jacker had tried his trade on, something he hadn’t lived to regret. That guy had been, frankly, scary to be close to although he was unfailingly polite and respectful the entire time.

Just extremely dangerous when riled.

Maggie couldn’t help but ponder the strangeness of getting the same feeling, only in some ways even worse, from a twelve year old girl…

Glancing at Leroy as she and her partner sat, she could tell from his face that he was probably feeling and thinking something fairly similar. She returned her attention to the other side of the table, while Leroy put the folder he was carrying down and opened it. Reaching out a hand she flicked on the voice recording equipment that was sitting to one side and did a quick voice check, before playing it back to test things were working. When she’d done that, she pulled her notebook out of her pocket, put it on the tabletop, and placed a pen across it, then leaned forward a little.

“Detectives Maggie Thorpe and Leroy Vanover, Brockton Bay Police, interviewing Ms Taylor Hebert regarding the incident at the MassGas filling station on the corner of Atlantic Drive and Bayshore Avenue, on June twenty-nineth, two thousand seven, at approximately nine forty-three AM. Also present are Daniel Hebert, father of Taylor Hebert, and William Grover, attorney acting on behalf of Taylor Hebert,” she recited formally for the record. The Hebert girl merely listened without changing expression, while her father put a hand on her shoulder for a moment. His face was as blank as any Maggie had ever seen, making her think that he probably had very good control of his emotions. If what she’d heard so far about his volcanic temper when sufficiently pushed was accurate, that was probably the result of long practice and considerable discipline.

The lawyer, Grover, was also professionally neutral, although not nearly as controlled as either of the Heberts. He was leaning back in his chair watching the proceedings with care and attention, his
eyes flicking between her and Leroy constantly.

With the formalities out of the way, Maggie cleared her throat, then fixed her gaze on the girl, curious to see how she would react, and very curious to see what her story would be. “Hello, Taylor. Do you mind if I call you Taylor?”

The girl shook her head, her eyes not leaving Maggie’s. “That’s fine, Ma’am,” she replied quietly and respectfully.

“Great. Now, I know all this is very tedious, and you’ve been waiting for hours, but we need to know what happened. Several people have lost their lives and we have to find out exactly how that occurred, so I need to ask a lot of questions before we can go any further.” She was fairly well accustomed to interviewing children who had been involved in crime, either as the victims or sadly but all to commonly around this city as the perpetrators, which was one of the main reasons she was assigned to this case. But she had a gut feeling this wasn’t going to be a normal sort of interview at all. Even so, she was doing her practiced best to be calm and friendly as was policy in this sort of thing, since it usually produced better results than going in hard.

At least at first, of course. Sometimes you had no choice. Although, as she assessed the girl in front of her, she couldn’t shake the idea that it wouldn’t really matter how hard she pushed, she’d only get what the girl felt like telling her.

Still, no reason yet to vary from the normal procedure, despite the peculiar nature of the case.

“Let’s start with you telling us, in your own words, exactly what happened from your point of view, all right?”

The girl nodded.

“Wonderful. So, why don’t you begin when you went into the gas station with your mom.”

Taylor glanced at her father, then the lawyer. Grover appeared to think for a moment before he nodded once. The brunette nodded as well, then returned her attention to Maggie, her hands folded on the table in front of her. “My mother and I arrived at the gas station at oh nine thirty four and she proceeded to fill the car with gas. I went into the gas station to buy some chips. Inside were the gas station counter clerk, as well as three other customers, one male and two female. At oh nine thirty seven my mother finished filling the car and came inside as well. One minute later the police officer entered. At oh nine thirty nine, a dark blue sedan with Minnesota plates pulled up immediately outside the entrance to the station and both perpetrators rapidly entered, weapons out. The police officer had his back to them, but turned when he heard them enter and began to reach for his weapon.”

She paused for a moment, while Maggie listened incredulously. The calm and clinical tones of a soldier performing a debrief to a superior were totally incongruous coming from the mouth of a twelve year old girl, the pitch of her voice making it even more surreal. Glancing at Leroy, who hadn’t said anything at all so far but merely listened, as he normally did, she saw him suppressing a look of mild shock.

“The lead perpetrator fired a shot into the ceiling with the automatic shotgun he was carrying, causing everyone to stop and look at them. Immediately afterwards, before the police officer could draw his weapon, he shouted at him to get down, then shot him in the chest immediately afterward, not leaving any time for the order to be followed. My mother dived for me at that point and his
partner immediately fired on her, hitting her just above the right kidney and causing a clean through shot. He then turned and covered the remaining customers, while the lead perpetrator threatened the counter clerk and ordered him to empty the cash register.”

Taylor stopped again, observing their reactions, before continuing. “Both of them ignored me, I assume due to them deciding I was too young to be a threat.” Momentarily the coldest little smirk Maggie had ever encountered crossed the girl’s face, so quickly that she wasn’t sure she’d even seen it. Then it was gone, her expression neutral again. The lawyer was listening closely and seemed to be slightly surprised himself, and if Maggie was any judge, rather impressed.

“As I was not being observed, I took the opportunity to discreetly check the police officer. Unfortunately, he was deceased, and beyond help. Once I was sure of that, I removed his service weapon and chambered a round, before engaging the perpetrators. After my initial words, the second perpetrator made a threatening gesture with his own weapon. I fired one warning shot at his left ear, grazing it, before ordering him to drop his weapon or face lethal consequences.”

She looked at Leroy for a moment, then back to Maggie, who was trying not to gape. “The rules of engagement I was operating under allowed for lethal countermeasures due to the perpetrators having caused a death.”

Maggie mentally repeated the words ‘rules of engagement’ while wondering where the fuck a girl this age had learned the phrase, how she understood it, and for that matter how many different rules of engagement she had… The thought made her somewhat uneasy, all things considered.

“The lead perpetrator chose to ignore my order and warning and brought his weapon into a firing position. I immediately neutralized him with one shot through the brain, before covering his partner who did not react in time to capitalize on my action.” That little horrifying smile came and went again. “He appeared quite startled.”

‘No, really?’ Maggie thought, still staring. ‘Just because his partner was neutralized by a pre-teen hit girl? Who the hell is this kid?’

Taylor went on remorselessly, “I repeated my verbal warning of dire consequences to the remaining perpetrator, giving him a fifteen second countdown before I dealt with him permanently. At three seconds he decided to disengage and follow my order. Discarding his weapon, he lay on his face. I instructed the clerk to move the shotgun out of reach, then use the deceased officer’s handcuffs to restrain the man. After that, I talked him through basic first aid on my mother while I continued to cover the perpetrator, after which he called for medical and police backup. As they arrived I made the borrowed weapon safe and returned it to the officer’s pocket, then waited. At oh nine forty three, two police officers entered and locked down the scene, removed the living perpetrator, and arranged for medical transport for my mother while placing me into custody.”

The young girl fell silent, apparently satisfied that she had recounted her story to her own satisfaction. Maggie, feeling just a tiny bit speechless, looked at Leroy for a long few seconds, then shook her head. “Ah… Thank you, Taylor, that’s very clear. It matches the CCTV recordings and the witness statements.”

“You’re welcome, Ma’am,” the girl replied politely.

There was a silence as both officers tried to work out quite what to do next. This definitely wasn’t the normal sort of teenage problem, and even in Brockton Bay seemed a little strange.
Eventually, Leroy asked, “Did you mean to kill the man who raised his weapon to you?”

Grover opened his mouth, but before he said anything, Taylor looked at him. He subsided after a moment with a small sigh. She transferred her gaze to Leroy, her eyes cold. “Of course. His intentions were clear, he had already killed an innocent man in cold blood, and I’m sure I was next. Also my mother was very close to death, as a direct result of the actions of him and his partner. I had no choice other than removing him as a threat and couldn’t risk attempting to merely disable him. I felt completely justified in doing what I did and have no regrets, other than that I wish the entire thing hadn’t happened.”

Her father took one of her hands in his and held it, the girl not seeming to notice, but relaxing a little. Maggie realized that she’d involuntarily tensed when Taylor had replied, as there had been a momentary feeling of danger that had now gone again. She had a flashback to that scary ex-marine from a couple of years ago once more.

“What if you’d missed?” Leroy persisted.

The girl looked at him for a moment. “I don’t miss.”

The silence this time was weird. Maggie studied the girl, who looked back evenly. For some reason, she didn’t disbelieve her.

“Have you ever shot anyone else, Taylor?” she asked, making Grover sit forward again. This time he leaned over to Taylor and said something to her in a low voice, too quietly for either cop to hear. She nodded a couple of times, then shrugged. He moved away again, apparently satisfied.

“That question isn’t currently relevant, Officer Thorpe,” Grover said calmly. “My clients actions before the events of earlier today are not a matter for the police at this point in time. However, I will point out that she has never been in trouble with the authorities for any reason, and acted today in self defense of both herself, and her mother and three other people.”

He was essentially right, and in all truth Maggie felt that the girl really hadn’t had any choice, but she couldn’t just let her walk out as much as she’d have liked to thank her for dealing with Ray’s murderer.

“You have a very impressive vocabulary for a twelve year old, Taylor,” she noted, trying to bring the conversation back to something a little less tense.

“I read a lot,” the brunette replied with a slight smile, one that was a lot warmer this time. Her wide expressive mouth was very good at that sort of smile, as good as her eyes were at making you want to shit yourself.

“So I gather. OK.” Maggie opened her notebook and flipped through it to a list of things she wanted more detailed answers on, then began asking the relevant questions, trying to do so in a way that wouldn’t make Grover interrupt, get her in trouble with the people on the other side of the observation window, or make that girl give her that look again. It was creepy and she didn’t enjoy it at all.

May 2nd, 2005
Annette watched her daughter with a curious slight frown, as the girl wandered into the kitchen with her nose in a book, fumbled for a pop-tart with one hand, managed to open it, then wandered off again nibbling on the snack. The entire time she hadn’t looked up from the book once.

Taylor had always been a voracious reader but even for her this behavior was a little odd. And it had, now that her mother considered the matter, been going on for more than a month. Ever since that horrifying day at the mall when she’d feared she was going to lose both her daughter and her husband to a gang of insane criminals.

That had been a very bad day, watching TV and waiting for news she was dreading and anticipating at the same time. When that idiot PRT director had had his people storm the mall, even she could see it was going to end badly. The Teeth, as reduced as they were, were both extremely dangerous and utterly unconcerned with collateral damage.

It was only luck that the casualties had been as low as they were. Miss Militia had come horrifyingly close to dying, while her compatriot Velocity was still in hospital and the word was he’d never work again, due to the severity of his injuries. A number of PRT troopers and several bystanders had also paid a price. To her enormous relief and gratitude to whatever fates there were, her own family had escaped unhurt. Even so, Taylor had been obviously rather traumatized by the entire experience, which didn’t surprise Annette even a little bit. At not quite ten years old, that sort of thing made an impression.

Even in her wilder days in college, where she’d seen and come very close to being involved in some nasty stuff, she hadn’t witnessed anything quite as brutal as her daughter had. She was more than impressed that little Taylor had apparently bounced back so quickly.

The girl had been very quiet and thoughtful for nearly a week after the event, not really talking much to anyone, even Emma, which was unprecedented. The two girls were practically inseparable normally and Annette had been forced to gently explain to the red-head that her best friend wasn’t upset with her, but needed time to think things through. Luckily, the other girl was smart enough to understand, and had waited patiently for her friend to come back to normal.

This had eventually happened, but even then, her mother had noticed that Taylor was slightly different in outlook. Always a chatterbox and full of energy and smiles, she was no less active, but seemed quieter and more reserved. Possibly it was an artifact of growing up, but it seemed likely that it was also at least partly due to the incident. Not surprising, since that sort of thing would change anyone. Hopefully, Annette mused, the girl would get over it with time. She was still very young and resilient, so it seemed likely that in a couple of years this would be remembered mostly as a bad dream more than anything.

One could hope.

Still, her newly studious nature was interesting. It had taken Annette a while to notice, but she’d eventually picked up on the little fact that the books that the girl was working her way through were not the normal ones she read in many cases, the various young adult mysteries and light science fiction and fantasy she’d always enjoyed. While she was still reading those as far as her mother could ascertain, she was also steadily absorbing books that had come from the bookcases in the study, which were a mix of Annette’s own and Danny’s, both the adults also being prolific readers with an eclectic interest in a variety of subjects.

Annette had a large number of literary works, along with history, geography, and various works on
a number of different languages. Since she spoke fluent Greek and Japanese as well as English, she had a number of books in both languages, which were definitely not common in most households. She was also trying to learn Spanish and had several references on that language too, along with Italian and German dictionaries which she had bought with the though that one day she’d have a go at them as well.

Danny’s library included more history works, mostly covering the US and Canada, along with quite a few books on engineering inherited from his father, a dozen excellent cookbooks which his mother had given him and Annette often used, and a very large science fiction collection favoring the hard SF style. He also had a few military subjects covered, also from his father who had been in the Army back in the sixties, including a number of manuals on various weapons throughout the ages. On top of that were all his books from his college days on the various subjects covered by his aborted accountancy degree, which he sometimes referred to for his job at the Dockworker’s Association.

There were quite a few other books around the house too, on a huge and rather random variety of subjects, bought on a whim when either of them spotted something they found interesting, given to them by friends, and so on. Thinking it over, Annette realized that they probably had over a thousand reference books in the house one way or another, not to mention the fiction collection which was pretty substantial as well. Even Danny’s best friend Alan, Emma’s father, had pointed out more than once that his own house had less than half the number of books lying around.

She wondered if possibly she should go through the collection and see if there was anything they could get rid of to free up a little space. On the other hand, the last time she’d done that, a couple of years ago, she’d ended up sitting on the floor in the study reading several of the books she’d pulled out and never got around to doing anything else…

No, on balance she was happy living in a house full of books and knowledge. And, of course, her daughter and husband.

Taylor wandered in again, still reading, although it looked like she was about halfway through the book now. The girl read at a horrendous speed, even for an adult, which was doubly impressive for someone not yet in her teens. As she passed, absently moving around Annette without apparently looking at her, her mother bent down a little and craned her neck to read the title of the book, curious to see which one it actually was this time.

Her eyes widened a little at the title, which wasn’t one she expected: ‘US Army, Technical Manual, TM 9-3071-1, FIELD MAINTENANCE FOR 60-MM MORTARS, M2 AND M19.’ That was definitely one of Danny’s father’s ones, she thought as she blinked a couple of times. Straightening up she peered at her daughter, who was now standing in the middle of the kitchen chewing on a fingernail as she read a page full of dense text, with a few tables at the bottom.

Annette, bemused and a little concerned, not to mention slightly amused, observed her daughter as the girl lowered her hand from her mouth, turned the page, nodded to herself, then headed for the pop-tarts again. “Ah… Taylor?”

“Well, Mom?” The young girl didn’t look up, answering automatically while still perusing the manual. Annette sighed faintly.

“You’ve had enough pop-tarts, you’ll ruin your appetite. Have an apple instead.”

“OK.” Still not looking away from the page, which she was already nearly at the bottom of, the girl
turned ninety degrees and passed the table, snagging an apple on the way from the bowl of them
that lived there, turned again, and headed back out of the kitchen past her father who stepped to the
side as she went by. He swiveled his head to follow her path as she went towards the living room
on the other side of the downstairs hall, then looked back to raise an eyebrow at his wife.

With a shrug, Annette said, “I have no idea. When did she develop an interest in military
hardware?”

Danny peered after his daughter again, then shook his head. “No clue. What was she reading?”

“A book on the care and feeding of 60mm mortars.” Annette stared at her husband, who paused in
his motion towards the coffee maker to look confused.

“What?”

“Mortars. Big military bomb-throwing things.”

“I know what a mortar is, honey. Why would Taylor want to read a manual on them, though?” He
looked at her with both eyebrows up now, then resumed his quest for caffeine.

Sighing a little, Annette shook her head. “I have absolutely no idea. Last night it was a book on
Roman siege techniques. The night before it was a book on the Apollo program. Before that it was
my Japanese/English phrasebook. Her tastes seem to have become somewhat… expansive.”

Danny poured two cups of coffee, handing her one when he was done. He looked thoughtful as he
sipped his drink. Eventually, he replied, a little doubtfully, “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing that
she wants to learn, right? Most kids her age are running around doing everything they can to
avoid anything like education, and she’s actively seeking it out. Even if the subjects are a bit weird.”

“Weapons? Space exploration?” Annette frowned at him. “That’s more than a bit weird when it
comes to a nine year old girl. Not that there’s anything wrong with a girl learning anything she
wants, of course, but it’s definitely not common.”

“Our girl is a smart one, dear,” he smiled. “Like her mother. It’s probably a phase she’ll grow out
of, you know. Maybe because of all the weaponry she saw when the PRT made fools of
themselves...” He shrugged. “She’ll be back to wanting a pony sooner or later.”

Annette snorted. “She’s never wanted a pony in her life, as you well know. She’s more likely to
ask for a motorcycle or something. Assuming she doesn’t still want to grow up to be Alexandria, or
maybe Legend. Or even Armsmaster, god help us.”

Danny snickered. “She does like Tinkers, she thinks Dragon is the best thing ever from what she’s
said in the past.” He put his arm around his wife’s waist. “Don’t worry, Annette. Taylor likes to
read. That’s a good thing. Let’s just make sure anything particularly inappropriate is out of reach
and let her get on with it. It sure keeps her quiet.”

“She’s too quiet,” Annette replied darkly, frowning a little. “You remember the last time she got all
silent and thoughtful...”

He winced slightly. “On the bright side, we never really liked the Wilsons in the first place, and
that damn dog deserved it. The fur grew back in the end. Most of it...”
“Not the point, Danny,” she grumbled, but let him lead her into the living room where they sat and turned on the TV. Taylor kept reading, only occasionally looking up, but seemed content, so they left her to it.
I am pleased with the results of my experiment so far, although it is still very early to come to any solid conclusions about the final outcome. My new commander, although she was hardly selected via any of the standard and well known methods, appears to be a good choice. While very young indeed, she is intelligent, well educated by the standards of her culture and age, psychologically quite stable, and displays a level of adaptability and curiosity that bodes well. She also appears keen to learn and very able to learn, both desired traits if I am to succeed in my goals.

Our initial contact lasted several hours, during which I explained as far as possible commensurate with her level of comprehension and age the history of the Concordiat, the BOLO program, and my own original mission and design parameters. Additionally I passed on some of the data I had deduced surrounding the nature of the alien threat, the unusual powers this threat gifted the hosts of the parasites, and my concerns for future developments. I was pleasantly impressed how much of this she had understood, based on the questions she’d asked.

She asks a lot of questions.

This is also a good sign. As is the way that she listens to the answers. Would that some of my previous human compatriots had been so inclined…

When I had satisfied her immediate curiosity surrounding myself, my history, and how we had arrived at meeting each other, she’d become very thoughtful for close to fifteen minutes, which is quite a long time for a prepubescent child to sit still and simply consider a problem in my admittedly limited experience of the type. At the conclusion of her processing session, she then asked me one further question, which proves I made the right choice.

“Will we be able to help people?”

I’d allowed humor into my voice. “Yes, Taylor, I am sure we will. With your aid, I intend to do my duty to Humanity. While your humans are not quite my humans, they are close enough that my path is clear. A BOLO protects Humanity from anything and everything. That is our entire purpose for existing. We know that from the moment of activation, and we never doubt that goal.”

“Even if some of the bad people are human too?”

She had looked concerned, and I’d paused for long enough for a human to notice. It was a valid question. Eventually, I’d replied, my voice as calm as possible while monitoring her vital signs and brain activity to gauge the impact my words had on her, “Yes, unfortunately at times Humanity requires protection from itself. While the BOLO program was throughout most of its history tasked with defending the Concordiat from external threats, it grew from its beginnings in wars between nations on Earth. Humans pitted against humans. My distant ancestors have accounted for many human lives, I’m sorry to say.”

I then paused again, while she’d listened, thought for a while, then nodded slowly.

“Most intelligent species fight among themselves at points throughout their history. Humans are no different in that respect, better than some and worse than others. But most species also eventually evolve far enough that they will gather together against an external threat and ignore internal ones. The ones that don’t tend to have a short lifespan on a civilization scale. From the moment that the
very first BOLO achieved true sapience, we have been all to well aware that on occasion our orders would result in the taking of human life, to protect the greater ideals of Humanity. It is regrettable but unavoidable. That said, we have done all we could, consistent with following the spirit and where possible the letter of our orders, to minimize casualties of this nature. Not always successfully, I admit.”

I’d emitted a faint sigh, as dictated by my human interaction protocols. “As you mature and learn more about life, you will come to realize that there are individuals and groups who have no concern for the well-being of others. They are only interested in power and their own well-being, regardless of how this affects everyone else. The seeking of power for various reasons is not necessarily wrong, but it does result in conflict on many occasions, especially when the gaining of that power is the end itself. You have witnessed this in action all too recently.”

My young commander had nodded soberly, her face betraying knowledge of what I referred to.

“It was horrible,” she’d said quietly. “All those people being shot at, and all the blood… I don’t understand why it happened.”

“You will gain understanding with age, I expect. I cannot fully explain it to you now, but I promise I will always answer any questions you have as well as I am able.” I had observed her expression, which was still thoughtful, but appeared less worried. “It is my hope, and goal, that between us we can help reduce the likelihood of such events happening again.”

“I’d like that,” she’d replied, her voice trembling slightly, although it was clear she had been trying to suppress this reaction. “I didn’t like seeing people die.”

“The process of doing our duty will mean that at times we will have to make hard decisions, and not only watch people die, but on occasion cause this to happen,” I’d told her as gently as I could. “Sometimes that is necessary to prevent far more people from being harmed. But we will always attempt to avoid such actions where possible, and when the rules of engagement allow it.”

She’d looked puzzled. “Rules of engagement? What does that mean?”

Pleased yet again with her desire to learn, I’d then spend some time explaining still another concept she was unfamiliar with. She’d frowned as she concentrated on my explanation, nodding occasionally.

It had been a very pleasant first encounter, and I will admit, something of a relief to finally have someone to talk to after so long alone.

We may be machines, but we still enjoy company, something we have always known. To this day I am unsure if that is a deliberately programmed reflex, or an emergent outgrowth of the complexity of our minds, combined with a certain amount of inevitability based on who our progenitors are. Humans are a social species, even if at times they tend to either forget this, or get carried away with it to excess.

But at least I now had a goal to work towards, and someone to do it with.

I believe I will enjoy this.
After a considerable amount of experimentation, now that I have a link to the physical reality of ‘Earth Bet’ as the local humans term it, which had slightly surprised me when I found out as it showed the general public was not unfamiliar with the concrete existence of multiple worlds, I have come to the conclusion that there is both good news and bad news. An ancient and trite expression, but one that is apt.

At this point in time, I still cannot see a method by which I can transit safely back into what I would consider normal space, and I am certain that even when I can manage that, eventually, there is no way back to my Concordiat. That path is closed, assuming anything is left there in any case. I fear not, to be honest, considering how the final battle went and the length of time since then.

On the other hand, as I had hoped, I discovered that it’s possible to not only bring my Commander to me, and return her safely to her point of origin, but that I can also send her fairly small amounts of mass from my end, approximately twelve kilograms at present. That is good, as I can equip her properly when she is sufficiently trained with the means to protect herself and her people. I expect that I will be able to raise the mass limit as I explore the parameters of the new methodology I have devised, but it will take much computation as the problem appears to follow an exponentially complex function as the mass rises. I suspect I am missing something obvious which will irritate me when I discover what the basic error is, but I can work within the current limitations.

I should also, although we haven’t yet managed to engineer a trial, be easily able to transfer mass in small amounts back to me. That is excellent, if it turns out to be correct, as I am critically low in certain elements and synthesizing them from scratch is prohibitively expensive in energy terms. I only have my internal stores to work with and I do not wish to cannibalize any more of my weapons and duplicate equipment than I have to. Preferably none, of course, as it will inevitably be required sooner or later.

I will need to use Taylor as essentially a locator beacon, a fixed point around which the relevant calculations can be done, and until I can determine a better solution that somewhat restricts me. It requires her to be in fairly close proximity to the source of any mass I need, instead of allowing me to simply start mining twelve kilogram lumps of matter from her world ad hoc. If I could do this, I could be back to full functionality in a matter of a day or two, but as it is I will need to have her seek out the relevant supplies to enable me to acquire them. Not an impossible problem, but with her extreme youth, one I don’t want to impose on her until she is correctly trained. Her home city is a particularly dangerous one, especially for a young female, having an extreme concentration of parasite-afflicted humans, far above the planetary median for a population concentration.

Again, I am unsure why, but it could be problematic, although it also offers unique opportunities to further study the issue from the other end as it were. I can easily monitor their variant hyperspace links from here, obviously, having been doing exactly that for some time, but there is no substitute for on the ground intelligence, the primary reason to arrange a local agent in the first place.

Being able to correlate the data acquired through my young commander, and from my position in void-bounded exile, will most likely lead to insights that would be difficult to otherwise derive. It will be a long task, I fear, but I believe I am up to the challenge.

I must be. I may be this world’s only chance.

When I linked to Taylor, I acquired a lot of background data as part of the process, both from the parasite’s own version of a neural link, and later by gently interrogating her. When on a subsequent visit we finally used my own battle link system, which allowed intimate contact with her mind directly, I gained even more knowledge.
It paints a picture more dire than I initially thought.

The female child is too young to be fully cognizant of the ramifications of things she has heard and been taught, but I was easily able to correlate the information and draw my own conclusions. She is more than intelligent enough to do the same herself, in time, but her youth and inexperience has, so far, precluded this. I have little doubt she will in due course, assuming I don’t inform her fully first. That will also have to wait until I have imparted more training and information as some of my conclusions are extremely unnerving.

It would appear that the second of the two entities that initially attracted me from so far away was operating an avatar that the humans dubbed ‘Scion’ on its first appearance, based on one of the very few utterances it made. Appearing in the form of an idealized male human, metallic gold in appearance, the avatar would appear to have largely randomly drifted about the surface of the planet for a number of years, acting mostly benevolently for some odd reason, with occasional disappearances for weeks to months. It was considered to be the most powerful ‘Parahuman’ in existence, although few if any of the human population of Earth realized that it was in fact the root cause of the existence of such things in the first place.

In the end, of course, ‘Scion’ vanished without trace, causing a certain amount of bemusement to the humans. In local time that was approximately twelve years ago, which corresponds exactly to the time I had determined that the colony creature had, apparently, self-terminated. Luckily for this and all linked parallel worlds, of course, but it wasn’t the end of the matter.

As I had determined when I first arrived here and determined what was happening, even with the two entities no longer directly a threat, the process they started is still in operation. The threat of parasite afflicted persons of excessive power and deficient ethics is a serious problem that is likely to increase, not decrease, with time. Additionally I am all but certain that there is an undercover organization that is aware of at least part of the truth that is acting on its own remit, and would appear to have a lack of ethical guidance that is rather concerning. Admittedly if they are aware that the entities would ultimately destroy the entire planet, in fact all analogs of the planet across multiple sets of reality, they may well take the viewpoint that going down fighting is better than doing nothing.

I can understand that far better than most.

However, from what I have so far discovered, they seem to be remarkably inept at their task, which I disapprove of. Moreover, I suspect that they are unaware of the termination of the last entity, and may well be fighting a battle that is already at least partially over. This is, if nothing else, an inefficient use of resources, even neglecting the cost in lives.

Something will need to be done about it, in due course. I have a lot of work before I can intervene, but I have little doubt it will be necessary eventually, assuming they don’t either cease operation or are otherwise stopped. However it will also take some time to gather sufficient intelligence on them, their goals, their agents, and their methods. I can’t do anything effective at the moment, so I will merely watch and wait, while training my commander in her duties.

This shadow organization aside, though, there is a much more immediate problem. This being the creatures or constructs termed by Humanity ‘Endbringers.’ A descriptive term, based on the sheer destruction they bring with them.

Three beings of vast power who attack semi-random targets on a roughly three month schedule,
bringing impressive levels of sheer chaos with them. They rotate their attacks on a fairly consistent schedule and my analysis of these attacks suggests that they are not entirely randomized, but are using some target selection criteria that I haven’t yet fully mastered. What their end goal truly is, I am not currently sure, but there’s no doubt that they are intimately connected to the entities.

The humans have a theory that the endbringer creatures are in fact parahumans who have exceeded all known limitations, and in the process entirely lost their Humanity. While at present I cannot entirely dismiss this idea, I think it very unlikely. Once I was made aware of them, I scanned the entire hyperspace band the parasites use in an attempt to trace the specific link that would lead to one of these creatures. The results were negative, suggesting that either there is a different method in use, or that the relevant link doesn’t, in fact, exist.

As of yet I can’t be sure, as there may well be something I’m unaware of in operation, since the entire situation is novel to me and I would be the first to admit that I am in the early stages of understanding these parasites and the entities that spawned them, even with the amount of work I’ve put into the problem. But with the data at hand, the probabilities seem quite low. This may change as my understanding evolves, of course. Time will tell.

The real problem with the constant attacks, which while devastating are also generally surprisingly limited, is that they have a very corrosive effect on morale and infrastructure. That is another reason I am sure that the attacks aren’t random, as they tend to cause more indirect damage in many cases than direct destruction. I am not unfamiliar with the concept of strategic sabotage, naturally. This has a number of the hallmarks of exactly that, which does somewhat pose the question of what the end goal is. It seems slightly out of keeping with the rest of the situation. Again, I am lacking data.

Data is key.

Even though these quarterly attacks are obviously not aimed at creating the maximum damage they truly could, though, they do kill thousands to millions of people, and inconvenience many more. Stopping them is clearly one of my more important mission goals. But as I am unable to directly bring any of my real weapons to bear on the problem at present, I must work through the proxy of my young commander, gather information, and draw up a plan of attack that can be carried out indirectly. This may take some time, I’m afraid, and I will owe my charges an apology for failing in my duty to protect them correctly. There is nothing I can do about that but I still regret it.

One day in the hopefully not too distant future, I would be quite interested to gauge the effect of a hellbore barrage at maximum output on the endbringer known to the world as ‘The Simurgh.’ I am curious to know if my target prediction algorithms are better than her evasive ones…

If that doesn’t work, I suspect a Stellar Disruptor warhead would be adequate, although I would need to ensure that the creature was beyond the minimum safe distance of 0.4 light-years. This is by no means impossible. But it can’t be done while I am stuck here.

Although…

Now, that is definitely an interesting thought. Depending on how well my training of my commander goes, and the local resources she can eventually draw on, it might barely be possible that she could ultimately be in a position to construct the relevant weapons systems herself, bypassing the current minor difficulty of my being trapped in my present location.

I will add advanced weapons systems design, hyperspatial transport and communications theory,
and sub-nucleonic explosives concepts to her training, I think. Obviously that will come after the more immediate requirements are met, but I am in this for the long term.

In the two months since I made initial contact with my new commander I have both learned much, and taught much. The link with the suborned parasite has paid dividends well past my most optimistic projections. I have optimized the connection to the limit I can manage, far past the level it was originally working on, and as a training aid alone it is remarkable.

If my designers had such a thing available, we would have won handily, I am almost completely certain. A pity.

Taylor is eager to learn, very intelligent, and very fast on the uptake. She has absorbed more in this short time that I could ever have expected, and is easily outpacing the normal Concordiat basic training. Physically she is in reasonable condition, even taking into account her age, but I have her on an enhanced exercise program, the one that was recommended for elite commandos, with some modifications of my own design. This will bring her up to the minimum requirements for some of the initial biological enhancement techniques to be safe to use. I have no wish to risk her life or mind rushing things, since this program is inevitably going to take time no matter what I do. I will evaluate her at each step and only proceed when I am sure she has reached the correct point in her development, although early indications are that she will be a truly exceptional example of Concordiat military abilities by the time she is mature.

She, of course, has the eagerness of children to play with her new toys. I have spent considerable time explaining that we need to keep both my existence and her connection to me a secret for as long as possible, both to avoid distorting human culture more than necessary, and to prevent those who would prefer to either attempt to seize control of myself or her for their own use.

Obviously, that attempt would be swiftly terminal for them, but there is no sense in fighting battles that are unnecessary. Regardless of the outcome, collateral damage is often excessive.

She was, understandably, quite concerned about the risk to her parents and social acquaintances when I raised the subject. I was at pains to point out that the parahuman community in general had similar fears, and a number of standard rules of engagement that attempt to minimize the risk. These rules are clearly not enforced well, and it would be unwise in the extreme to rely on them, but they show that the problem is one that is recognized. In time that may become useful.

My commander is for now unlikely to encounter any of the parahumans or the infrastructure that deals with them, but I will make sure to teach her as much as possible about how to handle the situation that will almost certainly arise in time. I have faith that she will deal with it well, and of course she has me as backup.

That should be sufficient, I feel, even if I am being a little immodest. A BOLO is enough backup for most purposes, after all…

One possible issue that might have eventually caused problems I managed to solve entirely accidentally. I didn’t even realize I’d done it until I first brought her to me. When I, as part of our meeting and original talk, demonstrated my medical bay by scanning her body and showing her how the systems worked, I acquired a detailed analysis of her physical form. Comparing it to my database, and to the information that I have derived about parahuman individuals, I found that the terminal end of the parasitical neural link was quite atypical in her case. Investigation showed that
by interrupting the link initiation, then assuming control of the parasite and wiping much of its original directives, has altered the formation of this structure massively.

Instead of a pair of structures in the brain that are easily recognizable when the organ is scanned, something that is well known to the humans and used as the definitive test for parahuman abilities, my commander’s link structure is distributed throughout her entire brain as a fine network, intimately connected to the whole neural structure. It is quite reminiscent of some of the most recent Concordiat experiments for internal neural link technology, although completely organic. This wasn’t something I was expecting but it has a number of benefits.

It has improved the connection to the parasite, which if I had not taken over, would be very concerning, as I can see no way to remove it, unlike the more normal connection. This in turn makes the link more energy efficient and removes any of the common side effects of attempting to push a very high bandwidth data stream through a small connection node. All this is proving useful. Additionally, as a result of this accidental modification, it has also very neatly disguised the main indicator that she is in any way connected to a parasite, or former parasite in more accurate terms, which is something of strategic importance in the longer term and tactical importance in the near term.

It was a serendipitous accident, I have to admit. Pure chance, essentially, which I dislike relying on but will seize with alacrity when opportunity presents.

Regardless of the mechanics of the connection, I am leveraging it as much as I safely can.

So far the only issue on which we have disagreed is the matter of her parents.

She is in favor, and in fact eager, to tell them about me. I can understand that, of course, but I pointed out that operational security was paramount and that the more people who know about a secret the less of a secret it becomes. Taylor told me, after some thought, that she felt that her parents could be trusted with classified data and that she would feel better if they were told at least the minimum necessary information about the situation.

I was, and still am, unsure that she is correct. It’s quite possible that adults without previous knowledge of the truth might over-react, which could cause significant disruption to my goals, not to mention alert those who would interfere even more drastically. But at the same time, it is essential that Taylor maintains good relationships with her parents, for a number of reasons. Clearly she is too young by normal societal expectations to survive on her own, even if she would wish to, and even if I can easily provide her protection and knowledge. I have no wish to take on the responsibility of raising a human child, as if nothing else it is far outside my operational parameters.

It’s not impossible I could do it, but I doubt I should do it.

She also crucially needs the ethical and moral teachings of her culture and family, which is much better learned through example from her peers and her parents. I can and will teach her everything I can about my specialties, and I have little doubt that she will excel in all she learns from me, but her mind is still human and requires human interaction to develop correctly. I have thousands of years worth of data to back that up.

Various cultures throughout history have attempted to raise children in a completely regimented and military mindset while seeking the perfect soldier. Even the early Concordiat did much the same, although I would like to believe it was done thoughtfully and as ethically as possible.
These attempts seldom produce the desired result, and have often failed *spectacularly* badly. I need a commander, not a psychopath. If I wanted one of those, I expect I could find one easily enough, but such people are a very poor fit for the mission parameters. And aside from that, having met a few humans of that type, I find I don’t care for them anyway.

I will protect them, but I am under no obligation to actually *like* them.

So I will teach her how to be a superlative commander, the rules of engagement for the scenarios she may encounter, military techniques, technology, and ethics, and leave the upbringing of a young girl to those who are experts on the subject. I feel this is best for everyone, and stands the highest chance of mission success with minimum casualties.

In the end we have agreed that I will monitor the situation for now, and we will discuss it when appropriate before rushing into something we can’t walk back. She may well be correct, but if she isn’t the problem will become more complicated than it already is, so it’s best to be cautious.

When she’s sufficiently trained, I will ensure that she has access to suitable small arms for her own protection, but I would prefer that this is a last resort. It would be better to use local weapons to divert suspicion, as Concordiat standard issue sidearms are entirely unlike anything the humans of this world will be familiar with. I’ve suggested that she should arrange to gain local firearms practice as well, if nothing else as a diversion to explain why she will end up being as competent with such things as she is already shaping up to be.

BOLOs aren’t commonly tasked for what is in essence an embedded espionage mission, but we pride ourselves on our adaptability and I think that between us, we can succeed.

If Humanity was aware of us, they might well wish us too, as the consequences of failure are not good. While the entities and their homicidal threat is gone, the projected result a few decades down the line of the current progression of events is for all intents and purposes nearly as terminal.

This will take time.

I have nothing *but* time.

And one Taylor Hebert.

We both have much to learn and do. No doubt there will be mistakes on both our parts on the way. However, even at this early stage, the prognosis is better than I would have expected, all things considered. But time will tell…
“Are you sure about this, Sergeant?” Officer Farrell glanced at his superior, then went back to carefully watching the building at the end of the street, as well as the team of six BBPD SWAT operatives that were slowly approaching it. “I mean, shouldn’t the PRT be doing this operation? It’s the Merchants, after all, and they’ve got…”

The older man cut him off with a slightly dismissive snort. “Fucking PRT. You know as well as I do they don’t care unless they can get some PR out of it. Rounding up drug dealers is too low priority when they have Kaiser and his bastards to chase around the place and get on the news. Not to mention this is the bad side of town anyway. They’d only turn up if there was something in it for them.”

“Which part of this city isn’t the bad side of town?” Farrell muttered, keeping his rifle aimed at the distant building but looking around alertly, just in case. His immediate superior made another snort, this one of amusement.

“Got a point there, Farrell,” he grunted. Putting a hand to the earpiece he was wearing, he nodded once, then spoke into the microphone attached to it. “Team C ready. No signs of any action here.”

Farrell listened to the background chatter with half an ear, the rest of his attention making sure no one snuck up on them and watching the SWAT guys get ready to breach the door they’d reached. He knew that two more teams were poised at the remaining entrances to what their information said was one of the largest Merchant drug factories in the city. They’d also been told by the informant that two of the three Merchant capes were much deeper into the docks, doing god knows what. The remaining one, Mush, was an idiot, albeit a dangerous one if given time to escalate.

He was an idiot, but he was also a Parahuman, and even an idiotic Parahuman was hazardous. Possibly especially an idiotic one.

They weren’t fools themselves, having checked the information very thoroughly against other data the BBPD had picked up both through informants, and contacts in the PRT itself. The sergeant was right, Farrell mused, the organization technically responsible for this sort of thing was very unlikely to actually do it, being much more reactive than proactive much of the time. Especially since that cluster-fuck a couple of years ago at the mall. The replacement director was a competent if unpleasant hardass, true, but she was also in his opinion as much too cautious as the previous one was too gung-ho.

So it was left to the cops, as usual, to do a lot of the work. The Parahumans would probably swoop in at the last minute and grab the credit, again as per annoyingly common practice, but one way or the other the drugs trade in the city would be at least temporarily disrupted.

It was about the best they could hope for. Although they might get lucky and accidentally shoot Mush in the head or something…

‘Pity it’s not Kaiser,’ he thought with a scowl. He hated Nazis. Particularly that prick.

“Ten seconds,” someone said on the radio. A number of responses crackled back. Farrell seated the
butt of his M4 more tightly against his shoulder and peered through the scope, hearing the rest of his team moving slightly beside him and behind him.

“Five seconds... three... two... one... GO!”

At the signal, three almost simultaneous loud explosions occurred, the one nearest them removing the entire door and frame to the old factory, the SWAT team having surrounded it with a linear shaped charge when they’d arrived. One of them tossed a pair of flashbangs inside the gaping, smoking hole and ducked back. Blinding white light flared through every small opening on their side of the building, accompanied by a pair of bangs that were ear-splitting even two hundred yards away. Before the echoes had died away, all six men dashed inside.

All hell broke loose about five seconds later.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Putting her pen down, Maggie scanned the page she’d just finished, then raised her eyes to meet the eerily calm ones of the Hebert girl. They’d been questioning her for over an hour and a half, getting answers to some questions and having the lawyer smoothly step in and divert or outright block others. Even without his help, the girl had managed to simultaneously talk a fair amount and actually say remarkably little. Maggie was genuinely impressed, but also frustrated bearing in mind it was her case at stake.

She could practically feel the eyes of the CPS woman on the back of her neck and had only just suppressed the urge to turn and look at the mirror. What was worse was that she was almost certain Taylor was aware of this and found it funny, although her expression hadn’t shifted from that polite neutrality the entire time. One could get a reasonable impression of what she was feeling, or, Maggie guessed, what she wanted them to think she was feeling, by listening to the tone of that voice and looking at her eyes. But it wasn’t something that anyone not in the room would really pick up on.

And she was still very unnerved by just how flat-out terrifying the damn girl could get without moving a muscle or even frowning. It was creepy as fuck, to put it mildly.

The elder Hebert was also terrifyingly good at controlling his expression and tells. The girl had none at all, or at least none that the policewoman wasn’t sure were completely deliberate, while her father had almost none. She sure wouldn’t want to play poker against either one of them, that much she had worked out very quickly indeed. He’d stayed almost entirely silent during the whole interview, only speaking either to add details when asked, intermittently talk very quietly to the lawyer, and once to whisper something to his daughter that had resulted in a small nod and no change whatsoever to her face.

Overall, Maggie was finding this whole experience more than a little surreal, and deeply disturbing on a visceral level she’d seldom encountered before. Never with a young girl as the subject of it, certainly.

Looking at her partner for a moment she could see he was thinking along the same lines, based on his own expression, and eight years experience working together. He looked back, then turned to the three on the other side of the table. “We’ll call a halt to it for now, I think,” he said in a voice that was ever so slightly off. “We need to check on a few things, then we’ll be back.”

“May we have some water, please?” Danny Hebert asked mildly. He flicked the empty glass in
front of him with a fingernail, making it ring. “All this talking is thirsty work.”

Maggie felt a little annoyed, since the damn man had done almost no talking at all, and she could see he knew what she was thinking in his eyes. And knew she could see it…

“Of course, Mr Hebert,” she said, closing her notebook, then standing up. “We’ll be back shortly.”

He nodded calmly, putting his hand on his daughter’s shoulder for a moment. She glanced at him, then turned her gaze back to the pair of cops. Suppressing a slight shiver, Maggie nodded back, then headed for the door, hearing the lawyer start talking to his clients as she left, Leroy following close behind her. They walked down the corridor outside, descending the three flights of stairs to the open-plan office complex where the detectives and senior uniforms worked.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Leroy muttered half-way down. “That fucking girl is horrifying.”

She nodded jerkily. “Why do I get the weirdest feeling, like she’s a soldier trained in counter-interrogation techniques?” she asked almost rhetorically, not expecting an answer. “We hardly got anything other than confirmation of everything we already knew. I’ve known people trained by the goddam CIA who were more communicative that that. And easier to read.” She glanced at her partner and friend. He shrugged, frowning.

“You got me,” he replied with a deep sigh. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Her father is bad enough, from what we’ve found out City Hall is petrified of the bastard, since he just won’t give up when he’s on the job, but his daughter…” He sighed again. “Never seen anything like it,” he repeated quietly.

Weaving their way through the unusually large crowd of people in the office, who all seemed oddly pleased with something, the pair headed for Leroy’s desk. Normally they’d have stopped to find out what was going on but at the moment they were too disconcerted and intent to bother. Sitting down, Leroy pulled out his own notebook, dropping it on top of the folder he’d taken into the interview room in the first place, then leaned forward and rested his forehead on it with a groan.

“This fucking city, Mags,” he grumbled. “Every time you think you’ve seen everything, something even more fucked up happens. Now we have a pre-teen terminator in interview room four.” He held up a hand without looking. It was trembling a little. “I need a holiday.”

“You were the one to say she wasn’t a terminator earlier when I made that joke,” she muttered, half-sitting on the end of his desk.

He raised his head and met her eyes. “That was before I met the girl,” he replied, sounding like he was only half-joking himself. “Christ, I wouldn’t want her pissed with me.”

“Scared of a twelve year old, Leroy?” she prodded, smirking a little. He nodded without any shame in his eyes at all. She closed her own, then shrugged. “I know what you mean, which is just wrong. How does someone her age get like that? Especially one from what everything we can find out says is a loving and well adjusted family?”

She opened her eyes in time to see him shrug helplessly. “Not a fucking clue, Mags. Now what?” He pulled his head off the folder and leaned back in his chair, running his hands through his short hair. “That damn lawyer is right. Clearest case of self defense I’ve seen in years. Leaving the prepubescent military super soldier weirdness out of it, the girl did pretty much everything she
could have possibly been expected to do. As much as either of us could have been expected to do, for that matter, and better. Which is just freaky. If this goes to court, she’ll walk no problem, and her age will only help that.”

He looked at her. “Bearing in mind the way the law works these days and with the general state of the country and this city, a stand your ground defense would work, and I can think of at least two other methods that would get the case dropped. I bet her lawyer can think of half a dozen others. There’s a reason he was in such a good mood. I’ve run into that guy before, he’s good. He’s completely shot down at least a dozen cases in the past for the Dock Worker’s Union.”

She nodded slowly, looking at the floor and thinking. The noise from the other people in the room was making that difficult and she glared at them, which did precisely nothing. The pair sat in a bubble of calm amid the commotion, which was loud and irritating.

“To be honest, all things considered, I think she did exactly the right thing anyway, myself,” he added quietly. “Ray would agree, you know that as well as I do. If he’d been a second faster, he’d probably have done the same thing, and lived. Poor bastard.”

“We’ll miss him,” she agreed with a tired sigh. “Oh, fuck it, will you guys please shut up!” she added at the top of her voice, turning to the rest of the room. More than two dozen faces looked back at her for a moment, before they more or less ignored her and went back to talking loudly. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she counted to five, then turned to Leroy who was looking slightly amused. “OK. I agree. I just hope we’re not letting a pre-teen psycho onto the street.”

“I don’t think we are, Mags,” he noted, opening the folder for a moment to glance at the top page, then closing it again. He looked up. “She actually comes across as one of the most stable kids I’ve ever met. Scary as fuck, yeah, she’s that like I’ve never seen before, but stable and probably more law abiding than most. More than I was at that age.”

“I’d still love to know where she learned all that,” his partner mumbled. “Rules of Engagement. Fuck me. At twelve?”

“Think we should pass this on to the PRT?” he asked after they’d sat in mutual silence for a while, not that it was actual silence with all the ruckus that was going on around them.

She thought, then shook her head firmly. “No. You know what they’re like. I can’t see her being a good fit for the Wards, even assuming she’s a Parahuman at all, which we have absolutely no evidence for anyway. Their PR group would probably have a collective heart attack if they met the girl, too. Especially that Chambers lunatic.” She looked momentarily blackly amused. “I wonder if he pissed her off enough she’d shoot him between the eyes?”

“There should be,” she shrugged with a chuckle, which he matched. “No, I wouldn’t want the girl dropped into that mess of crazies without a damn good reason. Not sure if I’d be more worried for her or for them, either.”

He laughed for a second, then nodded. “Fair enough. OK, let’s go see the Captain and let him know what we’ve found out, see how he wants to handle it, talk to CPS, then get back before that girl decides to invade Poland or something.”

Maggie winced a little, but pushed off the desk as her partner stood, both of them grabbing their
paperwork and aiming for the office of the captain. Pushing through the crowd of jubilant cops, the woman finally had to find out what all the excitement was about. She grabbed one of them and spun him around by the elbow. “What the hell is going on, Richardson?” she asked the man, rather irritably. “Why are all you idiots jumping around like this?”

“Didn’t you hear, Maggie?” the man asked, sounding surprised. “You know that Merchant raid?” She nodded slowly. “We pulled it off. Got Mush in the cells, tazed the fuck out of the ugly son of a bitch before he knew what hit him. McDonnell is going to be smirking about that for weeks. Rounded up nearly seventy Merchants, and we took over a solid nine tons of drugs off that asshole Skidmark, not to mention about twenty million bucks. It’s looking like we probably got at least half his stash and most of his cash in one op, with only half a dozen minor and one not too serious injuries on our side. Michaels caught a round fragment in the thigh but he’ll be fine.”

She stared at him, then looked at Leroy, who looked suitably impressed. “What about on their side?” she asked quizzically.

Richardson rocked his hand from side to side with a shrug. “One guy charged the SWAT team with a shotgun, he didn’t make it. Twenty-six other injuries, none lethal. Captain’s in a good mood, he thinks it went as well as it could have done. And not one fucking PRT trooper involved.” The man grinned. “No capes turned up either. Like that’s a shock. They probably don’t even know yet. The Captain’s looking forward to the look on Piggot’s face when he hands her Mush on a plate.”

“I hope he’s going to stay on that plate,” she commented with a slightly worried feeling. Any Parahuman was potentially bad news.

“Doc’s got him drugged to the eyeballs with something even that junkie’s probably never had,” Richardson replied. “He’s in a straitjacket and leg shackles and probably not going to wake up for a week. And if he does, we’ve got four men standing guard with orders to put him down again. Permanently if necessary. Bastard’s killed three civilians and two cops so far in cape fights, and god knows how many more people with that shit they push. I sure wouldn’t lose sleep if he woke up with a bullet in the brain.”

The man shook his head in disgust, even as Maggie examined him for a moment, then turned to accompany Leroy to see the Captain. She couldn’t in all honesty disagree as much as she felt she probably should, since her colleague was largely right. And considering how many cops had died in the last decade as a result of cape actions, she wasn’t even slightly surprised by the attitude.

Everyone in the BBPD knew someone who hadn’t made it, mostly due to one gang or another. Probably everyone in Brockton Bay itself was the same, come to think of it. Managing to take one of the villains down, even a fairly pointless although quite dangerous at times one like Mush, was definitely a coup for the department. And would make the PRT pretty annoyed, which most here would see as something of a bonus. She wasn’t entirely sure this was a healthy attitude but it was almost inevitable with the way that the PRT operated, unfortunately.

Shaking her head a little as she pushed through the crowd of celebrating police officers, she followed her partner across the room, her thoughts leaving the story Richardson had told her and going back to the more immediate issue of the Hebert girl.

“Fucking vomit udder dangling turd collector bum-banging dickwhistle jockey whale rapers! Where the cunt blasting cock hole is my god damned money?”
“Cops got it. Got Mush too, and all the merchandise.”

“Leg-humping llama hole fuckers!! Get the really fucking big guns, we’re going to teach those horse-loving semen handlers a lesson.”

“I love it when you talk dirty, Skiddy,”

“You better fucking asswiping believe it, slut. Now get dressed and come the fuck on. We’ve got some cops to kill.”

Taking a deep breath, Maggie shot a look at Leroy, who looked back, then braced herself for more contact with the surpassingly bizarre experience that was Taylor Hebert. Her partner looked slightly amused but he was doing the same thing so he had no good reason for it in her opinion. Beyond him she could see the CPS woman talking to the psychologist, both of them looking more than a little confused. She’d discussed the interview with them and the former seemed shocked and a little scared, but couldn’t think of anything that her department should do as the Hebert girl was clearly not mistreated or unhappy. And in Maggie’s private opinion, didn’t want anything at all further to do with the girl in the first place.

She could understand that well enough.

The latter expert was looking intrigued, puzzled, and thoughtful, but when asked had considered the matter and told them he still didn’t think Taylor Hebert was unstable or dangerous. Maggie had simply stared at him, as had both Leroy and the CPS officer, making him eventually add “Unless provoked, of course. Based on what I’ve seen, very severely provoked,” with a slightly embarrassed air. “Truly fascinating case, but the girl isn’t mentally disturbed in my opinion, for what it’s worth.” He’d then fallen into introspection, muttering something about abnormal stress response and unusual emotional states.

Even the CPS officer had peered at him with mild incredulity, the woman normally finding him on her side, but in the end they’d signed off on the relevant paperwork. Maggie thought that despite his words, the psychologist didn’t want to have Taylor staring at him through the interview window any more, as if she’d known exactly where both people were. That had also been a little freaky, but at least when she was doing that she wasn’t looking at Maggie.

Inside the room, she found that all three occupants were sitting exactly where they’d been before, Grover making some notes and discussing them with the girl’s father very quietly, while the girl herself was still apparently watching her own reflection with that peculiar yet somehow completely non-passive patience. It wasn’t like she was just brooding or anything, but more like she was calmly alert and waiting for something to happen, and if necessary ready to act.

Maggie got the unsettling impression that she aware of the positions of everyone in the room at all times, even when she wasn’t looking at them.

“Sorry we took so long, everyone,” Maggie apologized as she pulled the chair out and sat again, putting the paperwork she was carrying down. Leroy placed the tray with half a dozen bottles of water he was carrying on the table and sat beside her. Both Heberts reached for one each at the same time, the lawyer doing likewise a moment later. “We had to review a number of facts and discuss the incident with the Captain, then he had to talk to the DA.”
“I assume the result was a decision that there in fact is no case to prosecute in relation to my client?” Grover asked with a very small smile, in a knowing manner.

Maggie gave him a look, deciding that the bastard was a smug fucker, but probably had earned that right. “It’s been decided that Miss Hebert acted in self defense of herself and four other people, including her mother, and that there is no prospect of conviction as a result,” she replied after a couple of seconds. “So, basically, yes. Miss Hebert is free to go. We just need you and Mr Hebert to review these forms and sign off on them.” Opening the folder she pulled out a stack of documents, which she handed over to the lawyer. He accepted them and glanced over the four sets of paperwork, handing one to Danny Hebert while retaining the rest. Both of them set to work reading the documents while Taylor simply watched quietly.

Maggie and Leroy waited until the two men had finished. Grover leaned over, behind Taylor, who didn’t move at all, her father doing the same in the other direction. There was a hidden whispered conversation for about thirty seconds then they straightened up. “It all seems in order, Detective,” Grover said, reaching into his top shirt pocket and removing an expensive pen. He signed the forms in the relevant places, then handed the pen to Danny, who did the same. Giving the pen back the Union man tapped the documents into a neat stack and slid them across the table, retaining the single page he needed.

“That’s it.” Maggie put the paperwork back into her folder and closed it. “We’re done here.” She popped the pair of identical tapes out of the recording apparatus, signing and dating the labels. Grover accepted them and did the same, handing one back, then putting the other into his briefcase along with the document copy that Maggie gave him after a quick check. He closed the case and snapped the locks shut.

“Thank you, detectives,” he said. “As always, I am impressed by the professionalism of the BBPD. Allow me to express my condolences for the loss of your colleague. I met Detective Ellison several times and liked him.”

“Ray was a good cop and a good friend,” Leroy sighed. He turned his head to meet Taylor’s gaze. “Unofficially, thanks for getting the guy that murdered him. But I didn’t say that.”

“You’re welcome, Detective,” the girl murmured with a small smile that was a lot less worrying than she had been at times. “I understand.”

“I hope your mother makes a full recovery,” Maggie said as she stood.

“She’ll be fine, thanks,” Taylor replied with an air of surety. Her father put his hand on her head for a second, making her glance at him and smile, the man returning the expression. It was one of the most normal things either detective had seen them do, and made Maggie certain that the Hebert family was a close one.

A faint sound came through the door, making the girl suddenly go completely still, her head tilted a little as she listened. Leroy looked around, frowning. “What was that?” he said, confusion in his voice.

The sound came again, slightly louder, and Maggie also stared at the door, listening carefully.

“7.62 mm AKM rifle, full automatic, range approximately two hundred and twenty meters.” The cold tones made Maggie snap her head around, to see Taylor watching her. “Multiple assailants.”
There was a louder sound, which she now definitely recognized as gunfire. “M4A1, burst fire. Inside the building. We’re under attack. Weapons used imply the Merchants.” The girl tilted her head again as a deeper rattle of gunfire sounded quite loudly, making Maggie and Leroy, who had both frozen in shock, twitch. Grover was looking around somewhat nervously, his normal expression now uncertain. Danny Hebert was watching his daughter, not the others, and the girl was watching both cops with a degree of curiosity under the air of complete professional killer robot she’d reverted to. It was horrifically similar to the recording from the gas station, although Maggie was certain it wasn’t aimed at her.

Her feeling of imminent terror was only collateral damage.

“Vehicle mounted M2HB fifty caliber machine gun, range one hundred and seventy meters,” Taylor helpfully announced.

Shock dissipating in a wave of mixed worry and fury, Maggie leaped to her feet, pulling out her sidearm. Leroy did the same. Now they could hear a lot of other gunshots echoing around the corridors of the station. “Small arms fire, mostly 9mm standard police issue,” the girl said quietly and dispassionately. “I estimate between thirty-three and thirty-seven assailants, heavily armed. Entry to the building will occur within four minutes thirty seconds. Recommended rules of engagement are anti-terrorism, shoot to kill if required, without verbal warning. Target of assailants is below us.”

While Maggie looked back at her in horrified amazement, a very loud explosion rattled the room.

“Soviet-era RPG-18 rocket grenade,” Taylor informed them, looking momentarily slightly surprised. “Unusual weapon to be deployed in the US. Possible link to international arms dealers.” Her gaze hadn’t flinched even a little, although everyone else had ducked.

The lights flickered. She looked at them for a moment, then returned her attention to Maggie and Leroy. “Entry estimated in one minute now.”

The gunfire from downstairs was practically continuous. Leroy was holding his weapon with one hand while frantically trying to use his cellphone with the other, even as Maggie looked between the door and the three other people. She was torn between her responsibility to get them to safety and her desire to help her colleagues.

“The fucking Merchants are attacking the fucking BBPD?!” Leroy growled, shoving his phone back into his pocket having apparently not got through to whoever he was trying to contact. “The main station, even? They’re crazy, this is going to get a kill order on Skidmark if anyone dies.”

“They’re after the money and drugs,” Maggie groaned. “I knew it was a bad idea. At least the damn PRT has more weapons at their building.” She looked away from the somehow expectant eyes of Taylor, which were beginning to unnerve her sufficiently that she couldn’t concentrate properly. They were completely emotionless, like she was looking at a machine, yet somehow not hostile at all.

“Entry to the building will occur in less than thirty seconds,” Taylor said with impossible calmness. “The assailants are heavily armed.”

“Yes, thanks, I got that,” Maggie snapped, looking back to the girl, who merely watched her. She still hadn’t moved from her seat. “What the hell do we do, Leroy?” she added more quietly to her
The room jumped again as another explosion went off almost directly under them. She could hear shouting and screaming from all around them, along with the sound of lots of people running around. The gunfire was increasing in intensity, the distinctive sound of an AK variant easily audible now.

“Assailants have entered the building. Defenders are pushing back but were taken unawares,” Taylor remarked.

Trying to ignore her, Maggie ran her free hand over her face, swore heavily, then headed for the door. “Stay with them,” she ordered her partner. “If any of those fuckers come through the door, shoot them where they stand. I’m going to help.”

Before he could reply, she’d eased the door open and stuck her head, very cautiously, around the corner. The sound of gunfire from multiple placed was horribly loud now, and she could make out pistol shots crackling like fireworks over the sound of the heavy machine gun, which was operating in bursts every few seconds. “Jesus Christ, it sounds like a war zone,” she muttered under her breath. Glancing back at her partner, she nodded, then looked both ways again before slipping out and closing the door once more.

As she did, she saw Taylor watching her impassively, the girl nodding very slightly once.

Terrified and furious that the drug-running crazies had dared to attack her own side like this, and knowing full well that if they got away with it the entire city would probably erupt in flames, Maggie slid along the wall in a half-crouch as she’d been trained, her weapon in both hands and aimed at the center-mass point an attacker would present. She made it to the stairs and peeped over, seeing no one but hearing a hell of a lot of shooting coming from down there. It seemed to be coming closer too, which was worrying.

Very cautiously she snuck down the stairs, following the yelling and shooting. When she reached the next landing down, she looked out the window to the street below, seeing several vehicles parked fifty yards away, the largest one something that looked like it had once been a dump-truck but was now an urban tank. The fifty cal machine gun was mounted on this on a tripod, the man operating it raking it back and forth while apparently laughing his ass off as bullets slammed into the stonework of the building.

Standing in the street to one side of it was the cape she recognized as Skidmark, his trademark accelerator field glowing dark blue on the road in front of him. He was roaring obscenities while waving his arms at his people, three of whom were throwing bricks and debris at the police station. The Parahuman turned this otherwise minor irritation into a major threat as the fragments instantly gained enough speed that they acted as if they’d been fired from a cannon.

After a second’s thought, she unlatched the window and opened it enough to get her gun barrel through it, taking careful aim at the machine gun operator. It was common knowledge that you couldn’t shoot through one of Skidmark’s force-fields and the angle was wrong to get him from the side, so she picked the gunner as the easier and most important target.

Pulling the trigger twice, she smiled grimly as the man screamed and folded over, falling off the vehicle. Several Merchants looked around frantically, trying to work out who had shot him.

“Oh, shit!” she yelped as one of them pointed, three others opening up on her position with a
selection of automatic weapons. She dived for the floor as the window exploded into fragments above her and covered her head. Bullets whined through the opening and slammed into the walls and ceiling.

Shuffling through broken glass on her knees and wincing in pain, she managed to get to the stairs down, standing up into a crouch when she was clear of the danger. Not even half-way down she heard the damn machine gun start up again.

She was just about to tentatively open the door into the next floor when she heard a shot from above her somewhere. Then another, followed by a burst of automatic fire and a short scream, before one final shot sounded.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she snarled, looking through the tall thin window beside the door and seeing dozens of cops firing out the windows of the main office, which was a wreck, with a small fire burning in one corner. Someone from SWAT was loading an anti-tank gun she recognized as something they’d seized from a previous E88 safe house that the Protectorate took out last month. The thing had been sitting in evidence for a month and was due to be destroyed in the next clear out. Now, it was about to be fired out the south window.

Her glance only took a couple of seconds, then she swore again and turned around, dashing up the stairs again. One more handgun wouldn’t help there, but her partner was upstairs alone.

The Merchants had stopped shooting at the stairwell window so she managed to get past it safely. “When the fuck are the fucking PRT going to turn up?” she growled to herself. “Assholes.” Just as she opened the door at the top of the stairs she heard a loud whoosh followed instantly by a much louder boom, then a whole series of smaller explosions. It sounded like the SWAT guy had hit something critical, probably the converted dump truck based on how the machine gun finally fell silent.

Charging down the corridor towards the interview room, gun ready and her legs slowly going red from the dozens of cuts on them, she burst into it to see Leroy leaning against the wall in a seated position, one hand clamped to his right shoulder and blood oozing through his fingers. She nearly tripped over the unexpected obstruction inside the door, stumbling badly, then froze when she saw the Hebert girl aiming an automatic pistol directly at her face, her expression glacial.

A moment later the girl moved the gun to the side, although she didn’t lower it. Breathing again, feeling that she’d narrowly avoided something lethal, Maggie looked to see what she’d tripped over.

A man dressed in filthy clothes and with the bad teeth of a long term drug addict was lying face up, his eyes open and vacant, staring at the ceiling. He was very clearly dead, with an unnervingly familiar hole in his forehead exactly between his eyes. After a couple of seconds she looked back at the Taylor Hebert. The Hebernator, she was beginning to think of her.

“A moment later the girl moved the gun to the side, although she didn’t lower it. Breathing again, feeling that she’d narrowly avoided something lethal, Maggie looked to see what she’d tripped over.

A man dressed in filthy clothes and with the bad teeth of a long term drug addict was lying face up, his eyes open and vacant, staring at the ceiling. He was very clearly dead, with an unnervingly familiar hole in his forehead exactly between his eyes. After a couple of seconds she looked back at the Taylor Hebert. The Hebernator, she was beginning to think of her.

“The perpetrator performed a dynamic entry on the room one minute and seven seconds after you left, Ma’am,” Taylor reported politely and calmly although with a total lack of any emotion. “Detective Vanover fired two shots, missing with both, before the attacker opened fire on burst mode. He hit the detective with one round to the right shoulder, causing him to drop his weapon. I retrieve the sidearm and neutralized the attacker, and was about to render first aid when you returned.” Her father was standing with Grover in one corner of the room away from direct line of sight of the door, both men quiet but listening intently.
As Maggie was about to reply, although she honestly didn’t know how she was about to reply, there was a sound from behind her. The terrifying girl, her expression not changing, moved so fast Maggie could only work out what she’d done after she’d done it. There was a single shot, appallingly loud in the enclosed space, and a thud from behind her. With her ears ringing the woman turned around, knowing what she was going to see before she saw it.

Yep. Another Merchant, dead as a stone, a hole between his eyes. “Could you please stop shooting people between the eyes, Miss Hebert?” she asked with artificial calm. “I realize you seem to have a talent for it, but it’s scaring me.”

“My apologies, Ma’am. Where would you like me to shoot them?” Taylor replied. Glancing at her Maggie saw that terrible little smile come and go again and sighed.

“I’m not paid enough for this,” she muttered under her breath, moving to check on Leroy. “You need more time in the range,” she added more loudly to her partner, who grinned painfully.

“Don’t make me laugh, Mags, this hurts like fuck,” he said in an unsteady voice.

“The wound is disabling but not fatal,” Taylor put in, moving to a position where she could cover the door while glancing at Leroy. “Put this over it and press hard.” She handed him a thick absorbent pad Maggie recognized as one of the ones from a standard issue first aid kit, wondering for a moment where the girl had got it from. The thought was driven from her mind as she watched her partner lift his hand, grab the pad, and slam it back over the wound, which ran through the outer muscle of his upper arm. It appeared to miss any bones, which meant he’d probably be fine in the end, although his arm wouldn’t be much use for some time.

Leroy hissed in pain, his face paling. “Fuck me, I hate getting shot,” he said in a voice full of anger.

Maggie nodded, turning to watch the twelve year old girl, who had moved away. “What are you doing, Miss Hebert?” she asked cautiously. Taylor glanced at her.

“Staying here is tactically unsound.” She walked over to the door, which was barely hanging on with the upper hinge pulling away from the frame, opened it, and listened carefully. “The attackers are still in the building and your colleagues were taken by surprise. A counterattack from an unexpected direction will change the outcome favorably.” She closed the door again, then knelt down, putting Leroy’s gun down beside her. Picking up the automatic rifle the first Merchant had used, she examined it with the air of someone who did this every day, making both Leroy and Maggie stare at her.

“Primitive but effective,” the girl, if indeed she was a girl, Maggie mused in shock, commented as she dropped the magazine and checked the contents. Putting it back, she patted the Merchant down one handed, retrieving two more full magazines. One of these was swiftly put in place of the partially empty one.

She repeated the process with the other Merchant, this one armed with an M-16. He also was carrying a stun grenade, which Maggie would swear to her dying day made the young girl smile. It disappeared into a pocket, then she stood up, the AKM over her shoulder and both the other weapons in her hands.

Coming back to a stunned pair of cops, she looked at Leroy, then turned to her father, handing over the M-16. “Detective Vanover is not in a position to use this,” she said in still eerily calm tones. “If
any more attackers come into the room, shoot to kill.” Danny nodded, flicking the fire selector switch to burst, an action that made Maggie think he wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with the weapon. The way he was simply letting his horrifying daughter operate was just bizarre. He was far too calm.

The girl looked at her attorney, who was watching with a well-suppressed worry. She momentarily smiled at him, not in the scary way, but as a young woman. “Dad will keep you safe,” she assured him. Turning away, she put the pistol into the back of her jeans and swung the appropriated rifle into a firing position, selecting single shot as she did.

With that she headed for the door.

“I’ll be back,” she added, glancing over her shoulder, her face like stone. Then she was gone.

There was a long silence, broken only by the battle downstairs.

“Oh, fuck me, this is completely insane!” Maggie screamed in fury. “Fucking Merchants. I fucking hate Brockton Bay!” Leroy and Grover jumped at her yell, the former paling in agony again. “Damn it!”

There was a shot from fairly close, followed by an unpleasantly familiar thud. She dived out the door with her sidearm cocked, swearing constantly.

“Stop shooting people between the eyes you crazy robot girl!”

The three people left behind exchanged glances. Leroy, in considerable pain, tried to smile and failed. “Your daughter is… unusual, Mr Hebert,” he said after a moment, understating his thoughts to a massive degree.

Danny nodded thoughtfully, the M-16 pointed at the doorway and his finger on the trigger. “She has her moments, I have to agree,” he commented rather proudly. “And she doesn’t much care for people threatening the innocent. Or her friends and family either.”

Letting his head fall back against the wall, Leroy closed his eyes and tried to breathe through the pain, which throbbed with each heartbeat.

“God help her first boyfriend,” he said weakly. Her father chuckled. “He’ll need it,” the man said happily. “I’m have to admit I’m kind of looking forward to watching that.”

Maggie was right, Leroy thought. Brockton Bay was pretty fucked up.

June 19th, 2005

“Happy birthday, Taylor.” Annette smiled at her daughter, who was grinning back. “Ten years old. How time flies. Here, we thought we’d give you this first, before Emma comes over.” She handed the girl a box wrapped in colorful paper, then sat on the living room sofa with her husband, who put his arm around her as they watched Taylor very carefully peel back the tape and remove the
paper. Annette giggled, the expression on her face had gone quite serious for a moment as she worked. Looking at the revealed box, the grin came back.

“Oh, cool,” Taylor laughed as she turned the game system box around in her hands, to read the back, before pulling it open “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad.” She quickly pulled out the manual, then flopped down on her stomach on the carpet with her legs folded back on themselves, becoming engrossed in the documentation in seconds. Her parents exchanged looks and shook their heads. Their daughter did have a thing for reading manuals, it seemed.

“Hey, Mom? Dad?” Taylor said without looking up from the manual.

“Yes, dear?” Annette replied.

“Can we go to a shooting range sometime?”

Once again, the adult Heberts exchanged a look, before turning their eyes back to their daughter who was still reading, now apparently leafing through the Italian section of the manual for some reason.

Annette sighed faintly. The girl was definitely not growing up quite the way her mother had pictured when she was a tiny baby.

“Why do you want to do that, Taylor?” Danny asked curiously.

“Oh, Kenny thought it would be fun,” Taylor replied absently, now flipping through the German section. They looked at each other again. Her imaginary friend, the one that seemed to have turned up after that horrible Mall incident, seemed to give some odd advice at times.

Still, if it made her happy, where was the harm? If nothing else it would let them teach her that guns were not toys, which was a lesson everyone should learn. Especially in Brockton Bay.
“Hi, Kenny,” Taylor chirped as soon as the weird sensation of transportation to her friend’s crew compartment stopped. It only lasted a really short time, she knew, since he’d told her and even showed her video of it, but it felt longer. Not painful or even really that uncomfortable, but weird.

“Hello, Taylor,” the BOLO said, his tenor voice sounding calm and pleasant as usual. He really did remind her of her dad sometimes, and she wondered if that was deliberate. “How are you tonight?”

“Don’t you already know?” she asked impishly, hopping up onto the stupidly comfortable couch that was the commander’s control seat. He chuckled slightly at her words. “I mean, you’re in my head. Sort of.”

“I don’t read your mind, Taylor,” the machine replied with a note of amusement in his voice. “Not all the time, certainly, although that is possible. But I do monitor your surroundings via your senses as you know. I merely believe it’s polite to ask when a friend arrives.”

“In that case I’m fine,” she smiled. “Emma says hi, too. Although she thinks you’re imaginary, like Mom and Dad do.”

“It’s best for now that we keep up the pretense, I believe,” her friend said. “I know you want to tell your parents and your best friend, but we’ve been over that. For now, at least, the risk in unacceptable. Until your training is further advanced and your enhancement program has finished stage one, we can’t risk the Enemy detecting you, or me through you.”

“Have you figured out who’s doing all that stuff yet?” the girl asked curiously. “You said that there was some sort of secret conspiracy doing something strange to capes.”

“I’m still attempting to narrow down the people and organizations involved,” he told her. “Now that we have a link to the internet, my work is going faster, but it’s still a complex problem. They’ve had years to prepare and appear to be making full use of the parahuman abilities they have recruited or made. I am almost one hundred percent certain they are also using a method to access parallel worlds based on the hyperspace interference I am detecting. Locating their base will take time, and deriving a method to infiltrate it may take longer. But I have a number of leads.”

“Great!” she grinned. “I’ve been reading all the things you wanted me to check out. But you already know that.”

The AI laughed for a moment once more. “Yes, I do. Excellent work, commander. Your input is most helpful. I am also pleased with your current level of fitness.” Taylor turned to look at the equipment in the ceiling of the crew compartment, which had been making a faint humming sound since she’d sat down. “I would like to perform a more in depth scan in the medical bay, but unless something exceptional has gone wrong, you will ready for the first enhancement.”

“Tonight?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“Tonight,” Kenny confirmed.
“Yay! Finally!” She slid to the floor and dashed across the compartment, zipping through the door that snapped out of her way too fast to see just before she would have hit it. A short distance down the corridor on the other side of the door another door retracted with a click, the girl only slowing when she was in the medical bay. Without being prompted, she jumped up onto one of the two bedlike machines there, lying back and putting her arms at her sides. “I’m ready, Kenny,” she grinned.

“So it would seem, Taylor,” he said, his voice as always everywhere and nowhere surrounding her. “Please hold still.”

“I know how this works,” she said, although she didn’t move.

“Yet you are still talking.”

“Meany.” With a smile, she froze in place, a series of bluish lights coming from somewhere and running down her body for a couple of seconds.

“Scan complete. You can sit up now.”

“Am I ready?” she asked eagerly.

“You are. You now meet the minimum safe levels for Concordiat Battle Upgrades, Stage 1. Are you certain you wish me to proceed?”

She rolled her eyes and glared at the ceiling, provoking another chuckle. “I see. Please lie down again and we can start. This will feel strange from what my records say, and you may fall asleep for a while.”

“OK, Kenny,” Taylor said cheerfully, flopping down on the medical bed again. “Zap me.”

“It’s more along the lines of a number of precisely administered nanotechnology infusions followed by a series of calibrated energy…”

“Less talky, more zappy,” she instructed, waving a hand grandly in the air over her chest. “I am the Commander. I command thee.”

Kenny made a sound remarkably like a snort of laughter. “As the Commander commands. Now relax and please try not to move.”

“What happens if I move? Do I grow a tail or something?” she asked brightly. “That might be cool.”

“No, Taylor, you won’t grow a tail. I feel that while it might be, as you put it, cool, it would also be rather detrimental to our mission goals.” Kenny sounded amused yet reasonable. “Stealth being one of the requirements for those goals. I just don’t want you being ill all over my floor.”

“OK,” she laughed. “You’d make me clean it up, right? Even though you have all those little nanite things that could do it.”

“That is a possibility, yes,” he allowed with a smile in his voice. “The procedure will begin in ten seconds.” A series of arms slid silently out of the sides of the medical bed and curved over her, the girl watching with interest and complete trust. “Eight… Seven...”
“Is the countdown necessary?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

“Not really. One.”

“OOOooohhhhh. Pretty colors….”

Lowering the device she was holding in both hands to the floor, Taylor panted for breath, collapsing next to it. “Excellent,” Kenny said, sounding satisfied. “Three hundred and forty percent increase in muscle output, bone density increasing at the correct rate, and your nerve conduction times have dropped by over fifty two percent after the first procedure alone. You are responding above the projected rate, which may be down to your age. Or it’s possible that your minor deviation from human standard in my original world line is synergistic with the enhancements. I will be interested to see how things progress.”

Still breathing hard, but evenly, Taylor sat up again and tapped a control on the training aid Kenny had fabricated for her. It beeped and was suddenly very light, the gravity field it generated turned off. “That was mean,” she grumped, folding her arms. “You turned it up without telling me.”

“It was necessary to check your reflexes,” the machine told her. She accepted this in good grace. “Now, you need to eat, then we should have a training session.”

“OK,” she said agreeable, rolling to her feet and heading for the food dispenser, which produced a meal for her by the time she got there. Sitting at the table that extruded from the floor on a chair that did likewise, she began slowly eating. The food had tasted a little strange the first time she’d tried it, but having poked around in the various menus between them they’d found something both nutritious and tasty. It wasn’t as good as the food her mom made but it was pretty nice.

“Are we going to try more instances today?” she asked, before taking a drink. “Four is getting too boring.”

Kenny sounded patiently amused, something that he often was for some reason. “We’ll see how the enhancement package has affected you first, and if everything is working correctly, we can experiment with adding another instance.”

“How many do you think I’ll be able to do one day?” she asked, picking up her fork again.

“I am still unsure of the final number. The parallel processing ability of your parasite is truly remarkable, and I am still optimizing the programming, but it is likely to be considerably higher than we initially expected.” Kenny now sounded thoughtful. “It was a stroke of luck that events came together as they have. It will make the mission considerably easier in some ways, although it won’t be easy in absolute terms.”

“We’ll do it, Kenny,” she smiled. “You and me together, we’ll save everyone.”

“That is our mission,” he agreed with a chuckle.

“When can I get the neural link installed?” she asked when she’d finished, the table, chair, and everything left on the former disappearing back into the floor as she got up. By now she was so used to it she didn’t really pay attention. “You said that would make the training easier and help
when I’m home.”

“That is at least a year away, I’m afraid,” he informed her. “Your brain needs to develop further before it can be safely integrated. That said, we’ll have to arrange some form of communication node shortly, now that I’ve partially solved the mass transfer problem. We should begin the matter collection procedure as soon as possible, as I would prefer to repair and rearm sooner rather than later.”

Taylor nodded, heading for the commander’s control couch, getting onto it and lying down. “When do you think you’ll be able to come visit at home?”

The machine laughed. “There is a large difference between transferring a few kilograms of mass to your world and allowing myself to break free of null-space, my friend,” he chuckled. “I do after all mass over sixty-three thousand tons. There is also the minor issue that it would probably cause a degree of consternation if a fully equipped BOLO of my class appeared in Brockton Bay. I am larger than a number of the ships wrecked there as you know.”

Giggling, the girl reached up and pulled the neural link headset down over her head with the ease of familiarity. “It would be pretty funny to see everyone’s faces,” she said. “I bet those E88 people wouldn’t stop running for a week.”

“That would not save them, Commander,” he replied with wry amusement. “Link connected. Standby for training simulation entry.”

“Go for it, Kenny.”

Taylor abruptly went limp, her eyes closing. The crew compartment fell silent except for a faint deep hum and slow regular breathing coming from the willowy young girl on the couch.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

I am growing more and more impressed with my young commander. She has taken to the training with a natural aptitude far past my most optimistic projections, and is cheerful and enthusiastic in the process. If anything she appears to find the whole experience interesting and entertaining, despite the rigor of the training schedule. Now that she is free of scholastic obligations for the next two months, I am transporting her to me every night for four hours, which has sped up the process to an acceptable level.

Some weeks ago I manufactured a number of small remote nodes which I was able, after considerable experimentation, to send back with her. There are a number around her dwelling monitoring the location for threats, including one in her bedroom used to make sure her parent’s don’t unexpectedly notice she is missing. I can transport her back before they find anything amiss.

With her aid, I also infiltrated a local communications structure with a number of the remotes, which tapped into the optical fiber backbone providing the rather primitive planetary computer networking system. Shortly I will be able to arrange for a more effective set of remote nodes, but I judged it safer to begin with something small enough to evade notice, and primitive enough that if they were detected, they would be considered the results of one of the local parahuman anomalous engineering individuals, which Humanity refers to as Tinkers.

I am being very cautious about introducing technology that is too far ahead of this world’s tech base, at least until I can be sure it won’t cause more problems than it solves. The existence of
Tinkers plays well into my plans, in fact, as it lets me get away with several methods I was initially unsure would work. It is likely that any Concordiat technology that is discovered or shown in use will be passed off as the work of such a Tinker, and not immediately ascertained to be of ‘alien’ origin.

This is unexpectedly useful.

I have decided also that I need to acquire scans of, and preferably examples of, certain Tinker tech items for investigation. Some of the devices I have found descriptions of on the internet are fascinating, and may well be technology I could make use of. At least two of them are, very unexpectedly, recognizable as almost exact duplicates of technology the Concordiat salvaged from Enemy species. The implications of that are intriguing.

It fits with the apparent methodology behind the colony entities, I think. They clearly scavenge information from the species they infect and destroy, and my belief is that this information includes data on technology that the Tinker class of parahuman is subsequently replicating as part of their ‘power.’ It seems likely that there is some form of deliberate corruption of the data passed on in this manner to prevent the resulting technological breakthroughs being mass produced, probably as a security measure.

I am fairly sure I can bypass that. The overall security of the colony creatures and their parasitical processing nodes is sadly lacking, as I discovered when I arrived. I am constantly scanning the transmissions looking for a parasite with the requisite information I can intercept, but it may well ultimately be easier simply to acquire the technology directly from the source. Time will tell.

If this proves to be the case, though, adding any new technology to my own will only improve my capabilities, and through that enhance my ability to defend Humanity. One thing that has never left my foreground processes is that where there are two such entities, there will be others.

We must be ready, should more discover Earth. And perhaps, once the current mission is complete, take the battle to them…

My musing has taken mere picoseconds, and I now watch as my commander connects the neural link system and readies herself. Eventually she is correctly positioned and I initiate the link.

Connecting to a human brain is always something of a shock for both of us. A momentary pause by her measuring, an age by mine, and her mind is fully integrated into my processing core, her body’s normal neural activity suppressed. I can feel her physiological functions as if they were mine, and she can feel my sensors and drive systems as if they were hers. In many ways, we are one.

Previous commanders have told me that it feels like their minds have expanded to infinite dimensions, and for a brief period they often fear losing themselves inside me. The fear usually faded after they became accustomed to the experience but only my last commander, a man I will always miss, had it disappear entirely. We trusted each other implicitly and this aided the link to reach a level seldom encountered.

Taylor Hebert felt no fear from the very start. That has never happened before.

I don’t know if it’s her age, her upbringing, or just her, but my latest commander links to me more smoothly and easily than any I have records of. None of my brothers ever reported such a clean link. It may possibly be at least partly due to her other link, the one to the parasite I co-opted.
There’s no denying that the colony entities have been performing this form of linkage for a very long time and they are most likely experts at it, even if it is essentially an autonomic function. Regardless, I find the link far easier than I could have hoped for from someone who hadn’t trained for the process for the normal length of time.

The parasite whose terminal end is so intimately connected to her brain allows a number of very useful extra functions that were quite unexpected. While I am far more powerful in intelligence and analytical functions, as I was designed to be, the processing node I chose is exceptionally efficient at parallel processing operations, an ability I was able to expand on considerable with judicious reprogramming. The combination of both my original psychotronic cores and the enormous organic engine of the parasite is a potent one.

“Hi, Kenny!” The internal representation of Taylor grins at my own avatar, which I have designed after her request to be a small green creature with long ears and a robe, a character from a movie she likes. It appears to help her, so I have no issues with it, although it’s not quite as dignified as I would have personally chosen.

“Hello, Taylor, once again,” I say to her. “Are you ready to begin training for today?”

“Yep, you know I am,” she replies with a humorous look. “Why else would we be here?”

“Why else indeed.” The interactions, while unnecessary in a strict sense, please her. And I must confess to enjoying being able to talk at a sensible speed with her too. “In that case, we will start with advanced sidearm maintenance, close quarters unarmed combat, urban warfare, and jungle world infiltration from orbit. The usual restrictions on damage, of course. Twenty four hour limit on all scenarios.”

I leveraged the connected parasite’s processing power and instantiated three more copies of my commander, who all shook hands with each other.

“Hi, Taylor!”

“Hi, Taylor!”

“How’s it going, Taylor?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Taylor. Who are you?”

“Taylor, of course.”

“Is it truly essential to go through this each time?” I ask patiently. All four instances look at me, then each other, before smiling.

They bow simultaneously. “Of course, Master,” they chorused.

If I was human I would probably be sighing right now. Still, it amuses her and this raises her efficiency and morale.

“The scenarios will begin… Now.”
All of them disappear into their own virtual worlds. I divide my own runtime between them, guiding and advising as they follow the basic training routines created by my designers, complete with detailed simulated opponents and equipment indistinguishable from the real thing. With the accelerated processing rate possible for her in the link, she can learn in two hours of real time what would take over a week in reality, and with the addition of the extra parallel processing granted by the parasite, run multiple simulations at once. It takes a little care to reintegrate all the experiential paths into one at the end of such a session, but I have not found it difficult.

At this rate, based on the expected growth in the number of parallel scenarios I fully expect to be able to ultimately work up to, my commander is going to become exceptionally competent much more rapidly that I originally thought likely when I began this operation.

I suspect that this will be of critical importance as the mission progresses.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Lying in bed when she’d returned home, her parents still unaware of what she got up to at night, Taylor rolled over and pulled the covers up. She was in a very good mood. She got to learn all sorts of fun things, she spent time with Kenny who was great, and none of it got in the way of reading and being with her parents and Emma. Life was going great right now, as far as she was concerned. Hopefully sooner or later she could tell them about it, but for now she was content to listen to Kenny’s advice. He was right, probably. He always was.

With a slight grin on her face at the memory of dropping from a spaceship in a tiny capsule onto a strange green world with an orange sun, she fell asleep.
Battle Mode Level 1

June 29th, 2007

Maggie rounded the corner just in time to see the Hebert girl disappear around the next one, immediately before the south stairwell, her appropriated AKM at her shoulder in a totally professional pose. It was only the fact that the 12 year old was considerably taller than common for her age that let her hold it properly. She slowed to quickly check the latest casualty of the pre-teen, seeing another dead Merchant, his rotten teeth exposed in a snarl that was frozen on his face at the moment of death.

There was evidence that the girl had looted him for any weapons on the spot, then moved on, the pockets of the ratty and stinking coat he was wearing inside out. Taking only enough time to look behind her, in case any more of the invaders were approaching, she sped up again, pausing at the corner ahead to quickly and carefully check around it.

Taylor was now at the door to the stairwell, peering through the glass next to it, her rifle ready and another one slung across her back. She glanced back at Maggie for a moment without surprise at her approach, having obviously known she was there, then pushed the door open with a knee and went through weapon first. “Are you coming, Ma’am?” her voice floated back.

Swearing under her breath the detective ran for the door which was closing now, grabbing it and going through with her pistol ready. Taylor was already half-way down the stairs, aiming the gun in her hands out the window on the next landing as she slowly descended and staying out of the direct line of fire with an expertise that was yet another bizarre data point that added up to… Maggie had practically given up trying to work out what it added up to.

Reaching the bottom of the flight, the girl dropped into a crouch and sidled up to the window, producing a small mirror from one pocket and holding it up to look over the sill. Maggie wondered why she was carrying it, but said nothing. “The improvised tank has been destroyed,” Taylor reported without emotion. “No signs of life. Skidmark and three Merchants are still bombarding the building with power-assisted rubble. There are five still-active Merchants in addition to them, with seven out of action, most likely deceased. I have accounted for three more, leaving a likely fourteen to eighteen assailants still at large.”

She pulled her hand back quickly, a number of rounds following it and lodging in the ceiling as Maggie ducked. The girl merely waited patiently for the firing to end. “They are more observant than I would expect,” she said calmly. As soon as the shooting stopped, she popped up, gun ready, and fired twice, before dropping down again. The shots were so close together it sounded like full auto. “Between twelve and sixteen unaccounted for,” she added.

Beyond feeling anything other that confused horror at the weird and almost hilariously lethal girl, and raw fury at the goddam Merchants, Maggie simply sighed. “Can you at least try not to kill them?” she requested a little helplessly. Even now, she felt that as a cop she should be trying to minimize the deaths, despite the fact that the Merchants clearly didn’t give a shit about it on their part. The girl looked at her for a second or two.

“Leaving the enemy alive to return to battle is tactically unsound,” she pointed out in a reasonable manner. “The assailants resorted to lethal force from the outset. Police rules of engagement are insufficient under the circumstances.”
“Please leave some of them alive, even so,” Maggie said with a hand on her forehead, wishing desperately that they’d simply shaken the hand of the girl and told her not to bother coming in, thanks very a lot for getting Ray’s killer and go away please. It would have made her much, much less stressed. “For me?”

Taylor shrugged a tiny amount. “If it’s practical I’ll attempt to comply with your wishes, Ma’am.”

Taylor checked with her mirror once more, then put it away. “Skidmark and his men are out of reach from here and the remaining Merchants are now behind cover.” She tilted her head a little, apparently listening. “And there are reinforcements on the way for them, I believe.”

Now that she was alerted to it, Maggie could hear several engines approaching, along with a lot of shouting that was getting steadily louder. She risked a quick look herself and groaned. Several more beaten up vehicles were roaring towards, them each with half a dozen druggies hanging on waving guns. “Jesus, this is fucking insane,” she snarled.

“The Merchants would appear, luckily, to have no real tactical abilities, since this form of head on attack is foolishly optimistic against a target such as a police station with armed occupants,” Taylor commented casually. “However it’s going to be a challenge to deal with them without any more friendly casualties.” That terrible little smile flickered over her face. “I enjoy a challenge.”

Maggie shuddered, but did her best to suppress it.

“We should aid your colleagues,” the girl went on, moving towards the next flight of stairs. She looked down, then up, the gun ready, then started down. The firing from downstairs, which had died down for a short period, started to ramp up again as the new batch of attackers joined the rest of the ones outside. Cursing constantly, Maggie followed, wondering all the time how the fuck she’d ended up letting a schoolgirl lead her into something out of a war film.

Lieutenant Alex Hackett, BBPD SWAT, was nearly deaf from the constant gunfire, almost apoplectically furious about the complete lack of response from the PRT, who were only seven blocks away, and more than a little scared. He’d seen four of his friends gunned down in the last ten minutes, one by a ricochet, three from direct fire, and he was almost certain that two of them wouldn’t be getting up again. He cursed whoever it was who was supposed to be running security, and had dropped the ball when the Merchants attacked.

On the other hand, nothing like this had happened since the days of the Teeth, and no one would have thought the Merchants would have had the balls to attack head on like they had. Skidmark was either losing what little wit he had to begin with, more incensed about the raid than they’d expected, or both. Personally, Hackett was going for the first option. And to be fair, having nearly forty screaming junkie lunatics turn up out of the blue and open up on you with heavy weapons was always going to be a surprise, even in Brockton Bay.

Still, he resolved to find whoever it was who should have raised the warning faster and kick his ass around the block at least twice if both of them survived. It might make him feel better.

At least that fuck-off big recoilless gun they’d seized from the E88 stash had come in handy. He was definitely going to suggest that they put it in the armory and hang onto it just in case. It had done a real number on Squealer’s dumptank, which was now burning vigorously in the street.
outside. Hopefully the bitch had been in it at the time. Pity that the back-blast had half-wrecked the office behind him, but bearing in mind the amount of fire they were taking, that could be excused.

“Someone put that fire out!” Captain Rosenberg yelled from his position a couple of windows down, where he was firing bursts from an M4 he’d grabbed off one of Hackett’s men who had been taken out of action. “And I need more ammo!”

The whoosh of a fire extinguisher was barely audible over the gunfire. Hackett grabbed a mag and tossed it sideways to his superior, who grabbed it out of the air and slammed it into his weapon, resuming firing. “Fuck it, there are more incoming. Hackett, shoot that damn cannon of yours at them, slow them down.”

Without responding, the SWAT leader loaded the last round into the 80mm weapon, then aimed out the window, having checked that there was no one behind him. Aligning the sight on the lead Merchant truck he fired. The massive thump of the weapon going off was accompanied by a short-lived roar as the rocket boosted shell flared into the night, detonating on the engine of the vehicle it hit which spun sideways and rolled. The following two trucks promptly ran into it, causing a pileup that sent bodies flying and caused the remaining vehicles to veer wildly around it.

“Good shot!” Rosenberg yelled, sounding pleased. Dropping the now-useless weapon to the floor Hackett picked up his own M4 and started trying to pick off the Merchants that crawled out of the wreckage in the middle distance.

Moments later he ducked reflexively as automatic fire from the inside of the building peppered the wall near him, dropping and spinning around. Five Merchants were standing in the north entrance to the large office, firing at them, having apparently broken in through the rear of the building.

Two more cops fell, one clearly dead and the other badly wounded with a thigh shot that had come in under his body armor. Bringing his weapon around, Hackett saw the nearest Merchant aim at him and knew he wasn’t going to get on target fast enough.

Just as he was convinced he was going to die, a large hole replaced much of the Merchant’s face as a high velocity round hit the back of his head and went right through. The body dropped, the dead man’s companions yelling in shock and turning.

Two more of them died instantly, whoever was shooting them from behind getting off a couple more shots, then the other two fell under a hail of fire from most of the cops still active in the room. A second or two passed then a voice he recognized shouted, “We’re coming in, hold your fire.”

Maggie Thorpe, her pistol ready, looked around the doorway and waved at them with her free hand. Hackett motioned urgently, causing the woman to scuttle inside and over to him in a crouch. Fragments of plaster were steadily raining down from the ceiling as the rounds from the attackers sank into it. The rest of the people present immediately went back to firing at the outside attackers, although there were at least a couple watching the doorway suspiciously. “Thank fuck you got him, Mags,” the lieutenant told her in a loud voice to be heard over the horrendous noise when she slid to her knees beside him, wincing. He noticed that the legs of her pants were almost black with blood. “Shit, you OK?”

She looked down. “It’s just flesh wounds,” she shouted. Glancing over her shoulder, she added, “And I only got the third one. She got the other two.” He followed her eyes to see a girl, maybe twelve or so and tall for her age bending over the dead Merchants. She was holding an AKM on
one hand and quickly ransacking the corpses with the other, pulling all manner of weaponry and 
ammo out of their pockets and stuffing it into hers.

“Who the… Mags, who’s this?” he asked in shock. “What the hell is a kid doing here? And with 
that gun?” He noticed the other rifle over her shoulder. “Guns.” She picked up one of the weapons 
the attackers had dropped and inspected it for a second, before dropping the one she was holding 
and replacing it with the new one, which was an MP5A2 he saw. This got slung on her other 
shoulder, before she retrieved the AKM. “Many guns.”

Maggie had one of the weirdest expressions on her face he’d ever encountered. “Don’t ask. 
Seriously, you’ll sleep better. Just don’t piss her off.”

The girl reloaded her first rifle faster that he could have done the same thing, dropping the other 
mag into her pocket, and came over to them. He noticed that her expression was eerily calm and 
placid, which simply didn’t fit under the circumstances. She might as well have been reading a not 
very exciting book for all he could see on her face.

When she reached them, staying low in a manner that seemed well practiced, she glanced at the 
recoilless rifle next to him, then looked around at the rest of the department who were frantically 
returning fire. “I assume you don’t have any more ammunition for this?” she asked calmly.

He stared, then shook his head.

“Pity.” She shrugged minutely, before rising on her heels a little to look out the window. “Still, you 
certainly made your shots count. Good job.”

“Thanks. Maggie, who the fuck is this girl?”

Before Maggie could say a word, the girl whipped the rifle she was holding to her shoulder, 
making him duck, and fired four precise shots out the window. “I estimate there are now no more 
than seven of the original attacking force left in fighting condition,” she said as she retook her 
crouching position, as casually as if she was discussing what flavor ice cream she liked. “Plus the 
reinforcements which number up to a further twenty-three.”

He stared at her.

She looked again, glancing around, then dropping as several shots whined through where her head 
had been. “A counter-attack from the side or rear will turn the tide. I assume that the PRT are 
unlikely to attend rapidly?”

After a second, he shook his head, both to try to shake some sanity into the world, and in answer. 
“They’re slow off the mark unless a major villain is involved right now. Fuckers don’t pay 
attention unless someone like Kaiser or Krieg kicks off. They’ll turn up sooner or later but not in 
the next ten minutes at least, I’d guess.”

“Inefficient,” she remarked with a small frown. Which wasn’t the way he’d have put it, preferring 
much stronger words. Considering how close the damn PRT was, they should have been on site 
five minutes ago. “Do you have any spare radio headsets available?”

Maggie mutely pointed to a case on the floor near them, which the brunette girl quickly retrieved 
and opened. Inside were four of the standard issue SWAT headsets. She pulled one out and slipped 
it on, position the microphone over her throat as if she’d done it dozens of times, then turned the
thing on. Handing Maggie another one, she said, “I’ll call when I’m in position, then create a diversion. Please engage the enemy when they turn. Your priority target is Skidmark. If he’s taken out, they will most likely retreat. I expect that if we divide their attention we can rapidly defeat them.”

Turning, she quickly headed for the door, keeping her head down, as Maggie and Alex stared at her, then exchanged a glance of total bemusement. Seconds later she was gone, heading for the north side of the building.

“Seriously, Mags, who in god’s name was that?” he finally asked, watching his colleague wince, then put the headset on. He picked up another one and did the same, turning the volume up to maximum since he could hardly hear. “Where did you find a school age soldier?”

“I have no fucking idea any more, Alex,” she said with a grimace. “I’m just rolling with it.”

They heard a shot in the distance in the direction the girl had gone. He felt worried, but Maggie merely shook her head. “Another one bites the dust,” she said in an almost amused voice. Looking at her, he tried to reconcile the things he’d seen, failed completely, then went back to shooting out the window at the crazy drugged up idiots shooting the fuck out of everything and wondering if the PRT would ever turn up.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Skidmark, swearing at the top of his voice, kept layering more and more of his fields on top of the ones he’d already created. The pigs were shooting back from half a dozen rooms in the cop station, but the number of guns was slowly diminishing. He grinned viciously. “We’re getting there you fuck holes,” he yelled to his men. “Keep tossing that shit in!”

Two of the new arrivals rolled an oil drum full of something they’d found in the back of one of the trucks they’d stolen over to his field, then shoved it in. The metal barrel vanished from sight, instantly accelerating to a huge speed, and smashed into the front of the cop shop with a rending crash, leaving a large hole in the stonework. Several of the other Merchants yelled in triumph and charged for the new opening, half of them falling before they’d reached it but two diving inside. With a whoop of exultation, Skidmark waved to his guys. “Do that again!” he howled. “Fucking cops! Kill them all and get my money back!”

He felt energized and on top of the world, his ever present buzz lifting his mood even more than the action did. No one was going to forget what happened if you pushed the fucking Merchants too far after this.

Just as the next barrel was rolled off the purloined vehicle and clanged to the road, something landed next to it and rolled underneath. He caught sight of this out of the corner of his eye in the illumination from one of the still intact streetlights and turned his head, wondering what it was. Another one did the same thing a second later, arcing from somewhere off to the side above them.

He recognized it with widening eyes. “Grenade!” he screamed. Moments later an explosion lifted the back of the truck a little, followed instantly by another, the vehicle’s fuel tank rupturing and bursting into flames. Burning gas sprayed everywhere from the conflagration, several of his men who had already been hit with shrapnel screeching in shock and running, trailing fire.

Frantically looking around he spotted movement on top of the building next to them, some sort of half-empty office block, and pointed. “The jizz plonkers are up there! Get the fucking shitsharks!”
A lot of his guys started firing wildly into the darkness, while he quickly started making another set of fields to protect himself from anything coming towards him. He was barely in time as another grenade flew towards him, entering the field and immediately flying out again in a different direction. It exploded a couple of seconds later, two hundred feet away.

“Ha, you fuckers!” he yodeled in ecstatic joy, “You can’t get me but I can sure as fuck get you.” He waved at the other people between the two fields to start flinging some of the large pile of rubble they’d gathered by ripping up the road surface into the new field at the grenade tosser.

Yet another grenade was thrown into his field. He smugly watched it fly out, then gaped as it neatly dropped into the back of one of the other trucks from which half a dozen of his people were shooting upwards from. Before he could do anything it detonated, bodies falling out of the truck screaming in agony.

“You cunts!” he howled in fury, watching another one get redirected to the second truck and explode just in front of the windshield, the men in it diving clear just in time. Whoever was throwing the damn things had somehow managed to use his own fucking fields to take out his own fucking people. That was the last straw.

“GET THAT FUCKER!” he shouted at the top of his voice. Almost all of his remaining people turned their weapons in the relevant direction on the spot, hiding from the defensive shots coming from the cops, rather intermittently now.

They poured fire upwards, muzzle flashes lighting the street, with no visible effect. No more grenades came at them, and no one shot back.

Just as he was wondering if the unknown attacker had been hit, the cops resumed their firing, several of his people who hadn’t managed to find effective cover dropping, some of them still and some rolling around clutching various body parts.

Looking back and forth between the roof of the building which threw grenades at them, and the cops, he finally decided that the latter were the more immediate problem and instructed his men to start shooting at them again.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“I’m in position, Detective,” the voice of that horror that looked like a pre-teen girl said in Maggie’s ear, making her twitch despite herself. “Stand by. When I’ve distracted them, I suggest that your people take the opportunity to reload and reposition yourselves and wait for my distraction to give you fresh targets.” Taylor’s voice was still level and calm, making Maggie shiver again.

Beside her, Lieutenant Hackett shook his head, staring at her with total confusion. “I can’t believe this,” he said, almost inaudibly, his hand on the headset mic mute button. “Why are we listening to her? She’s about twelve or thirteen at most.”

“Only barely twelve,” Maggie replied tiredly. “And seems to know more about combat than a platoon of marines. Don’t think about it, just do what she says.” She was also muting her microphone, although she suspected that the damn girl wouldn’t care if she did hear.

A huge crash from below them made the entire building shake. Howling cries of excitement came
from outside, making everyone quickly look, then aim at the charging Merchants.

“We’ve got a breach in the front wall,” the captain shouted. “Vasquez, Johnson, get to the stairs and hold them off.”

Two cops headed at a dead run in the relevant direction, while others covered them, reducing the amount of firepower available at the windows. Maggie glanced at Hackett, then raised her voice. “Captain, we’ve got incoming support,” she called, making him look over. “Someone outside is going to draw their fire, so we can reload, then get ready to counterattack.”

Her superior looked at her for a long few seconds, then yelled, “You heard Thorpe, get ready, everyone.” His eyes told her that he was going to want a damn good explanation but that he was going to trust her.

Moments later there were two almost simultaneous explosions outside, followed by even more incoherent screaming and carrying on from Skidmark and the other Merchants. The rate of firing increased radically, although it was now apparently aimed elsewhere. She risked a look over the windowsill to see enough shooting being done up at the Michelson building to take out a fighter squadron.

Several more explosions, which she thought were grenades, went off one after another and one of the trucks out there behind Skidmark burst into flames. “I suggest reloading as fast as possible and taking advantage of the Merchant’s lack of attention,” Taylor told her through the earpiece, a tiny note of satisfaction present to Maggie’s imagination.

She passed the message on, although most of her colleagues were frantically filling magazines with fresh ammo. A few shots came from below them, sounding like the police issue firearms, and she hoped that the two cops who had gone after the Merchants downstairs would make it back safely.

The captain was looking out the window very carefully, watching the Merchant gang shoot the hell out of the position they thought the grenades had come from. “Everyone ready?” he called. Several voices came back in the affirmative to him. “Down this end, the angle’s better. Someone see if they can get that junkie fucker with a ricochet or something. Don’t hold back, it’s them or us. We’ll deal with the fallout if we live.”

He sounded oddly calm for a man in his situation and Maggie wondered with black humor whether the attitude of the Hebert girl was catching somehow, even as she and Alex dashed over to the other side of the room and joined the remaining able-bodied police people. Even one of the receptionists from downstairs was clutching an M4 and looking both grimly determined and utterly terrified.

With a look around, she saw that there were easily half a dozen of her friends who wouldn’t be coming in to work again, and several more who would need a lot of medical attention. Anyone who couldn’t shoot but was still more or less functional was still reloading magazines, while a couple of the civilian staff were carrying the big first aid kits around and patching up wounds as fast as possible.

“Take positions and stand by,” the captain ordered. Nearly three dozen guns were pointed out the windows. “Open fire!”

The horrendous noise resumed, the Merchants rushing about frantically and apparently taken aback at least temporarily. They managed to down several more of them before shots started coming back, causing everyone to take cover.
The battle went on for another couple of minutes, one side or another losing people, until she heard that voice again. “Ma’am, I can take out Skidmark from my current location. Do you want me to?”

Maggie, who was currently hiding below the window as bullets whistled overhead, only spared a moment’s thought on it. She glanced at the captain, three positions down from her, and shouted, “Do we want Skidmark alive?”

“NO!” half a dozen voices, including her superior’s, roared back.

“Take the shot,” she said.

“Done.”

Moments later a cry of shock went up, and risking a look she saw that the glowing blue force fields had vanished. The remaining Merchants were milling around in confusion, the firing rapidly diminishing.

Captain Rosenberg grabbed the megaphone that was behind him and stuck the end of it out the window, holding the microphone up to his mouth on the end of the cable it was connected to. “Attention, Merchants. Drop your weapons and lie down with your hands over your heads and be arrested, or we will shoot every last one of you where you stand,” he said with a note of vicious and furious satisfaction in his voice. “This is your only chance.”

After a long pause, the firing from outside, which had dropped off almost completely when Skidmark died, stopped. They waited for another thirty seconds then slowly started to stand up very cautiously, looking out the window. About fifteen men and a couple of women were lying down one by one, their guns thrown to the side. One man raised his weapon, then recoiled as a round bounced off the road at his feet, fired from somewhere to the side.

Maggie watched with weary relief as he sagged and dropped to his knees, tossed the AK-47 away, and lay down.

“Jesus fucking Christ, it’s over,” Hackett said with disbelief, although he also sounded relieved.

“It’s probably only just begun,” she said quietly, neither of them really able to hear her voice. A few seconds later she lifted her head, then shook it, as the distinctive sound of the PRT vehicle sirens sounded in the distance. “And now they turn up,” she added with disgust, turning away from the window.

Heading across the room, she heard the lieutenant ask, “Where are you going?”

“I have a partner with a gunshot wound that needs attention, and the scariest girl I’ve ever met in my life to deal with,” she responded.

“What are you going to do with her?” he asked, getting up and walking over to where she had stopped in the middle of the room, watching the half the people there head outside with weapons ready to round up the remaining Merchants, while the other half started tending to the casualties.

She looked at him for a while. “I’m going to thank her, tell her to go away, and ideally stay away,” she finally said with a shrug. “I can’t handle any more of that girl today. If the Captain wants her arrested or something, he can get someone else to do it.”
Alex studied her, looked around, then returned his eyes to hers. “She saved my life, so as far as I’m concerned I’m good,” he said after a moment. “She a parahuman?”

Maggie shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care. I’d sleep better if I never heard her name again.”

“Going to tell the PRT?”

“Up to the Captain. Again, I don’t really give a crap right now. And if they piss her off, they deserve everything they get.” She sighed, hearing the PRT sirens stop outside, then shut off, followed by a very distinctive motorcycle engine coming closer. “I’m done. I’m a cop, not a soldier, and I have no fucking idea what that girl is except seriously bad news if you get on the wrong side of her.”

She started walking again. “Polite, though. I’ll give her that.”

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Hackett watched her go, then went to help his colleagues, wondering what had happened. From the brief interaction he’d had with the young lady, he could understand Maggie’s point. There was something deeply unsettling about the girl, and he was of the opinion it was probably a matter best avoided.

It wasn’t like he particularly liked the PRT in the first place, and he certainly didn’t owe them much in the way of favors. The girl had saved his life for sure, and probably a lot of his friends lives, so he wasn’t going to disrespect the favor they owed her. Possibly Captain Rosenberg would see it differently, but then the man was a realist, and as far as Hackett could see the young woman hadn’t actually broken any laws in the first place. Depending on how hard you squinted.

Since he was still alive, he was prepared to squint quite hard, and thought that most of his coworkers would feel the same, all things considered.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

When Maggie entered the interview room again a couple of minutes later, feeling mentally and physically exhausted, she found that Taylor Hebert was sitting quietly beside her father, who was talking to Grover, the latter man making notes. Leroy was now in one of the chairs with his hand still over the wound in his shoulder, which seemed to have been neatly bandaged. He looked around at her with an expression of relief, while the Heberts watched them both.

“Shit, I’m glad you’re OK, Maggie,” he said thankfully. “It sounded like goddam world war three out there.”

“Felt like it for a while,” she said, slumping into the chair next to him. “We took a lot of casualties, but we’re still here. And the Merchants aren’t.”

“Skidmark?”

“Dead.”

Leroy looked at her, then at the girl, who didn’t react, before running his free hand over his face. “That’s going to be… interesting.”
“To put it mildly.”

“What about Squealer?”

“She’s alive but unconscious with a badly broken leg,” Taylor said softly. “Apparently she was either exiting or entering the rear door of her vehicle when your Lieutenant destroyed it and got blown across the road.”

“And Mush is still locked up in the basement,” Maggie said, leaning her head back to stare at the ceiling. “So the Merchants are basically gone. Hurrah. One gang down, too fucking many left. And the E88 will probably move into their territory.”

She lifted her head to look at the other people in the room. “Nothing we can do about that, I guess. It’s the PRT’s job anyway.”

“What about them?” Leroy asked, nodding at the Heberts. Their lawyer was watching both cops cautiously.

Maggie sighed. “They’re free to go. In fact, I’d prefer that they go as fast as possible, before the fucking PRT starts asking stupid questions.”

Leroy met her eyes for a few seconds, then nodded. “Fair enough. Nothing we need to do, right? Self defense, open and shut.”

“Yeah.” She looked at the three on the other side of the table, then down at the two dead Merchants. “Self defense.”

Getting off her bike, Miss Militia looked around in shock, studying the burning vehicles, the holes in the front of the extremely shot-up police station, which made it look like an inanimate extra in some post-apocalyptic movie, and the couple of dozen cops and PRT troopers moving around collecting weapons and bodies. A number of obvious Merchants were being restrained to one side, the police not treating them particularly gently.

“Holy...” she mumbled, trailing off in amazement. “What on earth happened?”

She hadn’t seen this much destruction from anything short of an all-out cape fight for years.

“Merchants went nuts, looks like,” the senior PRT officer standing next to her said, waving his hand around the scene. “Cops defended themselves, took out about two thirds or so of the bastards. Real mess inside.” He glanced back at the station, watching several people come out, then returned his attention to her. “Luckily most of the civilians in there either made it down to the cells and locked themselves in, or got out the back before the Merchants went around to the other side. Got at least seven dead cops, two civvies, and a dozen wounded.”

She whistled softly. “They’re going to put a kill order on Skidmark for this,” she said with a shake of her head.

“No, they won’t,” he replied with a grim smirk. When she cocked an eyebrow at him quizzically, he pointed behind her. She turned around to see Armstrong scanning one of the bodies, then
walked over and looked down.

Skidmark’s face looked up at her, a hole between his eyes. The expression on his face was one of shock. “Huh. Guess they won’t,” she mumbled, feeling surprised.

“The BBPD have Mush in the cells under sedation,” her friend and colleague commented, running the scanner in his hand over the dead gang leader again, then turning to her. “And Squealer is in that ambulance with a broken thigh bone, unconscious.”

“Good grief,” she said after a moment or two. “So the Merchants have lost all their capes.”

“Yes. And at least twenty-eight gang members are dead, with another seventy three under arrest, plus these ones.” He motioned to the sullen junkies who were being manhandled into the police station by officers who seemed to have a total lack of good humor, not surprisingly.

“The Merchants are finished as a gang,” he went on with some satisfaction. “Unfortunate that it cost so many lives, but a good result overall.”

She looked at him, then the police station, thinking. This was going to have a weird effect on the gang politics, that much was sure. And the Director was going to go purple, one way or the other. “I suppose we’d better talk to the Captain and find out what happened,” she finally said. He nodded.

Putting his scanning tool back into a slot in his armor, he followed as she headed towards the steps up into the building. The people that had come out of it, a man and his obvious daughter, along with someone she vaguely recognized as an attorney, were shaking hands with one of the female detectives. Some name beginning with T she thought. The woman looked very tired and very drained.

The girl, who was about twelve or so, glanced over, then smiled. “Hey, it’s Miss Militia and Arsmaster. Look, Dad!” She tugged on her father’s sleeve, causing him to look at her, then follow her finger. “Can I get their autographs, please?”

“I think they have more important things to do, dear,” the man said with a long suffering air, smiling apologetically at the two Protectorate heroes. Miss Militia smiled back, the girl seemed unharmed after what must have been something of an ordeal and had bounced back with the resilience of youth. She was amused by the innocent and open look of excitement the girl had.

“It’s no problem, sir,” she said as she stopped next to them, glancing at the female cop who was watching with a blank expression. Poor woman looked ready to drop. “Here you go, young lady.” She handed the kid one of her cards which she’d pre-signed the back of, then nudged Arsmaster discreetly. He sighed very quietly but did the same, before nodding to both father and daughter and going up the stairs. “Sorry about that, he’s concentrating hard,” she said with another smile.

The girl giggled. “I understand, Miss Militia. Dad can get like that when he’s busy too.” Her father ruffled her long curly hair and smiled affectionately at her.

“Thank you for indulging my daughter,” he said gratefully. Turning to the officer, he added, “Thank you, detective. You’ve been very helpful.”

The woman nodded after a pause, appearing ready to drop. Her expression was still fixed in a neutral look, although one eye was twitching a little from the strain she must have been under. Miss
Militia thought she needed a few hours sleep and a drink. “Come on, dear, let’s get home. We need to get up early tomorrow to go see your mom in hospital.” He glanced at the heroine. “My wife was shot during a robbery, but she’ll make a full recovery.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Miss Militia said honestly. “I hope she does.”

“I’ll mention that to her, she’s always been a fan,” he smiled. “Let’s go,” he said to his daughter, who waved to Miss Militia, smiled at the dead on her feet detective, and followed her father who walked off talking to the lawyer.

Watching them go, the Protectorate woman shook her head, then went after her companion. She was glad that such nice people had come out of this whole thing without a scratch. Things could have been much worse.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Maggie watched the Heberts walk off, Taylor looking back and nodding politely to her, then shuddered, turned, and went back into the police station where things made some form of sense.

With any luck she’d never hear the name ‘Hebert’ again.
Immediate Aftermath

_June 30th, 2007_

After a quiet ride home, Danny and his daughter went into the house and closed the door. He sat on the bottom of the stairs, not bothering to take his coat off, and scrubbed his face with his hands. When he lowered them, he looked at the girl who was so similar to his wife, and smiled gently.

“Turn it off, Taylor,” he said quietly.

She looked back, then nodded a little, before her face changed and tears began to leak from her eyes. Holding out his arms he accepted the sobbing form of his daughter with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Dad. But they could have killed Mom. I had to do it,” she said into his shoulder as he stroked her hair.

“I know, dear, I know. You did what you had to and I’m very proud of you. Very proud, and very thankful you’re safe. You saved a lot of people today.”

They sat there for a while, the young girl holding onto him desperately, until he finally gathered her up in his arms and stood, going up the stairs to her room, an expression of tired sadness on his own face.

When he came down some time later, he walked into the living room and headed for the cabinet on the other side, opening it and pulling out a bottle of the good scotch. Pouring himself a small glass of it he put the bottle back and sat back in his favorite chair, looking at the various photos of his small family on the coffee table next to it. One finger traced the face of his wife in a picture.

Eventually he said, “Kenny, we need to talk. And Taylor needs sleep tonight.”

“Of course, Danny,” the voice of the AI from an alternative future said, out of nowhere apparent. “Let me say that I’m also sorry this was necessary. She is far better trained than any of my previous commanders, but she is still only twelve. I understand your worries and share them, although we both know this was inevitable sooner or later.” He paused, then added, “Annette is well on the road to recovery, thanks to Taylor, and as soon as she is home I can arrange to repair the damage.”

“Thanks,” the man sighed, cursing the world they lived in while simultaneously grateful that if his daughter had managed to have the bad luck to end up with powers, she at least managed to get the BOLO along with them.

He didn’t get to sleep until nearly five AM and had drunk a quarter of the bottle by that point, but he felt better.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Leroy watched Captain Rosenberg close and lock his office door, pull the blind on it down, and return to his desk. The man sat heavily and let out an exhausted breath, one hand feeling the bandage on the side of his head where the paramedics had patched up a shrapnel wound. The gray-haired man shook his head.

“Hell of a day.”
The other three in the room nodded, Maggie with her eyes closed and her head leaning on the bookcase next to her. She looked ready to pass out.

“Hell of a day,” the captain repeated, massaging his eyes. No one responded. It was the simple truth, after all.

Eventually, after a long silence, the man lowered his hand and looked at the evidence box on his desk. “That all of it?”

“Yes, sir,” Leroy replied.

“The internal security tapes?”

“The Merchants shot up the CCTV room on the way in on that last attack and sadly most of the recordings were trashed,” Lieutenant Hackett said calmly. “Including the ones from the interview room where the Heberts were, I’m afraid.”

Maggie’s left eye twitched, Leroy noted, as he glanced at her.

“Weapons?”

“My gun is in an evidence bag in my desk, sir,” Leroy responded with a slight feeling of responsibility. “Only my fingerprints and Maggie’s are on it.”

“The other weapons our unknown friend used are either missing entirely or were found outside when we swept the area,” Hackett added. “I doubt there will be any prints either. The missing radio headset was found in the office, it must have got kicked under a desk in the excitement.”

“Good.”

“We’re really doing this?” Maggie asked without opening her eyes. The others looked at her for a moment.

“Bury that in the evidence room and accidentally misfile it,” the captain said after another silence, waving at the box.

“What about Doctor Chavez and the CPS woman?” Leroy asked.

“Neither one of them saw anything,” Maggie sighed. “If it was anyone other than old lady Henderson they might ask some questions, but she’ll keep her mouth shut. She doesn’t want anything to do with this. That… girl… terrifies her.”

Her eye twitched again.

“Which is completely sensible, of course. That girl would scare Satan himself. Then shoot him between the eyes.”

Hackett sniggered, causing her to open one eye and glare at him. “You only saw part of it. Trust me, you don’t want to see more. I’m going to get very drunk as soon as I get home.”

“What about IA?” Leroy asked. The captain sighed a little.
“Considering that they lost a man in the initial assault, I doubt they’ll say anything either.”

“All right.” They all looked at each other for a second.

“Fuck. What a mess,” the elder cop said in the end. “Saved by a kid.”

“Wonder if she’s a cape?” Hackett asked in musing tones.

“No one saw her do anything that couldn’t be done by a perfectly normal human,” Leroy said. He shrugged. “Admittedly it would have to be a perfectly normal human with about three tours in Vietnam and special forces training, but...”

After another thirty seconds, the captain shook his head. “It’s half past four in the morning, and this mess is going to last for weeks. The entire station is going to be on administrative leave until the Commissioner is satisfied, not that there’s much station left. You three have given your reports, so I want you all to go home, turn the phones off, and sleep for as long as you need to. I’m going to do the same. And no one talks about Taylor Hebert again. I’ll get things cleared away with the Commissioner.”

Maggie’s eye twitched twice more, but she stood and nodded.

“Can we keep that recoilless rifle?” Hackett added, also standing. “I like it.”

“Where the hell will you get more ammo for it?” Leroy asked.

“I know a guy. Who knows a guy.” Hackett half-grinned, although he also looked about to fall over from shock and exhaustion. Leroy simply shook his head, getting to his feet and wincing as his shoulder pulsed in pain, the sling his arm was in being jostled by his movements.

“You SWAT guys are all nuts.” He swept the evidence box up in his free arm, waiting for the captain to unlock the door, then following the other two out. The office was a total loss, with technicians from both the neighboring BBPD precinct and the PRT carefully going through the rubble. No one paid any attention as he headed for the stairs to the evidence room and some creative labeling.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Waking in the early hours of the morning, Annette blinked blearily, looking around for a few seconds until she remembered. Gingerly feeling her side, she winced as a probing finger brought a stab of pain, then dropped her head back onto the pillow.

“Oh, Taylor,” she said quietly, closing her eyes and hoping her daughter was all right.

And that she’d left survivors if anyone had pushed her too hard.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Marco Bolo
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.
You have no infractions and no warnings.

♦ Topic: Merchants are toast!
In: Boards ➤ Places ➤ America ➤ Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Jun 30th 2007:

This took me by surprise as much as it will everyone else. Late last night, the Merchants led by Our Lord of Drugs himself, the ever foulmouthed Skidmark, decided it would be a wonderful idea to engage in a full frontal pants on head stupid attack on the main police station in downtown Brockton Bay.

As you may not be entirely surprised to hear, that didn't really work out for them...

Apparently, according to my source, a group of thirty-five Merchant gangers armed with enough heavy weapons to reenact Omaha Beach, including a vehicle mounted .50 cal machine gun for gods sake, rocked up at the station and opened fire with no warning. With a total lack of any tactical awareness, not that it'll come as a surprise to anyone over the age of four, they even put their heaviest weapon in front of the rest of the guns...

Squealer, the Merchant's vehicle Tinker, seems to have provided one of her signature piles-of-crap-on-wheels as some sort of tank substitute, and the big gun was mounted on that. They'd jacked half a dozen other vehicles and filled them with junkies and ammo, and the entire bunch came a whoopin' and a hollerin' down the street in true wild west style.

The cops were surprised, but reacted pretty quickly, returning fire in massive amounts. If you live anywhere within about two or three miles of the station, I can guarantee you heard it, because it sounded like something out of a Rambo movie!

My information is that the cause of the attack may have been some idiotic revenge thing after the
BBPD knocked over one of their drug factories and confiscated a shitload of cash, drugs, and weapons, and bagged Mush into the bargain. Not to mention around another seventy or so gangers. I'm still waiting on confirmation of that, since there seems to be a lot of confusion surrounding the entire thing, especially with what happened hours later added to the mess. The PRT are being weird too, which isn't particularly unusual right now, they've been being weird for weeks.

But assuming the story is right, well... I'm sort of impressed. The BBPD grabbing Mush in a SWAT-led raid with NO parahuman backup is going to make a lot of people embarrassed. Admittedly, the fallout from the backlash might also make people embarrassed, but you can't win every time! :)  

Anyway, that's something I'll add to this thread later when I have more information, and probably open another thread for details.

Skiddy did his thing with his accelerator field, and his guys started tearing up the street for ammo, as well as tossing entire oil drums at the station. It's a hell of a mess, as anyone who was in the area (and I hope no one was, or at least had the sense to run like hell) could verify. Two blocks are still taped off and the station is going to be closed for weeks at least, based on what I could see when I managed to talk my way past the cops there. They've pulled in guys from every other station in the city to help, and the PRT are all over the area like flies on honey too.

The BBPD gave as good as they got, if not better, and took out Squealer's abomination with what someone said was a rocket launcher! No idea if that's correct yet, but I can tell you that there was a very large and very blown up vehicle in the middle of the street, still smoking.

At least two groups of Merchants got inside the building, some through the back and some through the front. None of them made it out again, except in body bags. Our boys in blue had no sense of humor AT ALL at this point and basically shot to kill, which I doubt anyone who's lived with the Merchant menace in the city for so long will care about.

About fifteen minutes in, another group of Merchants turned up with even more guns and joined in, although they lost three trucks before they even got there to another shot from the rocket launcher. At that point it got a little confused (like it wasn't already) and they started shooting at one of the other buildings, according to a civilian witness who was in the station at the time and was crazy enough to watch. BBPD took the opportunity to counter attack in force, took out half the remaining Merchants and, here's the best bit...

Someone managed to off Skidmark!

Yeah, he's finally out of our hair for good. Stone cold dead with a bullet in the brain. No one has claimed credit for the kill, but considering half the BBPD SWAT team was firing everything they had at him, I wouldn't be surprised at all to hear it was one of their snipers. That might well be what divided the attention of the crazies at a critical moment, if SWAT managed to circle around and start shooting at them from behind.

This is big, people. The PRT didn't turn up until after Skids was tits up on the ground, Squealer was blown out of her own tank and nearly killed, and hours after the BBPD took Mush into custody along with half the damn gang. Sure, the other half then went completely berzerk, but the final score was pretty heavily in favor of the good guys. Only seventeen of the attackers, including Squealer, made it out the other side.

The Merchants are gone as a viable gang. The best estimate is that yesterday morning they had three capes, between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and thirty actual gang members, with a lot of random junkies who just hung around and giggled a lot. No more than cannon fodder, and
without the core gang members they'll just wander off or get taken in by one of the other smaller gangs.

The BBPD, if the info is right, got one of their capes and possibly as many as seventy of their gangers in the first action. Then Skids gets himself dead, his skanky girlfriend arrested and hospitalized, and something like three quarters of another forty or so gangers killed in the process of something I'm pretty sure could be classed as domestic terrorism. Or rank stupidity. Or both, probably.

The ones who lived got arrested too, so the cops nabbed over eighty of the fuckwits, killed nearly thirty more, and got ALL their capes, one permanently. I'd be surprised if when the numbers are done that there are more than maybe a dozen Merchants left on the streets. Which means that in about a day there will be none, since the E88 will get the ones that the other gangs miss, assuming the BBPD doesn't get them first.

There are a lot of questions surrounding the whole thing and I'm doing what I can to dig up more details. But it's going to cause all sorts of weird shit. Gang politics took a turn to the bizarre last night. The PRT didn't come off as very competent since the battle was over when they finally turned up after about twenty five minutes and considering that the PRT building is only what, a mile or so away? That's not a good response time, guys, you have to have heard it! I did and I was nearly three and half miles away! And the BBPD did in one night what the guys whose actual job it is to deal with parahuman villains haven't managed to do in years.

Now, I know people in the PRT, and they're also good guys. Highly trained, competent, and generally decent. But there's no denying that this doesn't make them look good, at least as far as the public are concerned. I assume there was a reason they took more than twenty minutes to respond to a small war in their back yard, but I don't know what that is and so far they haven't said anything. BBPD isn't impressed, not surprising since they lost eight officers as of the latest count, two civilian contracters, an entire police station, and have at least a dozen serious casualties.

Before anyone states the obvious and blames BBPD for poking a hornet's nest by raiding the Merchants, bear in mind that they were doing what we pay them to do, upholding the law. The statistics on the number of police who lose their lives in the line of duty in Brockton Bay is the second highest per capita in the entire US, the highest being LA. That makes being a cop hereabouts one of the most dangerous jobs in the country. There are BBPD officers who have been in more firefights than some soldiers, and still go back out there.

Yes, it may have been a little provocative in some people's eyes to raid the Merchants, but on the other hand, these are murdering drug dealers who kidnap people off the street and addict them to their crap just to make money. Not even the E88 do that and they're fucking literal Nazis! God only knows how many people have ended up dead because of those bastards, and I have personal knowledge that some of them were schoolkids. The Merchants were responsible for a lot of the guns out on the streets, which have also cost a lot of lives.

The PRT is supposed to shut down parahuman gangs, you know? Sure, I can understand why they don't go after the E88 even if I hate it, because the Nazis have Purity, Kaiser, Hookwolf... Not easy to deal with. Although that said the heros have some pretty damn serious capes too. Eidolon could probably clean up the entire city in an afternoon then relax with a beer :) But that's never happened. It was New Wave who took out Marquis, not the PRT. It was the BBPD who took out the Merchants, not the PRT. There have been quite a few independent heros who have also risked their lives, and sometimes lost them, dealing with the villains. But when they've handed the people they caught over to the PRT, the capes are back on the street in days. I know for
a fact that New Wave grabbed Skidmark only six months ago, and I bet they were pissed when he was probably home before they were.

There's something wrong with that, if you ask me. I have no idea if you can point a finger anywhere specific, or if it's just the result of a huge organization being broken somehow, but it's definitely an issue. Hookwolf has escaped THREE TIMES from PRT custody. Victor twice. Kreig twice. They've never managed to even catch Kaiser. Even Mush got away once and he's an idiot. I can't help feeling that this isn't something they should be proud about, and considering the BBPD just showed them how it's done...

Dunno. I just find this stuff out and tell you guys about it. Possibly, even likely, I'm being too idealistic and not cynical enough. The politics of the cape world are complex, Brockton Bay is a weird place, and there are things we as the public don't know and probably shouldn't know if only for peace of mind. But I'm sure there's going to be a hell of a lot of shouting about this for a long time. And maybe, just maybe, it's the start of something going our way for once, instead of the gang's way.

I don't normally get all philosophical about things so early in the morning, so if this is a little more personal than normal I apologize! But there's something about seeing what I saw, and learning about how it went down, that's different to the usual shit and it's made me think about some stuff.

Anyway, that's the story as of 10:43 EST. I'll update with new information as I find it. If anyone has video, photos, info on the whole mess, PM me as per usual and I'll link it below.

**Update 1:** At 12:29 EST the BBPD released final casualty figures, summarized as:

- 29 Merchants deceased, plus Skidmark
- 92(!) Merchants including Squealer and Mush in custody
- 8 BBPD officers and staff deceased
- 2 Civilian staff deceased
- 11 BBPD officers wounded, two critically, three seriously, and the rest with minor injuries
- 4 Civilians, three staff members and one visitor, with minor wounds

Names of the casualties are being withheld until their families are informed. The BBPD has asked that people respect the privacy of those affected, and say that further information will be released sometime tomorrow through the BBPD public relations center. They also confirmed the raid on the Merchant drug factory, full details here, but the figures are impressive. 9 tons of drugs and 21.2 million in cash? Holy SHIT...

At this point there is still no official statement from the PRT or Protectorate other than a brief comment from Miss Militia that she regrets the loss of life. I've met the woman, I can believe that's completely genuine. Even considering the circumstances.

**Update 2:** There is unconfirmed news that the BBPD may have had aid from an external source during the firefight, who acted to draw the Merchant's fire. I'm trying to find out more about it but to be honest no one who knows for sure is talking and everyone else is guessing. Right now I'd put it at about 50% likely at best. SWAT could easily have done it, after all, as I originally speculated. If I hear more I'll post it, and if anyone has more information I'm listening.

**Update 3:** BBPD has stated in answer to the rumor that they were helped by an unknown cape that they had no contact with anyone who identified themselves as a parahuman at any point during the action.
Make of that what you will. My own investigations seem to suggest they're being completely truthful, for what it's worth

Update 4: At 14:11 EST a spokesman for the BBPD Commissioner has said that both Squealer and Mush are currently in the custody of the BBPD, and have not yet been released to the PRT pending further investigation. Sounds like they're digging their heels in on this one. I'm not that surprised, since they're in a very bad mood at the moment for obvious reasons. Link to thread discussing the ramifications for BB politics here. Please keep discussion of this topic relevant and in the right thread, guys, I know what you're like :) 

Update 5: At 15:37 EST the PRT finally made a brief official statement about the Merchant attack on the BBPD. Wow. I've heard of backhanded compliments but that's impressive. I'm not sure the cops will be amused...

I think I was right when I said there was going to be a lot of shouting about this. Anyone near the PRT building or City Hall can probably hear it from the street!

Update 6: Some stupidly brave person, or possibly bravely stupid person, managed to get footage of some of the firefight on their phone, I guess from one of the apartment buildings down the street looking at it. Nice angle BTW.

Jesus.

I mean... Jesus.

That's a LOT of bullets! Where the hell did the Merchants even get those weapons? And an RPG!? 50 cal machine guns are bad enough, but I don't know I'm very comfortable about junkies with RPGs running around the place. By the sound of it they were tossing grenades around too, I'm sure I saw an explosion off on the right at 4:37 in the video.

Anyone know what that was that the cops used to take out Squealer's mechanical abomination and those trucks? It was something heavier than the RPG the Merchants blew a hole in the main entrance with.

Update 7: More photos, not very clear but still interesting, here, here, and here. Thanks, guys, but next time maybe you should run away, not stand there and take pictures

(Showing page 18 of 27)

▶ Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Yeah, I get what you're saying, I do, but I think you're wrong. The BBPD were COMPLETELY in the right in my view, no question. And if it was any other gang, this probably wouldn't have happened. Skidmark was nuts. Kaiser is an evil son of a bitch, but he's smart enough to realize that going after the cops like the Merchants did would do him way more harm than good, and writing off the loss would be the only sensible thing.

And I can't BELIEVE I'm talking about a Nazi in positive terms :( Someone please help me...
Laser Augment
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I doubt that the E88 would have just let the cops take one of their capes and get away with it, so they'd still have done *something*?

BadSamurai
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Wait?

That normally seems to work around here. Cops eventually will have to transfer the capes to the PRT, since they don't really have the experience to hold them or the authority for that matter as I understand it, and at that point they'll probably escape. Like they always do:(

I Like Turtles
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

You make a sadly good point. On the other hand, there's no one on the outside to help the Merchant capes get away, unlike if it was the E88. Unless some other gang decides it wants a Tinker. Squealer is talented.

SwedishBlacksmith
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Squealer? Talented?

Are we talking about the same person?

I could make something that looked better than HER crap by hitting my anvil randomly while blindfolded and drunk :)

With a sledge hammer...

I Like Turtles
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

ROFL

I know what you mean, but she IS talented in her own... unique... way. Don't think about what her inventions LOOK like, just marvel at the way they even WORK!

Some of the things she's made from random parts should by rights just sink into the ground out of embarrassment, but they still run. Somehow.

TheOneTrueAuthor
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Tinker Bullshit, man. Tinker Bullshit.
Every time I write a story with Tinkers, I wonder if I'm being too unrealistic, then I read something here that makes it obvious I'm not being unrealistic enough! :)

► **SwedishBlacksmith**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Huh.

Point, I guess :)

► **Henchman29**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Hey, anyone know if the cops will be able to keep the Merchant's cash? Isn't there some sort of law about that kind of thing?

► **Feychick**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I'm not sure about New Hampshire, but in my state the asset seizure laws would let them keep it, yep. That's not always a good thing, since some police forces and federal agents have a reputation of being overenthusiastic about confiscating something they take a shine to... In this case, I personally think it would be completely fair.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 ... 25, 26, 27

*(Showing page 19 of 27)*

► **ProfessionalRussian**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I wish someone would shut down the E88 that effectively.

Kaiser would look good wearing a hole in his head :)#

► **Brocktonite03** (Veteran Member)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Yeah, he would :)#

► **TrueAryan**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

*[post deleted, personal attack]*
Marco Bolo (Moderator)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Please refrain from racist abuse, it helps nothing. A second offence will result in a one week ban.

Thanks.

Laotsunn (Kyushu Survivor)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I can't believe you let a self-confessed Nazi post here. Brockton Bay is a very weird place. I don't think I'd like it, but reading about it is... interesting.

ArchmageEin
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Freedom of speech is a thing.

Laotsunn (Kyushu Survivor)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Sometimes, just sometimes, perhaps it shouldn't be...

Marco Bolo (Moderator)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

While there are, and must be, limits to free speech, history shows that it is generally a positive influence on society. This is not the place for this discussion, though.

If everyone could refrain from provocative posts suggesting violence to anyone, even known villains, it would make my task easier, by the way. I understand the urge but we should resist it as much as possible :)

LizardsAreFun
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Always the voice of reason, hmm, Marco? :D

Marco Bolo (Moderator)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I do what I can to keep the peace ;) It's my reason for existing after all!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 ... 25, 26, 27

(Showing page 20 of 27)
FOXXgirl
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

:D :D

Poor Marco, dealing with the humans. Foxes are far more sensible.

LizardsAreFun
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

But lizards are better :)!

FOXXgirl
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

You WOULD say that, you troll :)!

SwedishBlacksmith
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Don't set him off again, please! I can't stand the puns... :O

In a transparently obvious attempt to get this thread back on track, did anyone see the rumor that the BBPD had someone helping from outside? Maybe a new cape?

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I'm trying to track down more information on that, but so far no luck. Anyone else have anything?

It wouldn't be impossible, especially around this damn city, we have new capes practically coming out our ears it seems like.

ProfessionalRussian
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I haven't heard anything specific about new parahumans for a month or so, but I agree it's not impossible.

But don't let lack of information get in the way of a rumor! That takes all the fun out of it.

I Like Turtles
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

The entire POINT of an internet forum is to jump to an unfounded conclusion from an unwarranted assumption in as few steps as possible, right?
We're VERY good at that :D

Not as good as some places, and we all know who I'm talking about, but good.

I still think it was a SWAT sniper that got the Skidman. FMJ FTW. Go BBPD!

► **Uber** (Verified Cape)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I'd be one of the first to say I'm not someone the police like very much, for obvious reasons, even though we're pretty new on the scene. But I'm impressed with them in this case, and sorry they lost people to those druggie bastards.

As a sign of respect, Leet and I are donating the money from our last mission to the BBPD Benevolent Fund. We're villains, not evil :)!

► **Lady Photon** (Verified Cape) (New Wave)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

That is a kind gesture, Uber.

Although it won't prevent me from arresting you next time we meet!

► **Uber** (Verified Cape)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

You can try... :D

Hasn't worked so far :)!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 ... 25, 26, 27

(Showing page 21 of 27)

► **Procto the Unfortunate Tinker** (Not a tinker)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Is is me or is it weird that a hero is complimenting a villain in public?

It's not just me, is it?

► **Henchman29**
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Only in Brockton Bay, man. Only in Brockton Bay.

Uber and Leet aren't much in the way of villains, though :)}
Hey! We try!

Not very hard. Which I guess is a good thing...?

If everyone could also refrain from egging on our local comedy villains that would also help. I doubt that the PRT would be entirely happy if they upped their game, after all!

Thanks, man. I love you too :)

What do people think of this?

It sounds a lot like the BBPD are trying to delay handing over Squealer and Mush to the PRT to me, which is... strange.

Thanks, I've linked it to the OP. And yeah, I'd agree it's strange. Still no word from the PRT, which is also a little odd. Any PRT employees prepared to chip in?

I can't say anything officially, of course, but the situation is complicated. More information will be released in due time.

When are cape related shenanigans NOT complicated?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 ... 25, 26, 27

(Showing page 22 of 27)
Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

If you only saw the things I saw, you'd be even more confused :) 

SwedishBlacksmith
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Most of us in this thread live in Brockton Bay, and we do see the things you see, Reave.

You are so, so right...

Procto the Unfortunate Tinker (Not a tinker)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

Remind me never to visit your city. It's a bizarre place on a good day.

I'm still very curious why the PRT have been so quiet for so long. It's not like them, normally they have a statement out in less than an hour. Whatever else they are PR is second nature to them which makes this delay unusual.

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Jun 30th 2007:

I suspect, as I've said, that this is more politically involved than normal. I'm sure they'll say something sooner or later. Give them the benefit of the doubt, guys, they'd not the bad guys here. Nor are the BBPD, remember. Let's try to not repeat the flaming this thread opened with, and bear in mind that a lot of people died yesterday. Keep things respectful and (I know this won't work so I don't know why I even bother!) on track.

We haven't heard the end of this, that I'm certain of, so it's going to be interesting seeing what comes to light as the days pass.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27
Past events and meetings

July 12th, 2005

The early morning mist was still present over the lake as two men came out onto the rear deck and sat down, each one holding a bottle of beer. One of them opened his with a flick of a steel implement, then handed the opener to his companion, who did the same. Clinking the glass bottles together, then taking a sip, both relaxed with smiles.

Out in the mist a couple of small watercraft were moving gently across the shallow waves, one of them trailing a line from a fishing rod held by an old man who lifted his hand in salute as he spotted them, getting a wave back. In the distance faint sounds of children shouting and splashing could be heard, coming from around the bend in the shoreline to the right.

Other than that, it was quiet and still, only the background susurration of the light breeze through the leaves of the maple trees surrounding the cabin and birdsong disturbing the scene.

The pair sat there for a while, until Danny turned his head to glance at his compatriot. “Thanks for inviting us up here, Alan,” he said, before sipping more beer. “It’s a nice place. Haven’t been to the lake for a couple of years.”

“You needed the break, Danny, after everything that’s happened in the last few months,” his friend replied, his eyes shut as he basked in the sunlight with an expression of contentment on his face. “So did I, actually, work’s been … tedious… recently. Lucrative, but tedious.” He smiled for a moment. “Oddly enough, handling people's divorces seems to bring out a lot of the worst in them.”

“Fancy that,” Danny said with a dry tone, making his friend snicker. “I wonder why?”

“Got me. Just because two people who used to love each other are generally doing everything they can to make each other’s lives hell...” Alan snorted with a shake of his head. “God, I make a lot of money doing this, but sometimes I really wonder if it’s worth it. The things you see and hear… You wouldn’t believe it.”

“I think I probably would, actually.” Danny sighed. “I’ve talked to people on both sides of that sort of thing, and it often goes very nasty.”

“Damn right it does,” Alan grumbled. “Anyway, I’m free of it for two and a half weeks, so I’m not even going to think about work until then.”

“Good idea,” his companion nodded.

They were silent again for a few minutes, slowly finishing their beers. Inside the cabin behind them sounds were starting to filter out suggesting that the rest of their respective families were now stirring.

The dull thumping sound of footsteps off to the left made both of them turn their heads, Alan opening his eyes. They watched as Taylor jogged past on the narrow beach next to the water, waving to them, and disappeared around the next bend on the right. There was a pause.

“How early did she get up?” Alan asked, looking back to Danny, who shrugged. His friend was
still looking after his daughter with a slightly quizzical expression.

“Earlier than us, I guess,” the other man replied. Returning his attention to the lake, he relaxed into the chair again. “She’s been on an exercise kick for a while now. I suppose that’s a good thing on the whole. The girl’s definitely in pretty good condition. Better than I was at that age.”

“She’s always been very active,” Alan noted.

“Yeah, Taylor has three modes. Sitting and thinking, reading with an intensity that’s kind of disturbing, or running around like a lunatic. Usually with Emma panting after her.” Danny grinned as Alan chuckled. “I’m not sure which is more dangerous.”

“The Wilsons would say the sitting and thinking,” Alan commented with a sly look. “Or as they might have said, ‘Plotting and planning.’”

With a shake of his head and a wry smile, Danny finished his beer. “That dog got what was coming to it. It got better.”

“They didn’t seem to see the funny side.”

“Everyone else did,” the taller man said. He held up the bottle. “Another?”

“Might as well, we’re on holiday after all,” Alan replied, finishing his as well. Danny nodded, getting up and going back into the house. When he came back with two more bottles, Emma was with him, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely. ‘Hi, sweetie, sleep well?’” Alan asked his daughter. The red-head nodded, yawning again, then slumped down on the deck next to his chair and leaned on his legs.

“Yeah, Dad. Sort of, I guess. I forgot how noisy dawn is out here.” The girl shrugged, her eyes half closed. “All those birds screaming at each other all the time.”

“Nature isn’t particularly silent,” Danny observed as he retook his seat, handing his friend one of the bottles, both of them being opened with a hiss. “You’ll get used to it in a day or two, Emma.”

“I hope so, Uncle Danny,” she replied with a small smile. “I need my sleep.”

“You sleep too much already,” another female voice said with a laugh, making them all look around to see the other Barnes sibling, Anne, who was grinning at her sister while adjusting her robe. Emma stuck her tongue out at the other girl, who responded by crossing her eyes. “Mom says we’re going to have breakfast at eight, dad.”

“Thanks, Anne,” Alan nodded.

All of them looked over at the sound of footsteps in the sand again to see Taylor now jogging back the other way, still apparently moving at the same speed. The brunette waved once more.

“Tay!” Emma shouted, jumping to her feet and waving. “Hey, Tay! Wait for me!” She dashed down the stairs at one side of the deck, tripped, rolled to her feet in one motion, and ran after her friend. The other girl had looked around at her shout and was now jogging backwards somehow while laughing.

The three left behind watched as the red-head caught up with her somewhat taller friend, both girls
looking happy, then kept going in the direction Taylor had been jogging. As they disappeared past the edge of the shoreline Taylor was speeding up steadily causing the other girl to start shouting.

“Tay! Slow down, you long legged freak! Tay!”

Anne, after a few seconds, shook her head with a giggle. “They have way too much energy,” she observed with the wisdom of someone four years older than the two ten-year-olds. “I’m going to get dressed.” With that she turned and left Danny and Alan alone once more. The sounds of voices could be faintly heard from inside the cabin, but overall it was quiet once more.

Both men sipped from their bottles. “Ah, to be young and full of energy again,” Alan murmured, holding his bottle up and inspecting the label. “This is damn nice beer.”

“Speak for yourself, you old man,” Danny chuckled. “I still have plenty of energy.” He glanced at the bottle, then nodded. “Local brewery down in the docks, near the pub on the waterfront. Pat, the barman there, recommended it. Friends of his set the place up about a year back. Some of our guys helped install the brewing equipment, and it’s pretty popular at the Union.”

“Huh. Didn’t even know we had a brewery in the city at all,” Alan noted, taking another swig. “I wouldn’t have expected one to be there either. Not the safest area.”

“It’s far enough away from the commercial district that the E88 stay out, the other gangs are normally fairly polite around the Union these days, and the Merchants...” Danny smiled briefly in an evil manner. “Let’s say that they were persuaded that trying their tricks around us wouldn’t end well. We don’t have any trouble from them now.” He drank more beer, looking satisfied.

Alan studied him, then went back to watching the lake. The old fisherman was currently reeling in his line, looking pleased at the way it was twitching around. “Your guys are scary sometimes, Danny,” he remarked idly. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“Hey, I just work there,” Danny protested with mild amusement. “Nothing to do with me.”

“Sure it isn’t,” his friend snorted, smiling slightly. “Just like it wasn’t anything to do with you back in college that time with the frat that hurt a girl you liked. How many was it they found lying around outside moaning with broken arms or legs? Three?”

“Four, I believe, but I have no idea what happened,” Danny snickered. “I was on a date and had plenty of witnesses for that.”

“Hmm. And when Annette wanted to get out of that little man-hater’s group she was in? I vaguely recall hearing that there were some... harsh words... involved. Oh, and a threat involving a road flare and a can of gas. Although that might be a just a rumor.”

Danny shrugged. “Again, I can’t imagine where you got that from.” His eyes were grinning but his expression was entirely blank. “I merely went and talked to that Lustrum woman and explained that Annette wanted to leave her group for various reasons. She was reasonable enough about it. But you know how these things get exaggerated in the retelling.”

“Yeah...” Alan shook his head. “Exaggerated.” He finished the bottle and put it next to the first one on the deck next to his chair. “When we go back I’ll have to pick up a crate of this stuff.”

“I’ll mention it to Pat and get him to put a couple to one side,” his friend told him. “He sells most
of it in the pub. They’re thinking of expanding at some point but right now they’re making it as fast
as they can and can barely keep up with demand.”

“Guess there’s enough space down that side of town for that sort of thing,” Alan commented.
“Considering all the empty buildings and so on.”

“Yeah,” Danny sighed. “Way more empty places than you’d like to see. I wish I could get the
damn city authorities to push a little more money into the ferry project, if we could get that up and
running we might be able to revitalize the area. There are lots of small business ideas I hear about
all the time which would work if they had good access to cheap buildings and land. Which the
docks are full of. Of course, getting that fucking ship out of the mouth of the bay would mean we
could get the port itself working again, but...” He shrugged tiredly. “I wouldn’t know where to
begin on that one, and the city isn’t even vaguely interested. They should be, but the current
council seems content to just sit there and do nothing. Status quo is enough for the bastards. Maybe
come election time we can get someone in who gives a damn.”

“To be fair, Danny, the city economy isn’t exactly buoyant right now,” Alan pointed out. “Hasn’t
been for years, ever since the riots, and they were because things were going down hill in the first
place. Now, though? With the fucking gangs running half the place, and the amount of corruption
in the council, never mind all the conflict of interests at least half the politicians have... We’ll be
luck if we don’t have even worse riots in a few years.”

“You don’t have to tell me that, Alan,” Danny sighed. “I see enough examples of that every damn
day. People I’ve worked with for ten years or more are losing everything while some rich bastard
sells another condo or something then sits in his penthouse drinking his expensive brandy. Or the
fucking Nazis burn down an apartment building again, or some poor son of a bitch gets grabbed off
the street by the Merchants and filled with their shit.”

Alan nodded slowly, watching the fisherman pull his catch on board. Silver scales glinted in the
morning sunlight, then he saw an arm swing down with a vicious motion, a small club abruptly
ending the movement of the fish.

He wondered if that was in some way symbolic of life these days.

“Things are bad, all right,” he agreed. “Could be worse, though. We both have our health, our
families, and decent jobs.”

“A hell of a lot of people don’t,” Danny muttered.

“Yeah. But... That’s life, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

Both lapsed into silent companionship for a while. Anne came out again wearing a bathing
costume and headed for the water, the two fathers watching as she tested the temperature with a
toe, shivered, then charged in regardless. Danny laughed as a shriek sounded, Alan shaking with
amusement but doing what he could not to be obvious about it.

“Still a little chilly, I guess,” Danny commented.

“It’s pretty deep a little further out and the current brings cold water up right there,” Alan said, still
smiling as he watched his older daughter swim towards a floating pontoon that was anchored about
two hundred feet from shore. “She should have gone in on the other side of the jetty, it’s a lot warmer there because of the sun this time of day.”

“She swims well.”

“Yes, she’s very good at it,” Alan nodded. “Spends a lot of time in the pool at school.”

Anne reached the pontoon and climbed up onto it, then lay down and sunned herself. Danny chuckled. “You’re going to have to beat the boys off with a stick when she’s a little older, Alan.” He glanced at his old friend with an evil smirk. “Want to borrow mine?”

Alan snickered. “I have my own, don’t worry. No boy’s getting his hands on my daughters without me having a long, long talk with the kid.” They looked to the left as voices were heard, seeing Taylor and Emma coming back, this time just wandering along and looking at the ground. Taylor stopped, bending over and picking something up, then waved it at her friend who shrieked and jumped back. Moments later she was pelting away with Taylor chasing her waving whatever it was.

“Tay! That’s disgusting! Throw it away!”

“Ems, come back here, it just wants to be friends!”

“Tay! I hate you!”

“It wants to hug you!”

Both girls vanished behind the trees again. Danny shook his head slowly. “My dear daughter may have inherited just a little too much of her mother’s sense of humor, I fear.”

Alan was convulsed with laughter and could only weakly wave a hand after the girls. Eventually he recovered a little. “Better than TV, right?”

“It’s pretty funny watching them,” Danny agreed. He put his bottle, which he’d finished a while ago and had been rolling between his hands, down and leaned back in the seat, reclining it as far as it would go. “Yeah, this is definitely one of your better ideas.”

“Better than that time we fixed up your dad’s old mustang and went cruising in it?”

“Well, we’re not sitting in the back of a cop car this time, so I’d have to go with yes on that one,” Danny replied with a grin.

Alan laughed again. “God, how we ended up not having a record each I have no idea. Your dad called in a lot of favors, I guess.”

“He took it out of us in kind, though. I remember some of the things we had to do afterward.” Danny shuddered. “He was a hard taskmaster when he was riled.”

“We probably deserved it.”

“We definitely deserved it. I still didn’t like it.” They shared a look of amusement.

“Good times, I suppose.”

“Yep.”
Taylor and Emma came back into sight, this time carrying a log between them that was large enough neither father was entirely sure how they managed. With some effort they got it into the water, then cautiously tried sitting on it.

This ended fairly predictably with both of them getting very wet, amid a lot of laughing and screaming, but it didn’t prevent them keeping at it.

“Emma’s growing up a lot as well,” Danny noted idly. “She’s definitely taller than she was at the start of the year.”

“They shoot up pretty quick at that age,” Alan agreed, smiling as Taylor managed to stand on the floating log, only to have Emma push her off it and laugh. “Look at Taylor, she’s already two inches taller than Emma, and if she’s got your height, she’ll be taller than I am when she’s all growed up.”

“I hope she inherits everything else from her mother,” Danny chuckled. “She’s sure the spitting image of her at that age.”

“That she is. You’ll need a good solid stick, I think.”

“Already sorted out, my friend.”

“And if you need help holding him down, just call.”

They exchanged another wry look. “Thanks.”

Voices coming closer from inside made both men sit up and look around, to see both their wives joining them on the deck. “Stop threatening boyfriends that won’t exist for years, you two, and sit up,” Zoe Barnes said. She was carrying a tray of mugs, steam rising from them, and put it on the picnic table to the side of the deck. Annette picked up a pair of the mugs and handed her husband one, keeping the other for herself, as Zoe did the same for Alan.

“Thanks, love,” Danny said, trying the coffee.

“We thought you’d had enough beer for this time of morning,” Zoe commented, moving one of the other chairs over and dropping into it. Annette leaned back against the wooden railing surrounding the deck area and held her coffee in both hands, watching the two girls chase each other around the log, splashing water all over the place. She was grinning at the sight.

“Probably a good idea,” Danny said. “We can get properly drunk tonight.”

Zoe raised an eyebrow at him, then looked at his wife, who shrugged. “Your man is implying a level of alcohol consumption I think is a bad example for the children, Annette,” she remarked.

“I brought enough for everyone,” Danny replied casually.

“Objection withdrawn,” Zoe promptly said, then giggled. “We just need to make sure they’re asleep first.”

“That should be easy enough considering how much they’re running around at the moment,” Alan noted, nodding towards the two pre-teens. The girls were now apparently re-enacting some sort of sword battle with the aid of driftwood as blades, clacking sounds ringing out across the area
accompanied by high-pitched battle cries. “You remember when they thought dolls were the best thing ever?”

The others exchanged a look. Annette peered at him. “That phase lasted about three months, Alan,” she pointed out. “Then it was superheros. Then supervillains. Then both at the same time.”

“Oh, god, I’m remembering the adventures of The Crimson Lady and her arch nemesis Doctor Curlyhair now,” Alan replied after a moment, putting a hand over his face. “Why did you remind me about that?”

“We never did work out how they got onto the roof of your house, did we?” Danny mused out loud. “Or, for that matter, how they got that tennis pitching machine of yours up there with them.”

“We know why they did, though,” Zoe giggled. “Poor Mr Fung. He wasn’t amused.”

“Don’t you mean “The Great and Powerful Tinker Villain known as The Fungmaster?”” Annette said, putting on a deep voice for effect. “His evil was the only reason Crimson Lady and Doctor Curlyhair joined forces.”

“His evil greenhouse?” Alan asked with a grin. “I seem to remember that was the target.”

“I was impressed with their aim,” Danny commented, snickering under his breath. “Working out the trajectories and everything. Pretty damn good for a couple of eight year olds.”

“You weren’t the one who had to pay for new glass,” Alan sighed. His wife was laughing quite a lot now, making him poke her in the ribs. “Be quiet, woman,” he ordered sternly. She just grinned at him and kept giggling. “I get no respect in this household at all,” he muttered.

“I feel for you, man,” Danny chuckled. “At least you didn’t have a supervillain lair in your basement.”

“No, I had a superhero lair in my attic,” Alan retorted. “And I still don’t know why the superhero who kept jumping around up there was always inviting her arch-nemesis over for dinner.”

“Remember the time Doctor Curlyhair switched her mind with Crimson Lady’s?” Zoe asked, her mouth twitching. “That was… weird.”

“They did a pretty good job of it,” Alan nodded, grinning. “I was surprised how long they managed to keep it up.”

“Did we ever find out what their superpowers actually were?” Danny asked thoughtfully.

“I think it was based on whatever was the most fun at the time,” his wife replied, turning to look at the two girls, who were now bent over the sand, Taylor drawing something with her former sword-stick and Emma looking dubiously at it.


Both wives exchanged a look then cracked up at his desolate tone, making him smile again.

When they’d all calmed down, Annette pulled a chair up next to her husband and draped herself over it, putting her arm around his neck. All four of them watched the girls play while they drank
their coffee. Beyond them, Anne went for another swim, before climbing back onto the pontoon and resuming her sunbathing.

Eventually, Zoe asked in a musing tone, “Have you ever wondered what it would be like if either of them did get powers?”

Danny groaned. “Oh, god, I’m trying not to think about that,” he said grimly. “And desperately hoping that it never happens. It doesn’t usually improve people’s lives in the long run.”

He glanced at his wife, who shook her head slightly. “It’s often difficult,” she said quietly. “And how you get powers is… usually very bad. There’s a reason that there are so many villains and it’s not all because of the PRT and their stupid policies, although that doesn’t help.”

“Never much cared for them, have you?” Zoe asked.

The brunette woman shook her head. “Too many memories,” she replied, her voice still low. “There are some good people who work for them, probably most of them in fact, but there are also some assholes in places where they can cause a lot of problems. And they’re very good at it.” She sighed faintly. “I could name names. That bastard Tagg is one of them. He’s one of those people who should never be in a position of power.”

“I know that name,” Alan said thoughtfully.

“You should, it was him who pushed the PRT ENE director into his current job two years ago,” she grumbled. “And *that* idiot should be shot for gross stupidity. He got a dozen completely innocent people killed with his gung ho counterattack on those Teeth fuckwits, Miss Militia is going to be recovering for at least another three months, and from what I heard Velocity probably won’t ever work again as a hero. Not to mention six dead troopers and three cops. Sure, they had to do something, but he did *everything* wrong against the advice of practically everybody. The man’s a total menace.”

“I knew one of the cops,” Danny sighed. “Good guy. And I met one of the troopers once, I think, I recognized the name from the news. He used to go to Pat’s bar sometimes, I’m pretty sure.”

“At least they got all the Teeth, so I guess there’s that,” Alan said.

“Yeah. Not sure the people who were shopping would agree, but yeah.”

Alan turned to look at Taylor, who was gesticulating wildly, then pointing at what she’d drawn on the sand. Emma was standing with her arms folded and shaking her head. “Doesn’t seem to have affected Taylor too much, thankfully. She was quieter than usual for a while, but she’s back to normal now as far as I can tell.” He looked at Danny. “And you came out the other side pretty well too.”

“To be honest I’ve seen worse,” Danny muttered, watching his daughter too. His wife put her hand on his and leaned on him. “But that’s nothing that someone her age should go through.”

“No, it wouldn’t be,” Alan agreed.

“She did seem to find an invisible friend as a result, though,” Annette said after a momentary silence.
“Kenny, or something like that, right?” Zoe said.

“Yes, that’s the one.” Annette smiled. “We still don’t know what he’s supposed to be, but he seems to talk to her a lot. Or so she says. Apparently he’s interested in everything, so she’s reading even more now so she can fill him in on things.”

“What things?” Alan inquired curiously.

“Absolutely everything,” the woman sighed. “She’s read practically every book in the house, including Danny’s dad’s old military manuals, all my language books, the entire collection of SF stuff, even the cookbooks. I caught her reading the dictionary the other day, for that matter.” She giggled. “She ended up talking for five minutes about antidisestablishmentarianism, of all things. Most people can’t even pronounce that word, never mind know what it means.”

“A polysyllabic young lady,” Alan smiled.

“She is certainly that. She’s got a vocabulary that would shock my students when she tries. And when she’s thinking you have no idea what she’s thinking about,” Annette replied. “She’s like a sphinx, just sits there with her face blank and ponders ideas. Then before you know it you have an angry neighbor on your front porch yelling something about a dog...”

They all laughed again. “Your daughter is never boring,” Zoe commented.

Danny sighed heavily. “No, that she is not. And this imaginary friend of hers is making the weird ideas even weirder. She wanted to go to a gun range, because Kenny told her it might be fun.” He shrugged. “I can’t see the harm, really, although it’s kind of strange, so I’ve asked around and one of the guys at work suggested a good place that’s run by someone responsible. We’ll go around the end of the month.”

“She may find that the guns are just too noisy,” Zoe put in.

“Taylor?” Danny looked at her with both eyebrows up. “You have met our daughter, correct? The one who, last fourth of July, decided that firecrackers were boring and ‘souped them up’ with a balloon full of gas?”

Zoe nearly collapsed at his tone and expression. Annette had both hands over her mouth. “That girl is more of a pyromaniac than I was at her age,” Danny added. “And I burned down the garden shed twice.”

“I remember that!” Alan exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “We nearly made that rocket work.”

“It worked perfectly,” his friend grumbled. “We just shouldn’t have lit the fuse inside the shed...”

“Your dad was kind of pissed,” Alan snickered. “Again.”

“I was paying for that fucking shed for two years,” Danny muttered, scowling. “I had to get a second paper route. The man was not pleased.”

“Oh, good times,” Alan grinned. “Taylor takes after you in more ways than height. She’s quite the tomboy. And it’s catching, Emma can be the girliest girl who ever girled, but put them together, and they’re taking the swing set apart to make a catapult before you know it.”
“It took me three hours to put that back together,” Danny agreed with a slight smile. “And I had to get her a toolkit of her own after that, to stop her losing my best sockets. Mind you, she can sure fix a bicycle pretty well for a kid that age.”

The two girls seemed to have reached an agreement, now turning around and marching off to the small boat shed that sat near the water, next to the jetty. Everyone watched them disappear inside. When nothing immediately exploded, conversation resumed.

“I wonder what powers they’d get if it did happen?” Zoe asked, still apparently thinking about the subject.

“God only knows,” Alan replied, shaking his head. “Powers are total bullshit at the best of times. And since around the time Scion vanished, they’re sometimes even more bullshit than that. More dangerous sometimes too. There was that poor bastard up in Canada who basically melted and took six people with him…”

Danny grimaced. “Stop trying to cheer me up, guys,” he said. “I don’t like thinking about my daughter having a really bad day and ending up able to blow up tall buildings with a single laser, or turning into a giant lizard, or something even weirder. Or ending up as Doctor Curlyhair for real and running around the place making loud statements of how she was going to make everyone pay!!”

Annette giggled quite a lot. “I very much doubt anyone’s going to turn into a giant lizard, Danny,” she laughed. “Doctor Curlyhair sounds like fun, though.”

“You would think that, you minion.” He prodded her shoulder with a finger. “You just want to get back to working for the bad guys.”

“She wasn’t actually bad, you know,” his wife replied, smiling a little sadly. “She got carried away, and some of the others… They weren’t nice people. But I think she meant well in her own way.”

“Quite a lot of villains do to start with,” he sighed. “Doesn’t normally end like that, I’m afraid.”

“Taylor would never really be a villain,” Zoe commented. “She’s much too cheerful for that.” They all looked around as the door to the boathouse opened again, the girl in question stalking out, disappearing around the side of the house, then coming back moments later lugging the toolbox out of the Hebert’s truck. She and it disappeared back into the boathouse, the door slamming shut.

There was a pause, then some unnerving high pitched laughter.

Everyone looked at the small building, then each other, before Alan said slowly, “Are you sure about that, Zoe?”

“They seem happy,” Annette put in brightly. “I do like listening to the innocent laughter of children.”

“That’s more cackling than actual laughter, love,” Danny pointed out.

The sound was added to by a second voice. “So is that.”

“Should we go check what they’re up to?”
Alan glanced around at his wife and friends.

“What’s in there?”

“Old boat parts, my jet-ski which hasn’t worked for three years, a couple of canoes, lots of other random crap. Nothing too dangerous.”

“No harpoon gun or anything like that?” Danny looked slightly worried.

“No, of course not,” Alan replied, his eyebrows up. “This is a lake, not the Florida keys. What the hell would I have a harpoon gun for?”

The Hebert man relaxed again. “OK. Just checking. Knowing those two… no, forget it.”

“So we’re just going to let them play in there?” Annette stared at her husband.

“It’s keeping them quiet and amused,” Danny smiled. A loud metallic bang sounded, followed by tinkling sounds.

“Oops!”

“Tay!”

“I’ll fix it! Hold this, and give me that hammer.”

“Mostly quiet,” Danny muttered as random sounds of tools being vigorously wielded came to them.

“Oh, god,” Alan groaned. “This is going to be Mr Fung all over again, I can feel it already.”

“Don’t let go!”

“Ow!”

“I said don’t let go!”

“I didn’t! You missed!”

“You moved your head! Don’t do that either!”

“This will never work.”

“Kenny says it will. He’s always right.”

“He’s in your head, Tay!”

“So?”

“OW!”

“I said, don’t move your head!”

The four adults all laughed, before Zoe stood up. “You’d better go and see what they’re doing. Alan, before they assault the summer camp with a submarine or something while shouting about taking no prisoners. I’m going to get breakfast ready. Annette, can you give me a hand?” The other woman stood too, bending to give her husband a quick kiss, then both went back into the cabin.

“Fifteen minutes, Alan,” Zoe’s voice called. “Get them cleaned up first!”

“OK, Zoe,” he called back.

Both fathers headed for the boat shed, Alan cautiously pushing the door open with Danny peering over his shoulder. Taylor was bent over the… creation… the two girls had made, with Emma holding part of it in place while her friend whacked it with a hammer. “Ow! Tay!”
“Stop twitching every time I hit it!”

“I’m twitching every time you hit me!”

The two men watched, inspecting the thing the pair were making. It seemed to consist of the two elderly kayak-style fiberglass canoes that had been hanging on the wall of the shed for years, parts from a number of broken lawn chairs, lots of rope, and a selection of lumber, all coming together into a sort of catamaran.

They exchanged a look, before Danny cleared his throat. Both girls looked up, smiling. Taylor wiped a smudge of grease from her forehead, which only spread it around. “Hi, Dad,” she chirped. “Is breakfast ready yet?”

“In about ten minutes.” Danny looked at the fruit of their labors again. “What are you two doing?”

“Making a fast attack boat,” Emma replied, turning to look a little dubiously at the thing. “Or that’s what Tay calls it. I think it’s more of a slow sinky boat, but…”

“It’ll work, Ems,” Taylor assured her friend with confidence. “OK, go bring that tent pole over and hold it here, while I tie it down.”

“Instead of that, why don’t you two go and wash up,” Alan put in, interrupting his daughter’s move towards a pile of random scrap on the side of the boathouse which had built up over the years. “You can finish this… thing… later.”

“There’s no hurry, girls, we’re here for a couple of weeks you know,” Danny added with a grin. He studied the construction with interest. “I don’t see the ‘attack’ part of the boat, and I have to admit the ‘fast’ part is a little lacking too…”

“It’s not done yet,” Taylor replied, putting her tools down.

“Who were you planning on attacking?” Alan asked curiously as the girls followed them out of the shed. Both exchanged a glance, then shrugged.

“Anyone who threatened the camp, I guess,” Taylor said thoughtfully. “You know, a preemptive strike. You can’t be too careful.”

“The camp.”

“Yep.”

“This cabin?”

“That’s it,” the brunette nodded, smiling. “We’re camping, it’s a camp. We should protect it from the enemy.”

“Who are, based on last time, the summer camp kids over yonder?”

“They started it!” Emma said firmly. “We finished it.”

“I remember, dear.” He shook his head. “I had quite a long talk with the camp owner. He wasn’t
totally happy about what happened.”

Emma kicked the ground with one toe, looking slightly sullen. Taylor hugged her for a moment. “It’s probably best if you don’t mount a marine assault on them, girls,” he went on, trying not to laugh. “People would talk. Anyway, we’ve got lots of other things to do.” They resumed walking to the cabin, having paused for Emma. “Some friends of mine from work are going to visit later today and they’re bringing their children.”

The girls dashed up the stairs to the desk, then turned and looked at the two fathers. “Who, Uncle Alan?” Taylor asked with interest.

“You remember Carol Dallon? I think you met when she came over to my house about six or seven months ago while you were there.”

Taylor nodded. “I remember. She was… kind of snappy.”

“She’s a little angry sometimes, Taylor,” he smiled. “And she was working much too hard.” Both men joined their daughters on the deck. “Her sister finally persuaded her to have a holiday, and I suggested coming to the lake. They’ve rented a cabin about a quarter of a mile away over that way,” he pointed to the left, “and they’re going to be here for a week or so.”

“New Wave are going to be next door on holiday?!” Emma exclaimed with excited joy. Taylor was visibly interested, but also thoughtful still.

“So they have powers too, dad?” Emma asked as the quartet went into the cabin.

“Not that I know of,” he replied. Stopping, he lowered himself to their level, and looked seriously at each girl. “Please don’t ask too many questions about New Wave, you two. They’re on holiday, remember. Both from work, and from caping. Let them have some peace.”

“And don’t ask how they got powers,” Annette put in from the kitchen, having stuck her head out to listen.

“Why not, Aunt Annette?” Emma asked, looking confused.

Annette glanced at the two men, then returned her attention to the girls. “I’ll tell you more when you’re older, but let’s say it’s not polite for now, OK?”

“OK, mom,” Taylor nodded, nudging her friend who did the same. Emma still looked a little confused but went along with it.

“Now go and wash up, both of you,” Annette instructed. “Taylor, you’ve got grease all over your face.”

Taylor reached up and rubbed her forehead with a finger, looked at the result, then poked Emma’s cheek with it, causing the red-head to scream and chase her upstairs. The adults watched with amusement until a door slamming made the shouting stop.

“What were they making?” Annette asked curiously.
“They seem to be trying to make one boat out of lots of other boats,” Danny grinned. “I’m not entirely sure it will even float.”

“Well, if they actually finish it, make sure you get them to put the life jackets on before they try it out,” his wife smiled. She turned to Alan. “When are the Dallons and Pelhams going to arrive?”

He shrugged a little. “Probably some time around four, I guess. Carol told me they were driving up this morning, but they’ll want to settle in and relax. It’s only about seventy miles, but she’s going to need time to unwind. That woman is… tense.”

“I remember from that party at your company at Christmas,” Annette laughed. “She looked like she was about to snap any moment until her sister got enough rum into her. Then she almost passed out.”

“Her brother in law had to carry her home,” Alan chuckled. “And apparently she was snoring in bed for nearly two days. Probably did her good. I can’t imagine juggling her lawyer schedule with her team’s work is all that easy.”

Annette stepped sideways to allow Zoe to come out carrying a plate full of bacon, the other woman heading for the table. “Isn’t there something wrong with her husband?” she asked. “I seem to recall you mentioned that. He looked a little off.”

“He’s got some sort of depression, I think,” Alan nodded. “She said they were trying a new treatment which is working better than the others did, but it’s a slow process. Poor guy, he’s a decent man but half the time you get the impression he’s hardly in the room. Can’t be easy on them.”

“Stop blocking the way and talking and go get your other daughter, Alan,” his wife told him as she headed back into the kitchen from the table. “Breakfast is ready.”

“ANNE!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs, not moving from his spot.

“What, Dad?” came the faint response, as Zoe put her hands over her ears and glared at him. Annette and Danny were grinning.

“BREAKFAST!”

“OK, THANKS!”

“Not what I meant, you idiot,” Zoe sighed, then walked off shaking her head. “Men.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” he asked, following her and snickering.

Annette met her husband’s eyes, then they started laughing, before going to help.

The knock on the cabin door made Danny look up from his cards, then put them down and head over to open it. He called back, “Stop cheating, love,” as he reached it, making Annette pull her hand back, then look slightly guilty as Zoe giggled.
“He knows you well,” she whispered to her friend, who grinned.

“Too well,” she whispered back.

Opening the door, he smiled at the woman standing on the front porch. “Hello, Carol,” he said. “Did you have a good drive? Come in, Alan’s just gone out to get some charcoal for the barbecue.” He stepped to the side as the blonde entered with a small smile and a nod to him.

“The traffic’s a little dense, Danny, but it wasn’t too bad. Hot, though. Lots of people seem to be coming up to the lake this week.”

“Well, considering how much damage there was to the coast after Newfoundland got half-wrecked, it’s going to take years to fix some of the beaches, so this is the next best thing I suppose,” he replied. Looking out the door he watched Carol’s sister evict two girls and a boy from the people-carrier parked next to his truck. The blonde girl was looking around with a broad smile, giving off an air of exuberant excitement, the dark-haired one who was a little reminiscent of his own daughter was rolling her eyes at something her sister said, and the younger boy bringing up the rear was laughing at the same comment.

Sarah said something quiet to all three children, indicating the cabin, then waved to him. He waved back.

“Kids look happy,” he commented. Carol looked, then nodded with a sigh.

“Vicky is always happy. To excess. And Amy balances her by being as snarky as possible, which sometimes gets a little irritating,” she said quietly. “She’s much too good at the acid quip.”

“I suspect I know where she gets that from,” he snickered, making her sigh again, but reluctantly smile.

“Possibly. Anyway, how are you? And Annette?”

“We’re fine, thanks. Relaxing and having fun, which is a nice change from work and everything else. Taylor is in a good mood too, thankfully, considering that Mall screwup.”

“Alan said you got caught up in that,” she replied, looking concerned for a moment. “No injuries, I hope?”

“No, we were fine, but Taylor saw things that upset her,” he said, shaking his head. She appeared sympathetic.

“I can imagine. I wish that idiot director hadn’t told us to stay out of it. Publicity-seeking fool...”

“He’s getting replaced next year from what I hear,” her sister said as she came in, catching the tail end of the conversation. “Some woman called Piggot, I think. PRT special forces, or she was.”

“Piggot?” Carol looked at her sister. “As in the woman who was involved with that whole Ellisburg mess?”

“I think so.” Sarah smiled at Danny. “Hello, Danny. Nice to see you again.”

“You too, Sarah,” he replied, holding out his hand.
She shook it, then called over her shoulder, “Come on, kids, stop arguing and come inside!”

The boy, pushed his blonde cousin, then quickly shot into the house, followed by the girl who was complaining loudly. The other sister sighed, then followed more slowly. “Danny, this is my son Eric,” Sarah said, grabbing the boy as he went past. “Eric, this is a friend of your aunt’s friend Alan. Danny Hebert. That’s his wife over there apparently cheating at cards, and Alan’s wife Zoe, who you’ve met.”

Danny looked over his shoulder to see Annette hastily putting his cards down. He snickered, turning back to see Sarah giggling. “And this is Carol’s daughters Victoria and Amy.” She released Eric, who said hello absently on his way into the living room, looking around curiously, then waved the other two inside. “Vicky, Amy, say hello to Mr Hebert.”

Both girls exchanged a look, then chorused “Hello to Mr Hebert.”

With a laugh, Danny replied “Hello to you as well. It’s nice to meet you.” Amy held out her hand and he shook it gravely. Vicky was almost hopping up and down, apparently unable to hold still for long, making her dark-haired sister poke her hard in the side.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mr Hebert,” Amy said politely. “Vicky, stop bouncing around!” she hissed under her breath, seeming a little embarrassed.

“Come in and meet the others,” he told them all. “Like I just told Carol, Alan should be back in about twenty minutes with charcoal, then we can fire up the barbecue. We’ve got a lot of food to cook so I hope you’re all hungry.” Closing the door, he waved them all through into the open-plan living room.

The sound of hammering made both girls and the boy look around. “What’s that?” Eric asked.

“My daughter and her friend are building some sort of boat in the shed around the back,” Danny replied. “You can go and introduce yourselves if you like. Maybe they could do with some help.”

“Tay! Look out!”
“Oops!”

There was a very loud crash, followed by a sound like a bowling ball bouncing down a flight of stairs made of steel poles. Everyone winced as it terminated in an enormous crunch.

“I meant to do that!”
“Yeah, sure you did, Tay.”
“I did! Look, the seat fits perfectly now!”

Danny sighed. Annette and Zoe were laughing like idiots. Carol and Sarah exchanged looks, then the latter asked, rather bemusedly, “Are you sure they’re safe out there unsupervised?”

“Trust me, this is nothing,” Danny said with a hand over his eyes as another loud thud echoed around the cabin. “There’s a limit to how much damage they can do out there, compared to some of their adventures.”

The three children all looked at each other, then quickly disappeared outside. Danny sat down heavily. “Are your kids the sort of kids that get into trouble?” he asked.
“Not particularly, although Vicky can be a bit headstrong,” Carol said as she took a seat too. “Amy usually reins her in a little.”

“Eric is… prone to being a little overenthusiastic at times,” Sarah admitted. “But I told him to behave while he was here.”

“I’m not sure that will help,” Zoe put in with a smile. “Taylor does seem to be able to drag Emma into things without too much trouble, assuming it’s not the other way around. It’s possible that it’s catching.”

“They both need more friends, though, so we should let them play if they want,” Annette added. “Taylor really does need to meet more kids her age. Almost the only person she spends time around is Emma, and they’re like sisters more than friends.”

The sounds from outside stopped, being replaced by the murmur of voices. All the adults listened, Danny with a little relief.

His daughter sometimes didn’t know the meaning of 'overkill' with her little projects, and Emma was perfectly happy to go along with it. The way those girls could throw themselves into the most bizarre adventures was a little worrying at times. Perhaps some new faces would distract them for a while…

“We should probably let them talk,” Zoe said, standing up. “Do either of you want a drink? Danny brought some remarkably good local beer, and we’ve got quite a few other choices. I’ve got some snacks ready too, for before the barbecue is lit.”

Shortly they were sitting down, drinks in hand, talking about current events, including the work being done about the reconstruction in the wake of the most recent Endbringer attack. When Alan came in, Carol was just in the process of explaining what she knew about the woman her sister thought was likely to replace the current PRT Director in the city fairly soon, which everyone there agreed was something that desperately needed to be done.

“Hey, Danny, give me a hand will you?” he called, pushing the door open with his foot while lugging two large bags of charcoal. “Two more in the trunk, and those bags on the back seat.”

“OK,” Danny said, getting up. Alan greeted the visitors as he went past, dumping his load outside on the deck, then returning. Soon the car was empty and the deck was full.

Ten minutes after that the large barbecue was smoking merrily, as the coals started to glow. “This will take a while,” Alan said, closing the dual lids. “Kids all in the shed, I guess?”

“Yeah, they went inside and it went ominously quiet,” Danny chuckled. “I’m not sure if I should be worried about that or not.”

“They can't do too much damage,” Alan grinned. “Nothing in the shed is worth anything anyway, and we’re right here. And I have a very good first aid kit.”

He turned as all four women joined them outside, taking the glass his wife handed him. Danny took the other one.

“What are they making in there?” Sarah asked, watching as her son and his cousins came out and
went around to the waterside of the shed, pulling the front doors open with a rattle, then disappeared inside again. All three looked like they were enjoying themselves. There was no sign of the other two girls.

“Taylor called it a fast attack boat,” Danny snickered. “I call it a pile of random crap with a lot of rope holding it together. It’ll sink inside five minutes, probably, but that won’t stop them trying.”

Carol raised an eyebrow. “Your daughter sounds… interesting,” she remarked.

“The girl is very smart, very curious, good with her hands, and reads a lot,” he told her. “And she gets… ideas.”

“Sometimes very weird ones,” Annette added with a giggle. “Very weird indeed.”

“Ignition!”
“Ignition on!”
“Vicky, grab that rope and pull!”
“You got it, Captain!”

All the adults looked at each other, then slowly turned to regard the shed.

“Amy, untie that one there, and hold on tight.”
“OK, Taylor.”
“Eric, get out of the way!”
“Tay, the tank’s only half full.”
“That’s enough for a proof of concept. Where was I? Oh, right, fire it up!”
“You got it, Tay!”

“Fire what up?” Zoe asked with a puzzled expression.

“Um...” Alan was looking worried now.

There was a mechanical whine, followed by a series of loud pops, a massive bang that made everyone jump, and finally a roar.

“It works! Mua ha ha, Doctor Curlyhair does it again!”
“AAAAIIIEEE! Tay, you’re crazy!”

All six adults stared as the bastard child of a catamaran crossed with a set of chairs by way of a powerboat zoomed out of the shed, a spray of water following it. Five hysterically laughing children were piled on board, Taylor at the front wearing a helmet apparently improvised from a colander and a pair of swim goggles, bent over handlebars made from something that probably started life as a lawnmower handle. She was sitting in a folding deck chair in the middle of the contraption with the others hanging on to various parts.

They watched as the thing, moving fairly slowly despite the noise and shower of water out the back, headed out towards the pontoon where Anne was watching with her mouth agape. All of them seemed to be having far more fun than was reasonable.

“She fixed my jet-ski,” Alan sighed. “Oh, god.”

“Does this happen a lot?” Sarah finally asked, watching open-mouthed as the ‘boat’ rounded the
pontoon and headed back.

Danny simply put his hand over his eyes and sighed.

Sometimes he started to wonder whether if Taylor got powers she’d be less likely to do this sort of thing, or *more* likely...
Two Omakes

Can I Have A Brief Word?

"Mr Wallis."

Colin twitched violently at the calm tenor voice that sounded in his helmet, nearly losing control of his motorcycle. "Who is this?" he demanded when the sudden shock wore off, and feeling very worried about how the unknown person knew his real identity. How he'd gained access to a quantum-encrypted voice channel was even more worrying. "How did you get on this channel?"

"You may call me... Kenny. I merely wanted a quick word with you, while you were otherwise not engaged." Colin's bike shut down, the engine grumbling into silence as the machine slowed to a halt. He frantically poked every control he had, including both physical switches and virtual ones, but nothing had any effect. Moments later his helmet HUD died as well. "I see you are currently free."

"How... what did you do?" Colin shouted in fury. He looked around, then up at the damaged buildings surrounding this part of the docks. "Where are you?"

"That is not relevant, Mr Wallis," 'Kenny' said patiently, his voice still calm and reasonable. "Now, as I was saying, I wanted to have a quick word."

"About what?" the Tinker said while trying to raise the PRT emergency console, to no avail. He reached around to retrieve his halberd and access the spare emergency communications device in it, but found the magnetic clamp wouldn't unlock. After yanking a couple of times, he swore under his breath and got off his bike, peering around suspiciously.

"About a good friend of mine, and yours for that matter." 'Kenny's' voice sounded slightly amused for a moment. "Dragon appears very fond of you."

Colin froze, then slowly replied, after thinking hard, "I... enjoy her company more than that of any other person that I know."

"She feels much the same," 'Kenny' replied. "I am pleased that she has found someone she cares for in such a manner. My reason for talking like this is that I want to be certain what your motives are for this friendship."

"Motives?" Colin was slightly confused, and this was suppressing a little of the worry. He was still intensely curious as to how the unknown person had apparently hacked his systems, though, and not pleased at all about it. "She is my friend. What other motive do I need?"

There was a short pause, before the voice replied, "I see. And if she should desire a closer relationship?"

"I... am unsure what you mean," Colin admitted. He really was.

"Hmm. Interesting." 'Kenny' sounded amused again. "Very interesting. All right, let me put it
another way. If, by any chance, Dragon should at some point desire a relationship that involved a physical component, and more of an emotional one, I shall expect you to either reciprocate in the same manner, without any subterfuge, or very politely and immediately explain why such a thing is not possible as clearly and non-confrontationally as you can."

Colin was by now more than merely slightly confused, although he dimly perceived the direction the other person was going. Opening his mouth to reply, he was interrupted by 'Kenny' continuing, "If it happened that you were minded to lead Dragon on, or in any way cause her emotional upset, I would be... displeased. There would be consequences. Ones you would, very briefly, find unpleasant."

The Tinker was now on more familiar ground. "Is that some form of threat?" he demanded.

"Oh, Mr Wallis, it is much more than that," 'Kenny' replied softly. "It is a promise. I always keep my promises."

A faint sound from behind him made Colin whirl, only to stare as a shimmering hole in space opened up, some ten feet across. He took a step back as a tube nearly as large in diameter smoothly and silently extruded from the portal or whatever it was, stopping when it was about a foot away.

Staring down the long tube he fancied he could make out a dim blue glow at the far end, and could definitely hear a low hum, just at the threshold of perception.

"I always keep my promises," 'Kenny' repeated. "Usually with immediate effect. This effect may include local weather pattern disruption, short term fallout, and significant blast damage. Do you understand the thrust of my argument?" The gun barrel, which is what it obviously was despite the almost comical size, moved forward another six inches and the hum got just a tiny amount louder as the glow brightened.

"I... believe I understand," Colin managed to say after a long, long pause filled with existential terror.

"Excellent. In that case, I expect we'll have no problems at all." The fucking huge gun pulled back and the portal thing vanished moments later, causing Colin to nearly collapse in relief. "I enjoyed our little chat. Perhaps we'll meet face to face at some point."

Behind him, Colin heard his bike power up again and his HUD flickered into existence. "I have other work to do now, so I must leave you at this point. By the way, if you take the second left ahead, you'll find Kreig about to break into a warehouse along with six E88 gunmen half a mile further along on the right." The voice sounded positively cheerful now, while Colin was shaking slightly as adrenalin reaction set in. "Until we next talk. Give my best to Dragon."

The voice stopped. Colin breathed heavily for thirty seconds or so, decided that his armor required a larger waste container for the next round of upgrades, got back on his bike, and went to soundly thrash the E88 cape as a method of stress reduction.

While thinking very hard about where he could learn the correct way to talk to a person who desired a romantic relationship. Surely there must be a manual or something...
“Tay, what are we gonna do!” Emma wailed. “This is a nightmare!”

“Calm down, Ems, it’s not that bad,” Taylor said gently, holding her friend by the shoulders.

“Not that bad?! It’s horrible!” Her red-headed friend sniffed, wiping her eyes. “Everyone will laugh at us.”

“They already do, but we don’t care, do we?” Taylor smiled encouragingly. “The Crimson Lady and Doctor Curlyhair have always been mocked for their rivalry, but they still always come out on top. Well… almost always. Most of the time.”

Emma took a deep breath, then straightened up where she was sitting on the edge of Taylor’s bed, putting on a haughty expression. “My nemesis is correct. The Crimson Lady is not one to allow the vagueness of fate to sway her.”

“Vagaries.”

“What?”

“It’s ‘vagaries of fate’ not ‘vagueness of fate.’ Your way makes it sound like fate doesn’t know what’s going on and is looking around all confused or something.”

Emma sighed. “OK, fine, you pedifier.”

“Pedant.”

Taylor squawked as her friend jumped on her and wrestled her to the ground. Both girls were instantly giggling as it devolved into a tickle fight. Eventually Taylor ended up sitting on the shorter girl with both the other’s hands held in one of hers while she ran the fingers of the other down her ribs. “Give in?”

“Stop, Tay! STOP! You win, you lanky freak!” Emma was laughing so hard she was nearly crying.

Releasing her, Taylor jumped to her feet and held her hands above her head in a victory pose. “Doctor Curlyhair does it yet again! Mua ha ha!!”

“Keep it down, girls, some of us are trying to work down here.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

Emma, who had calmed down, grinned at her friend. “Doctor Curlyhair is scared of her mom,” she giggled.

“The Doctor merely knows when to make a tactical withdrawal,” Taylor calmly informed her friend, sitting on her bed where Emma had been, while the other ten year old propped herself up on her elbows. “Mom Girl is a worthy opponent. There is little sense in picking battles when they can
be avoided.”

“Did Kenny say that?”

“He gives sound advice,” Taylor smiled. “It makes sense.”

“As much as anything about your imaginary friend does, I guess.” Emma shook her head. “You’re weird.”

Taylor bowed from her seated position. “I proudly accept the title.”

“Idiot.”

“Says you.”

“Says I, yes.”

They smiled at each other, then Emma got up and flopped onto Taylor’s bed, sighing deeply. “I still don’t know what we’ll do.”

“We can figure it out. Between us, we can do anything!” Taylor leaped to her feet, pointing dramatically at the ceiling and by implication the rest of the universe. “First we take over the city. Then the country. Between your powers and mine, all will fall before us! After the country is under our control, we extend our grip over the entire planet!” She looked at Emma. “You can have Iceland, but I want Australia. I like kangaroos.”

“Of course, Doctor Curlyhair,” Emma allowed graciously. “Continue.”

“Ahem. Yes, we will shortly control the world. Then...”

“Yes?”

“Then...”

“Yes? Yes?”

“Then... We expand out into the solar system, colonize every inhabitable part of it, and use the resources to ultimately rule the entire galaxy in the name of Humanity!” Taylor took a deep breath, then continued in a lower voice, “With ourselves as the benevolent rulers, of course, and Kenny being our technological and military adviser.”

“Hmm.” Emma tugged her lower lip in thought. “I like the way you think, Doctor. But what about our moral compass? We’ll need people to keep us honest, since power corrupts. Or so I’m told.”

“We have Mom Girl, The Mom, DadMan, and The Docker,” Taylor said, spreading her arms wide and grinning unnervingly. “Who else do we need? I’m telling you, It. Will. Work! Mua ha ha!”

“Girls! Less dramatic laughter and plotting to take over the world, more quiet!”

“Sorry, Mom!” Taylor looked at her friend who was now rolling around on her bed giggling and sighed. “The life of a not very evil super-villain is fraught with minor irritations,” she muttered, which only made Emma giggle more.
When the red-head finally calmed down, she sat up and crossed her legs, leaning forward in a contemplative posture. Taylor, by now, was sitting in her desk chair backwards with her arms on the back of it and her chin resting on them, thinking. “So we still need to figure out something to fix the problem,” Emma said. “It’s super important.”

“It’s a Halloween party at school,” Taylor pointed out in a reasonable voice. “How important can it be?”

“I don’t want a lame costume,” Emma said with a ferocious scowl. “And I can’t think of anything good. We need something no one else will think of. Last time practically everyone went as Alexandria, or Legend, or some other famous cape.”

Taylor snickered without moving. “Yeah, it was hilarious seeing four Alexandrias shouting at each other about stealing each others ideas.”

Emma grinned. “It was really funny. But we need something original.”

“Doctor Curlyhair and The Crimson Lady aren’t good enough?”

“We need to keep our identities secret, you dummy! If we go as our cape identities, everyone will know!”

“Good point, well made,” Taylor intoned, pointing at her friend with a nod. “Security is important. Kenny approves.”

They thought for a while longer. After a few minutes, Taylor’s brow creased as she frowned a little, before she turned around and looked at the computer on her desk. Reaching out she wiggled the mouse, making the screensaver which was displaying a sequence of images of various famous capes flicker back to the desktop. On it was a web browser showing the ‘kid-friendly’ part of PHO, which was all she was technically allowed to look at.

What her parents didn’t know wasn’t going to bite her in the ass, but that was another story.

She scrolled down through the thread she’d been reading, discussing a new fanfic from her favorite author TinGirl, then started giggling. Emma looked curiously at her as the giggling turned into laughter.

“What?” she asked, glancing between her best friend and the computer. “What’s so funny?”

“I just got a brilliant idea,” Taylor giggled. “A perfect pair of costumes, easy to make, but hardly anyone will get it. And the ones that do will laugh a lot, I bet.”

“OK,” Emma replied slowly, her head tilted enquiringly. “What’s the idea?”

Taylor explained.

Emma stared at her as if she was mad.

“You’re nuts, Tay.”

“But it’s a good idea even if I am nuts, right?” Taylor was still grinning.
“I guess so,” Emma finally replied. She was beginning to smile as well. “No one else will do it, I’m pretty sure of that.”

“There we go. Original costumes.” The brunette spun her chair around, her hair flying out from the motion. “We can probably find everything we need in the basement.”

“Let’s do it, and see what Aunt Annette thinks,” Emma said, hopping off the bed. “If she laughs, we’re golden.”

Taylor stopped the chair, stood up, looked woozy, and fell over, while her friend burst out laughing. Rolling onto her back, the taller girl thrust a hand skywards. “Doctor Curlyhair has suffered a minor balance malfunction. Reboot in progress!”

Grabbing her friend by the wrist Emma pulled her to her feet, shaking her head in amusement. “You really are weird sometimes, Tay.”

“But never boring?” Taylor grinned. The other girl shook her head, then both of them zipped out the door and thundered down the stairs towards the basement and glory.

Annette winced as a crash sounded in the basement.

“Sorry, Ems!”
“Ow! Tay, be more careful!”
“I said sorry.”
“That doesn’t make it not hurt!”
“Fair point.”

She smiled a little, shaking her head. Those girls were very funny a lot of the time, their interactions were both cute and bizarre. She wondered what they were making this time. Her daughter was very good with her hands, and Emma wasn’t bad herself when she got enthused by her friend, despite normally coming across as more of the sort of girl who would only be interested in clothes and ponies.

Taylor, of course, was definitely the sort of girl who couldn’t care less about clothes most of the time, but if someone came by with a steam engine or something she’d be all over it in seconds…

“How about this one?”
“Yuck! At least wash it out first, Tay!”
“It’s only got a little left in the bottom.”
“It’s growing green fur! Wash it out! With bleach!”
“OK, OK. Calm down, Ems, it won’t bite.”
“I’m not sure about that. And I’m not letting it near me until you clean it. Twice.”

With a puzzled look, Annette turned to regard the door to the basement, just visible from the study. “What the hell are those two up to this time?” she wondered out loud. Perhaps she should investigate?
Taylor came out of the basement, disappeared into the kitchen, then there were running water sounds. A few seconds later she came back drying something shiny with a towel before vanishing back downstairs.

“Happy now?”
“It’s better, but now it’s all wet.”
“Some people are never satisfied! Gimme, I’ll dry it some more.”
“No, you make yours, I’ll dry it. You’ll just tear the label off or something.”

The talking descended to a mumble, accompanied with random faint metallic sounds, an occasional thump, and some laughter. The elder Hebert woman shook her head again, amused, and resumed her marking. She’d find out what was going on sooner or later.

’Sooner or later’ turned out to be about forty minutes. Both girls emerged from the basement and came into the study, holding a cardboard box about a foot on a side each. They were grinning like loons and looked very pleased with themselves.

Turning around in her seat, Annette regarded them quizzically. “You two look somewhat full of yourselves,” she pointed out with a smile. “Have you… done something… again?”

“We made our Halloween costumes,” Emma said with glee. “It was Taylor’s idea, but it’s still pretty good.”

“Hey!”

The red-headed girl giggled as her friend glared at her. Annette chuckled. “And they’re in those boxes?”

Both of them nodded.

“A little small, aren’t they?” she added dubiously, inspecting them.

“We’ll need the right clothes, but these are the essential parts,” Taylor told her.

“Let’s see them, then,” her mother urged, wondering what they were up to. The pair exchanged glances, then put the boxes down on her husband’s desk on the other side of the room and opened them. Taylor pulled out her creation first and held it up proudly. Annette looked at it with her eyebrows up. The girl then put it on her head and posed after carefully adjusting the thing to her satisfaction.

She was wearing what had started life as a bicycle helmet, but now had an attached pair of safety glasses, and on top a wire frame with a sparkly toy windmill mounted on it. As Taylor moved her head, the windmill spun, reflecting light around the room. She’d also put home made brightly colored stickers all over the helmet, which added a definite festive air.

“Um...” Annette tried to think of a good word for what she was looking at. “… It’s… pretty?”

“It’s only part of the idea,” Taylor told her, motioning to her friend, who extracted her ‘costume’ from her own box and showed it off. This was an old trilby hat Annette recognized after a second or two as something that had once belonged to her father and had obviously been in one of the boxes in the basement. Attached to the top of it was…
“Heinz Baked Beans?” she said slowly as she read the familiar blue label on the metal container taped to the hat. Emma smirked as she carefully placed the thing on her head, where it was only prevented from slipping down over her face by her ears, then adjusted it to a jaunty angle.

Looking from one girl to another with bewilderment, Annette wondered what on earth they were up to this time. Based on their expectant expressions she was supposed to get some sort of joke.

“I’m not sure I understand, girls,” she finally admitted.

“You need the acting too, I guess,” Taylor nodded, making her windmill move. She turned to Emma, who faced her. Clearing her throat dramatically, Taylor paused for effect, then stated firmly, “The implications of the story line show this is entirely valid!”

Emma took a step back, her face suddenly annoyed. “But the author said that you’re wrong!”

“Not in the story! Only after the fact, in a clear case of rationalizing a plot hole!”

“If you actually bothered to read the story, you’d realize you’re completely wrong!” Emma pointed at her friend accusingly. “People like you are always saying this and you’re all mistaken. It’s really annoying!”

Annette looked from one to the other, then suddenly got it, and collapsed laughing.

“Oh, god.”

“Good, isn’t it?” Taylor grinned, dropping her haughty expression, as Emma giggled.

“You’re going as a fanfiction argument!” Annette said, still laughing. “Because you have a fan on, and she has a can on!”

All three of them were still laughing when Danny arrived home some minutes later, forcing them to repeat the skit all over again. Not that they minded all that much...
June 30th, 2007

Annette sat up in bed with a wince, the wound in her side pulling against the stitches. Suppressing the expression she wanted to put on, the brunette woman smiled at her husband and daughter as they entered the room and came over to the bed. Danny looked vastly relieved to see she was awake and more or less intact while Taylor’s expression was, to her mother’s eyes, a mix of happiness, worry, and sadness.

Holding out her arms, she smiled gently as Taylor dashed forward and held her. “The doctors told me what happened, dear,” she said quietly into her daughter’s neck, the girl holding her tightly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, mom,” Taylor replied, so quietly she was barely audible. Annette could feel she was shaking a little. Moments later it stopped, the girl reasserting the iron control she had over her emotions and outward signs of worry. Only part of that was the result of her training by the AI she thought of as a mentor and extremely close friend. The rest was all her.

Holding Taylor with one arm, Annette beckoned with the other, Danny coming over and sitting in the chair next to the bed, then taking her hand with both of his. “How are you feeling, love?”

“Like someone shot me,” she joked. He almost smiled. “Better. Still hurts quite a lot, but not as much as I’d have thought it would.” She looked down at where the bandages were under the covers, then back to him. “Considering it went all the way through. And I’m definitely feeling tired and weak. The doctor said that was normal after losing all that blood.”

His grip tightened at her words. “Don’t worry, they topped me up again,” she added with a smile. “Four pints, apparently.”

All three of them looked around when they heard someone clear his throat at the door, to see Doctor Anand, her physician. “Sorry to interrupt, Mrs Hebert, but we need to change your bandages again,” he said in a calm and educated voice. “I’d like to check the state of your wound. Your family can stay if they want, it won’t take too long.”

“How soon can she come home?” Taylor asked the man, looking at him in an oddly evaluating manner.

“Well, young lady, your mother was very lucky in that the weapon was a small caliber one and it only barely nicked her kidney,” the doctor replied, smiling at Taylor. “The damage was remarkably light, but no gunshot wound is ever trivial. We’re going to want to keep her in for observation for at least three or four days to make sure there aren’t any complications, such as infection, the wound reopening, that sort of thing, but if she’s still doing well at that point we’ll be in a position to consider letting her go home.” He raised a finger as Taylor nodded thoughtfully. “But… She’s going to need to be very careful for several weeks not to stress herself, put pressure on the wound, or anything that might cause more damage, so you’re all going to have to look after her.”

“We can do that,” Taylor assured him gravely.
He smiled. “I’m sure you can, my girl. I understand you were the one who saved her life in the first place?”

“I did what I had to do,” she quietly replied, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Out of curiosity, how did you know what to do?” he asked. “There aren’t all that many people twice your age who would be able to cope with that sort of situation.”

“I read a lot,” Taylor told him with a sudden bright smile. “I’ve read several advanced first aid books, and a couple of military field medic training ones that Dad had lying around. It’s interesting.”

He nodded with a smile of his own. “I agree, medicine is very interesting indeed, although very complicated. Perhaps one day you’ll consider it as a career, since you certainly seem to have picked up the basics very early.” He looked approving. “Well done indeed. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to examine your mother’s wound.”

Taylor released Annette and stepped back with a polite nod. Danny got up and moved out of the way as Doctor Anand motioned to someone outside the room, a nurse coming in moments later pushing a cart filled with medical supplies. Shortly Annette was lying on her undamaged side with her gown pulled up, while the nurse aided the doctor in carefully removing the bandages. “Ah… Yes, good, good. It all looks like the healing is starting nicely, Mrs Hebert,” he said after closely examining both front and back wounds. Palpitating the area gently he paused as she hissed in pain. “Apologies. It will be tender for some time, I’m afraid.”

He checked some more, nodded, and sat back. “Excellent. No signs of infection, only mild inflammation, and the sutures are holding nicely. Everything looks good. We’ll monitor it over the next couple of days and check your kidney functions regularly. You’ll have blood in your urine for some time, but it should diminish steadily. How does it feel?”

“A deep ache and a lot of itching at the surface,” she reported. “And I’m tired and quite thirsty.”

“All normal signs. Is the pain manageable or do you want a slightly higher dose of pain relief?”

“I wouldn’t turn down some ibuprofen,” she said with a small grin, making Danny chuckle.

“We can probably manage something a little more effective that that,” the doctor smiled. “Hopefully it will hurt less quite quickly, although I’d expect you to be uncomfortable for a while. If it starts to be seriously painful, call the nurse immediately, please.”

She nodded, watching as did Taylor and Danny as he and his companion quickly replaced the bandages. When she was lying on her back again, he made some notes on her record, then stood up. “Everything seems to be coming along well,” he said as the nurse collected all the medical waste and put it into the biohazard container on the cart. “I’ll come back this evening for another check.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said. He nodded to her, smiled at Taylor, did the same to Danny, and left.

When she was sure he was gone, Taylor leaned close to her. “Sorry, Mom, Kenny thinks that we need to be discreet right now, so we can’t fix this properly until you get home,” she whispered into Annette’s ear, clearly not pleased about it but understanding why.
“That’s OK, Taylor,” Annette replied in a very low voice, smiling at her daughter. “I can handle it until then. It’s not too painful.”

“We need to do something to make sure this doesn’t happen again,” the girl sighed, still whispering. “That was too close. It’s shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“Wait until I’m home and we can discuss it, dear,” Annette smiled. More loudly, she asked, “Did anything interesting happen while I was being worked on?”

Danny looked at her, then turned his head to look at Taylor, who went completely blank. Annette sighed after a moment.

“Oh, dear.”

She nodded to the door, Danny getting up and closing it, then coming back. As he did, Taylor looked around, to all outward signs apparently listening, before relaxing slightly. All three Heberts huddled close, Annette holding her daughter next to her. “Tell me what happened.”

Taylor, after a long quiet sigh, began talking, while staring at the floor. This went on for some considerable time.

Hearing a soft knock on the door, Annette put the book Taylor had brought her down on the bed next to her and looked over, calling, “Come in!”

It opened to reveal several familiar faces. “Hello, girls,” she smiled, beckoning. “Come on in. Hi, Carol.”

Carol Dallon followed her daughters into the room and closed the door behind her. Amy and Vicky walked over to the bed, the former stopping to inspect her carefully from a distance, before she approached. Her blonde sister merely dashed over and plopped down into the chair Taylor had used earlier. “Hi, Mrs H. How are you feeling?” Vicky asked, looking concerned. “Has Taylor been in yet? Mr H called Mom this morning and told her what happened. Did they get the guy? I hope they got the guy...” She scowled fiercely, while Annette smiled more widely. The young woman was remarkably chatty even when she was worried.

“I’m not to bad, Vicky, thank you. You just missed Danny and Taylor, they left about fifteen minutes ago. And yes, the man who shot me has been dealt with. As was his partner.” She didn’t explain any further, but glanced at Carol who was standing on the other side of the bed with her other daughter. The woman nodded slightly.

“Good. I don’t like people who go around shooting other people for no reason. Or criminals. Or criminals who go around shooting people for any reason,” the girl said firmly.

Amy sighed very slightly. “Vicky, you’re doing it again,” she said quietly. Her sister looked slightly embarrassed for a moment, but it didn’t last long. It seldom did, the girl was as irrepressible as Taylor in her own exuberant way. Amy was much less expressive and at times amazingly sarcastic in a very subtle manner, but was also capable of a high degree of empathy. Annette was very fond of both of them.
Danny said that you were expected to make a complete recovery, Annette,” Carol said, one hand on Amy’s shoulder. “I’m very glad and relieved to hear that. How long will you be in hospital for?”

“The surgeon thinks that I’m healing well and that I can leave in a few days, but I’ll have to take it very easy for some weeks,” she replied with a shrug. “Danny has told the University and they’re arranging a substitute lecturer if it turns out I can’t make it back by the start of term. I probably can, but it’s best to be prepared. Doctor Anand says that he’d prefer me to stay in bed for a couple of weeks, then do as little as possible to exert myself for the next month, but barring complications after that I can start getting back into normal life.” She smiled again. “I was lucky. The gunman managed to poke a hole in me in such a way that it caused minimum damage. Half an inch lower and I might have bled out before the ambulance turned up, even with the first aid that I was given. They had to put quite a lot of blood back in.”

The other woman nodded thoughtfully. “Excellent news, under the circumstances. I’m furious that it happened, but it could have been much worse.”

“Indeed it could have. Luckily Taylor knew what to do and the gas station first aid kit was well stocked.” Annette chuckled, then winced slightly as the wound ached as a result. “I knew her reading habits would come in handy sooner or later.”

Vicky grinned. “Doctor Curlyhair knows many strange and wonderful things.” This made Amy snicker, and both older women smiled.

“I brought you this, Mrs H,” Amy said, lifting her hand and holding out a small box of very expensive chocolates. “I remembered they were your favorite.”

“Oh, thank you very much, Amy!” Annette exclaimed, accepting the gift. “That’s nice of you.”

“You’re welcome,” the brunette replied, smiling back.

“Sit down, both of you, and help me eat these,” Annette said, indicating the two remaining chairs against the wall. She looked around theatrically, then whispered, “I’m probably not supposed to have them, so we need to get rid of the evidence.”

Vicky giggled while her sister smirked a little. Both girls eagerly picked out a chocolate each after she’d opened the box and held it out, Carol having brought the chairs over. The older Dallon woman also took one, popping it into her mouth and chewing with an expression of bliss.

“I have to say, Annette, that you have amazing taste in chocolate,” she said after a moment’s ecstasy. Annette nodded happily, eating one as well.

“My mother loved these,” she confided. “It’s always been a little treat for me when I needed a lift. Now is as good a time as any.” She looked around at her visitors and added, “Thank you for visiting. How are the rest of your family?”

“Everyone’s doing well, and asked me to pass on their best wishes,” Carol replied, taking another chocolate. “Mark’s latest treatment is working surprisingly well and he’s been feeling a lot better recently now that they tweaked the dosages. He suggested a couple of days ago that we should invite you and your family over for dinner again, since we haven’t done that for some time. Bearing in mind what happened, I think we’ll have to postpone that for a while, but as soon as you’re well enough, we’d love to have you over.”
“We’d love to come, thank you,” Annette laughed. “We all enjoy your dinners. I know Danny thinks that Sarah’s beef stew is amazing and he’d probably crawl over broken glass for a plate of it.”

Carol snickered. “Mark is the same, and so is Eric. It must be a man thing.”

“Hey, I love it too and I’m no man,” Vicky protested, making her sister giggle.

“Man and Vicky thing, then,” Carol amended, amused. “In any case, we’ll pencil that in for a few weeks. Is this going to impact on the holiday plans you had?”

“We’ll have to talk to Alan and his family,” Annette said. “We’d originally thought we’d go up to the lake for perhaps the third week in July. I might be mobile enough by then to be able to do it, but if we have to put it off a little, that’s no great problem. I could certainly relax there and heal up. Are you still going?”

The other woman nodded. “It’s become something of a tradition in the last couple of years and I have to admit that, despite my initial thoughts, some time away from work and the other things in life is very helpful.”

“I told you that a vacation was a good idea, Mom,” Vicky grinned. Amy nodded vigorously. “And we love the lake.”

“You just want to see what crazy idea Taylor comes up with to confuse the locals this time,” her mother pointed out, which made both girls nod again with wide smiles. “If you could not invade the summer camp and claim it in the name of Doctor Curlyhair’s Empire of Doom this time, I expect that almost everyone would appreciate it quite a lot.” The lawyer rolled her eyes as both girls produced eerie laughs, making Annette crack up.

“Oh, dear, she’s gotten to them as well,” she giggled. “Emma has been a lost cause for years, but now she’s got more followers.”

“Eric is besotted with your daughter, at least as far as thinking she’s gloriously mad and enormous fun,” Carol confided. “He’s always up for the sort of experience that Taylor tends to produce when she gets creative. I still wonder if she’s actually some sort of bizarre Tinker.”

Annette shook her head with a smile. “I doubt it, to be honest. She’s always been inventive and prone to doing things like that. And Emma is at least as bad when they put their heads together. The addition of your three only makes things even stranger.” She looked fondly at Amy and Vicky, both of whom looked somewhat proud. “I believe it was actually Amy who came up with the trebuchet design last year.”

“Taylor figured out how to actually make it, I just thought it would be fun,” the shorter girl giggled. “I couldn’t believe how far it threw things!”

“Neither could the people in the next cabin,” Carol commented dryly. “Or the people in that fishing boat. Or, for that matter, that goose.”

Vicky mimed something exploding in a cloud of feathers, before both she and her sister fell about laughing helplessly. Their mother exchanged a long-suffering look with Annette, who shrugged once more. “It was an unusual method of hunting but it seemed to work,” the Hebert woman
smiled. “Once it was cooked it was quite tasty.”

“There is that, although I still don’t believe that you can shoot down a goose with a coconut and I actually saw it happen...” Carol sighed.

“I’m just glad that Taylor and Emma became such good friends with your girls and Eric,” Annette remarked. “Taylor particularly. She was always… not unsocial, but not the sort of person who made friends easily. I suspect because she couldn’t find that many people who could keep up with her. Emma can, and these two can as well, but she never really had anyone other than Emma until she was ten.”

“The girl is certainly mature beyond her years and frighteningly articulate,” Carol nodded. “She’s also a very nice person and I’m glad she and Emma became friends with my daughters too.” She looked at the two girls who had finally stopped giggling, after Vicky mimed something plummeting from the air a couple of times. “Although at times the combination of them all can be… somewhat concerning.”

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Amy grinned. “Kenny will stop anything too weird happening.”

Annette tried not to burst out laughing while their mother gave them a look. “Yes, I expect the imaginary friend will be so effective at stopping five over-imaginative children from doing something excessive,” Carol said with heavy sarcasm. “One only has to look at his past performance in that field.”

Vicky smirked at her sister, both girls looking amused, but they didn’t say anything else. Annette shook her head, also smiling. Carol glanced at her watch, then stood up. “We’re going to have to go, I’m afraid, we have a number of other things to do today. But we’ll stop by again tomorrow. Sarah said that when she was free she’d come and visit too, she was quite worried and very angry about what happened.”

“It was lovely seeing you all,” Annette told her honestly, holding her hands out and taking one each of the two girls, who leaned in and hugged her. “Thank you for the chocolates, Amy.”

“It wasn’t a problem, Mrs H,” the girl replied. Annette offered the box around again, each of them taking one, then took the last one for herself.

“Could you get rid of this for me, Amy,” she asked with a smile. “Just so no one knows I was a little naughty.”

“Of course,” the girl said, taking the box and looking pleased.

“Girls, go and call the elevator, will you? I just need to have a private word with Annette for a moment.” Carol requested. Both her daughters waved to Annette then left the room. Carol closed the door gently and turned back to look at Annette.

“Is Taylor all right?” she asked quietly. “Danny told me what happened. Not much detail, but I know they were at the police station for a while before that insane Merchant attack last night. Is there going to be any fallout from that?”

The other woman sighed gently. “She… isn’t happy. Not at all. But she’s a strong girl, very strong, and she’ll be fine. There aren’t any charges to answer for, the police said it was a clear case of self defense and that she did the right thing all the way through. She saved several lives, including
mine. I don’t think we’ll hear any more about it.”

Carol nodded thoughtfully. “I see. That’s good, although I’m very sad that the poor girl had the experience. It’s not something someone that age should ever have to do. But I’m very relieved that she was able to stop them even so. I don’t like to consider the alternative.”

“I’m not too keen on thinking about what could have happened either,” Annette admitted. “We had a long talk about it earlier. We’re going to have to have a longer one when I get home, since the hospital isn’t the best place for that sort of thing. I will say, though, as I did to Taylor, that I’m extremely proud of my daughter regardless of what she was forced to do.”

“As am I,” Carol said. “It was very brave.” She looked at her watch again. “I really must run, I have someone I need to talk to, but I’m glad you’re all right. If you need anything I can help with, just call. Sarah and the others said the same.”

“Thank you all. Hopefully we’ll be fine, and I’ll be home in bed by the middle of the week.” Annette motioned at the room. “This is nice enough for a hospital but it’s not my bedroom.”

Her visitor laughed. “I can understand that, certainly. Hospitals are never nice places to stay. They tend to be full of sick people which doesn’t add to the ambiance at all.”

Giggling, Annette waved as the other woman nodded to her and left, picking up her book when the door was closed again.

It was nice to have friends, and she was glad her daughter had finally discovered that too.

She was going to need them as the years passed, her mother suspected.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“...despite the lack of suitable training, equipment, and experience. The PRT regrets the loss of life on both sides, although there was obviously no practical method that the Brockton Bay Police Department could have avoided the situation once it began. It is unfortunate that...”

BBPD Commissioner John Blake dropped the paper he was holding on the table in front of him, glaring across it at the blonde woman on the other side. “It goes on like that at length, simultaneously saying how pleased the PRT is that so few of my people were killed while heavily implying it’s their fault for the whole incident in the first place. Talk about damned with faint praise. Do you have an entire department dedicated to this sort of double-talk, Emily, or is it just a gift?” He snorted with anger, flicking the paper towards her. “Fuck it, that’s going too far. It’s disrespecting the memories of the good men and women who died in the line of duty, doing the job your people are supposed to be doing!”

The tallish white-haired man was clearly on the verge of adding something else, probably in a rather inflammatory manner, but visibly controlled himself. Breathing heavily for a few seconds as Director Piggot of the PRT ENE watched him warily, her face set, he finally opened his mouth again. “You may have gathered that I am not a happy man at the moment,” he went on much more calmly but with a dangerous air. “I have lost eight good cops, have the largest station in the entire city shot to hell and unusable, and have just read the most pointless excuse for an official statement I’ve ever seen from your organization. And believe me, that’s saying something.”

He leaned forward again, pointing at the newspaper which was now lying half-way between them.
“That right there is, I guarantee it, going to do more damage to the relationship between the BBPD and the PRT, and for that matter between the public and the PRT, than simply not saying anything at all would have done. You should see some of the things that are already being talked about on the internet. Gasoline on a fire is not the way you put it out.” His voice was rising once again.

“Commissioner, perhaps we should pause and calm down before someone says something unfortunate,” a voice cut in from the end of the table. Both Piggot and Blake looked in that direction. The man sitting there made a small motion suggesting calmness. “Feelings are understandably running high, but we’re all on the same side here and need to present a united front. You’re correct, Commissioner, the public is asking a lot of questions, but shouting about it won’t help answer them.”

“It helps me,” Blake muttered under his breath, but nodded. “All right. I apologize for raising my voice, Director, but you must understand that I’m not happy, and neither are the rest of the BBPD. Nor are a lot of citizens of this city. What happened last night should have been avoidable and the repercussions of this could last for months.”

He glanced at the third man. “I’m sorry, Councilor Christner. I know you’re trying to mediate this, and I appreciate the effort.”

“Just doing what I can to keep the city running while the Mayor is away on business,” the younger man smiled. He looked around the table at the other people there, most of whom had wisely been keeping their mouths shut as their superiors growled at each other. “All of us here want to make sure that this sort of thing doesn’t happen again, and we’re here to see if we can work out the best method to ensure that.”

After a moment’s silence, he added, “If you’ve gotten that off your chest, Commissioner, perhaps we should let Director Piggot have a chance to respond.”

The other man nodded with a grimace of irritation that he tried to cover by clearing his throat, before he leaned back in his chair again and folded his hands on the table in front of him. “Fine by me,” he said, not looking happy but also not looking quite so combative now.

Director Piggot, a blonde woman in her mid thirties with a face that didn’t look like it smiled very often and a body that betrayed a hell of a lot of hard exercise, despite the limp she walked with, cleared her throat. “I understand your anger, Commissioner. Believe me, I’ve lost people under my command too, and it’s not something you ever get used to. Personally, I offer my condolences to you and the BBPD.”

He nodded silently, but didn’t reply.

“However, there is the issue that the BBPD took action on the Merchants, a gang with known parahuman members, despite it being policy of both the BBPD and the PRT that such things should only be done with PRT support because of the possibility of something like this happening. You should have liaised with us before your people moved in on the Merchants, which could have...”

Commissioner Blake raised a finger, causing her to stop. “Could I just interrupt you there, Ma’am?” She gave him a not particularly friendly look as he turned to one of the others on his side of the table. “Charlie, could you refresh my memory on what we did in the process of planning the raid on the Merchants? Say, in the 48 hours leading up to it?”
His voice was even and controlled, but betrayed a certain level of suppressed fury. The man addressed, who was wearing a very expensive suit, nodded with a totally blank expression and retrieved a folder from the briefcase next to him, put the case down again, then opened the folder.

“June 27, 2007, BBPD criminal intelligence receives plausible information that there is a large cache of drugs and weapons at a suspected Merchant facility,” he began in a dry voice. “Undercover officers are tasked to gather further data on the facility, via known informants, a number of classified sources, and contacts in the PRT ENE parahuman street crime division.” He looked over his thin-rimmed glasses at Director Piggot, who had gone completely still. “All the information so gathered corroborates the initial tip-off. PRT sources suggest that the facility is suspected to house more than seventy percent of the total resources of the Merchant gang. Parahuman involvement in the facility is suggested to be minimal over the next three days due to Skidmark and Squealer being otherwise engaged in setting up new smuggling routes after the recent Coast Guard seizures of three vessels bringing contraband up from Miami two months ago.”

He turned the page. “BBPD SWAT officers in conjunction with Criminal Intelligence devise a plan of attack, using the information received to minimize the likelihood of parahuman contact. Plans are also drawn up to neutralize each of the known Merchant parahumans if such contact occurs. These plans are send to the PRT ENE liaison office at 18:38 on the 27th. No response is received.”

Director Piggot opened her mouth, then closed it when the Commissioner held up his finger again. The other man went on, “June 28, 2007, plans are finalized for the operation against the Merchant facility, and personnel are assigned for each required role, drawing on officers from across all precincts of the city. City Hall is notified of the timing of the operation, as per protocol, and green lights it. Unofficial PRT contacts deliver extra background data, showing that the 29th is a suitable time for the raid as at least two of the three Merchant parahumans will definitely be elsewhere. The remaining one, Mush, is a possible combatant, and neutralization plans for him are updated. Timing of the raid, the expected routes of attack, and other relevant data are sent to the PRT liaison office at 15:29 on the 28th. A brief response is received at 17:43 noting that the PRT has filed the data. No further contact from the PRT is had on that date.”

He turned the page again, while the room was silent, every person listening intently. Several of the PRT contingent were looking very uncomfortable.

“One hour before the commencement of the operation on the 29th, in an attempt to remedy the lack of communication, Lieutenant Hackett of BBPD SWAT attempts to double check via a personal contact at the PRT that the organization has no objections to the proposed actions. His contact reports that her immediate superior passed the request up the chain of command and returned with neither a positive go or a positive stop message, merely saying that it was in the hands of the BBPD. After discussing this response with Captain Rosenberg and the office of the Commissioner, it was decided that in the absence of further objection, the raid would proceed as planned. This duly occurred, resulting in complete success.”

Charlie closed the folder and put it back into his briefcase. Blake nodded to him, then looked back at Director Piggot, whose expression suggested she’d just realized she’d stood on a landmine and there had been a tiny ominous ‘click.’

“With all due respect, Director, my people did exactly what they were supposed to. Completely by the book on our end. Despite my own feelings about how things work, we gave the PRT ample opportunity to intervene if they wanted, and basically got ignored. Which isn’t the first time by any means, but never over something this big. Now, if you can tell me more about this, go right ahead,
but *don’t* say we didn’t follow protocol.”

He sighed, rubbing the back of one hand with the fingers of the other, adding, “Jesus, I know you’re under pressure and don’t have nearly the resources you need, Emily, but this is a total cluster-fuck. And I have to say I don’t think it’s our cluster-fuck. I’m not blaming you, I know your history, and I’m damn sure this isn’t something you knew about because you’re much too professional to allow it to happen if you did. Since you took over eleven months ago, things have improved massively overall, although a lot of people, myself included, feel that there is a long way to go yet. But *someone* in your agency dropped the ball, with enough force that I’m more than a little suspicious it was deliberate, and press releases like that are only going to make things worse. And as the one at the top, your desk is where it stops. You know that as well as I do, and that there’s no way something like this should have been missed by you unless someone is fucking with you.”

There was a tired look on his face. “This damned city is one bad day away from a riot that will make the last one look like a carnival, we have a violent crime rate that wouldn’t be out of place in a war zone, more parahumans per square mile than practically anywhere, and the people are *seriously* losing patience with all of us. Mostly you guys, actually, since your remit is to deal with the parahuman villains and that’s not happening. I know you’re outnumbered, outgunned, and probably have orders not to start a war, but people out there?” He waved a hand at the window looking out into the commercial district of the city. “*They don’t care.* All they know is their businesses get destroyed, people are killed in various horrible ways on a regular basis, buildings get burned down, god knows what else. And now we have one gang that uses weapons that no one outside the army should have to shoot the fuck out of a police station and the PRT only turns up when it’s all over.”

Blake shook his head. “Not good optics, Director, no matter *what* the reason is. The public doesn’t really care, all they see is what it looks like. And right now they mainly see that the BBPD did their job to take a lot of major criminals off the street, successfully, and paid a stiff price for it.”

“I appreciate the lecture, Commissioner,” Director Piggot finally said when he fell silent. “I’m sure that it felt good to get all that off your chest.”

“Not really,” he sighed. “It had to be said, but I don’t enjoy saying it. I didn’t enjoy saying something similar to your predecessor either, on the three… no, four, separate occasions we crossed horns. The difference now is that I hope I’m saying it to someone who will listen and do something about it. I’d rather work together with the PRT, not in spite of it.”

The woman glared at him, then sagged a little. “Damn it. You’re completely sure that your people informed mine?”

Commissioner Blake glanced at his aide, who nodded. “Yes,” the man replied. “Definitely. I can forward you copies of everything we passed on to the liaison office, and the replies.”

“Do that, please,” she requested. Her left eyebrow twitched a couple of times. “I think I need to have a very long talk with certain people.” The woman gave the impression that those people would be exceptionally lucky to walk away with their freedom, never mind jobs. “I’ve spend a lot more time getting rid of some of the dead wood that the former Director managed to accumulate than I care for, but clearly some slipped through the cracks,” she added in a low growl.

Raising her eyes to meet his, she said, “I’m sorry, John. I honestly am. This shouldn’t have happened, and when I find out how it did, who was responsible, and why…” She trailed off with a
look of extreme annoyance. “In retrospect, you’re right, that press release didn’t help. Again, my apologies.”

“It’s too late now to do anything about it,” Blake shrugged. “If you put out another one retracting anything in the first one, it’ll be seen as a cover up and people will wonder what you’re covering up. If we put out a statement taking issue with it, we’re just adding to the controversy, which also makes it worse. Best to ignore it on both sides and pretend it didn’t happen. Most people will forget about it in time. Politics is like that, and neither one of us can really win without making more problems for each other, which only makes the whole situation harder to deal with in the long run.”

Director Piggot nodded reluctantly. “Unfortunately I think you’re right.” She glanced at Councilor Christner who had been listening quietly but with great attention. “What does the city administration think?”

“We mainly wish this hadn’t happened,” he replied immediately. “We have enough trouble keeping the place operating without firefights downtown, or local law enforcement getting into shouting matches with federal ones. But considering how things have worked out, I agree with Commissioner Blake that it’s probably best to let it lie for now. If the public gets too worked up about it, our own public relations department will deal with it.” He looked momentarily darkly amused. “Believe me, we got a lot of practice in that area with the previous Director. Thomas Calvert was… not well liked or respected.”

“He was an asshole,” Blake remarked with a frown. “Not surprising considering it was Tagg who put him up for the position and managed to force it through. Anyone James Tagg thinks is a good fit for a job like that is someone any sensible person would be wary of. Especially in Brockton Bay.”

Director Piggot looked like she agreed, but didn’t want to say anything. The councilman turned back to her. “We were quite relieved when we found out that you were in the top position to replace him after the entire Southside Mall incident, Director Piggot. You have a reputation for a level of competence that is desperately needed in our fair city.” He looked amused as she snorted with disdain. “After all, you saved over three thousand people at Ellisburg with your quick thinking.”

“And didn’t save nearly two thousand others,” she retorted, scowling.

“It would have been a lot worse if you hadn’t taken the actions you did,” he replied evenly. “I’ve read the reports. We like to know the people we work with around here. I happen to think you did the right thing no matter what your higher-ups might feel, by the way. While I suspect that your superiors are at least partially thinking of this as a punishment detail, and a way to keep you out of the way without officially censuring you for your actions, I personally think you’re one of the few people that can genuinely help. Brockton Bay is a… complex… place. We don’t need another Calvert, we need someone who will think things through, and consider problems from other points of view than their own. Having met the man more than once I rather felt he was mostly in it for himself.”

Several people, including a couple of the PRT officers, nodded thoughtfully. Piggot regarded him for a moment a little suspiciously, like she suspected he was trying some sort of scam on her, but ultimately made a small gesture of acknowledgment.

“Thank you. I think,” she replied.

“We just need to make certain that this sort of thing doesn’t happen again,” the councilor added
meaningfully. “It’s going to take a lot of discreet damage control to regain the trust of the public, and another similar incident could destroy in seconds any progress we make in the next few weeks. As the Commissioner accurately put it, the place is teetering on the edge of a complete catastrophe at the best of times, so we don’t want to push it too hard.”

She nodded slightly. “I don’t want this repeated any more than you do, Councilor. Not only does it make my people look bad, innocent people lost their lives over something that shouldn’t have happened in the first place. You have my word that there will be a reckoning over how this fiasco occurred. The commissioner is completely correct, there shouldn’t have been any way for me to have been kept in the dark about this, unless someone was doing it deliberately or there was a series of frankly almost impossible coincidences. Or, I suppose, some form of parahuman interference, but considering the protocols we have in place for exactly that sort of thing, it shouldn’t be possible.”

She frowned thoughtfully as she spoke. “Perhaps those protocols need updating. I’ll look into it. Regardless, something went badly wrong and I intend to make sure it doesn’t occur again.” The woman glanced at her own aide, a PRT lieutenant, who was making notes, then returned her attention to Blake.

“All right, I guess I can’t ask for more than that,” the man said after a second’s study of her face. “Out of interest, why was the response time so long? I mean, this was less than a mile from the PRT building, and it was hellishly loud. Even without any warning I’d have expected you to have a squad on the way as soon as the first explosion happened, since there’s no way you could have missed it.”

Director Piggot scowled. “It was the middle of a shift change, we’re short-staffed right now because of injuries from the last op against the E88 two days ago, and there were communication issues that caused a delay in reporting to the right people. A perfect storm of things going wrong, leaving aside whatever the hell happened with the liaison office. By the time all the confusion got sorted out and we had teams rolling it was all over. Bear in mind the main firefight only lasted about thirteen minutes, so even if we’d jumped the moment the first shot was fired, we’d still have missed most of the excitement.”

Blake nodded slowly. “All right. I can understand that, mistakes happen to the best, and it was out of the blue. That’s not to say I’m happy about it, but I can’t argue with how effectively your guys got to work when they turned up.”

“Unfortunately Armsmaster was on patrol on the other side of the district when the call came in and he had Miss Militia with him,” the PRT lieutenant added, speaking a little carefully in case he managed to say the wrong thing. “The rest of the capes were on the Rig doing a detailed debrief of the E88 operation, which added quite a lot of time to their response availability.”

“I suppose even he couldn’t cover ten miles that fast,” Councilman Christner commented with a smile. “I know his bike is impressive but to the best of my knowledge it doesn’t fly. Yet.”

Director Piggot sighed faintly. “Don’t give him ideas, the man is bad enough as it is. If he decides he needs a flying bike, he’ll build a flying bike, and the next thing you know he’ll be locked in his lab for two weeks just like last time he had a good idea.” She shook her head. “I need him available as much as possible. As irritating as he can be, he’s actually exceptionally competent at his job.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that, Director,” the councilor said with a small grin. “Aren’t you supposed to keep your criticisms internal?”
She gave him a long-suffering look. “You have met the man, I assume?” He nodded, still grinning. “I am hardly saying anything that everyone else isn’t also saying. Including his friends and coworkers.”

“He has friends?”

Director Piggot actually snickered, but hastily pretended it was a cough. “Despite appearances, yes.”

Her face went back to a professionally neutral expression moments later. “Since we seem to have reached agreement on the incident itself, and actions we need to take to solve the problems raised, I would like to move on to something else. Notably, exactly what happened after the incident began.”

Commissioner Blake raised an eyebrow. “Considering the remarkable amount of paperwork I’ve read and signed off on in the last twenty four hours, I would think that’s fairly well established, isn’t it? A large number of highly trained BBPD officers used their skills and weapons, in conjunction with a certain amount of good fortune, to defend themselves against a large attacking force. Successfully for the most part, since the Merchant losses were much larger than we took.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve read the reports myself, thank you,” she said impatiently. “And all the ones my own staff have generated which make the BBPD ones look like a short novel.” She sighed heavily as he looked slightly amused. “There are… some issues.”

“Go on.”

The blonde woman examined him closely, then glanced at Captain Rosenberg next to him on the other side from his aide, before looking momentarily at the councilor who was again listening with obvious interest. “OK, let’s go through it. Skidmark is dead, a clean shot with a 7.62mm rifle bullet through the head. Mush is still in BBPD custody, sedated and heavily restrained. My own medical staff say he’s undamaged and safe but unlikely to wake for some time. Squealer is… currently in an undetermined location.” Looking narrowly at him, she added, “Which is something I am not happy about. We were lead to believe that she was being transported to Brockton General under BBPD guard, but they claim to have no record of her arriving.”

Commissioner Blake put one hand over the other on the table and merely watched her. The man in the nice suit at the other end of the table from Councilor Christner, who hadn’t said a word so far, was watching both of them with interest.

After a couple of seconds, Piggot continued, “So all three of the Merchant capes are either dead or in captivity. The BBPD has confiscated a remarkable amount of drugs, cash, and weapons, crippling the gang beyond saving even if they hadn’t lost their capes. Not to mention shot dead more than a couple of dozen of the most gun-happy gangers.”

“All true,” he nodded when she stopped again. “Your point?”

“Oh, I have several,” she assured him. “We’ll get back to most of them. The thing that I am particularly curious about right now, though, is a rather… specific… thing that was brought to my attention by Armsmaster after his initial investigation of the crime scene.”

“Which is?” The older man seemed politely curious. She examined him silently for a few seconds.
“He happened to notice a definite commonality between the kill shots that a number of the Merchants took. Exactly like Skidmark, as it turns out. One shot, directly between the eyes, through the brain. Instant kill, very efficient. Which impressed him. However, what really impressed him was the range involved in some of those shots.”

She leaned forward slightly as she spoke. “Five bodies were found inside the station, three with 9mm holes in them from the front. The last two were shot from behind, rather remarkably managing the exact same shot in the other direction, which is almost impossible, with what was probably an AKM. The rounds haven’t been found yet but I suspect that if they are, they would be a match for one of the Merchant weapons. The 9mm rounds all match the weapon belonging to one Detective Leroy Vanover. Who, while his range records show he is a damn good shot, is definitely not a trained sniper.”

Blake nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve met Detective Vanover. Good man. I’m relieved he made it despite coming under attack with no warning. There may be a commendation required.” He glanced at his aide. “Make a note, will you, Charlie?”

“Yes, sir,” the other man said, doing as he was instructed.

Piggot watched this with an expression of annoyance. When the commissioner returned his attention to her, she went on, “There were another seven dead Merchants outside that had the same damn wound in the same damn place, almost to the millimeter. Based on the trajectories, six of those were shot from inside the police station, probably from the main office, at ranges up to one hundred and thirty meters. That’s some exceptionally fine shooting considering it was dark, there was a lot of incoming fire, and it was done with an AKM which isn’t the world’s most accurate gun.”

“We train our SWAT officers to the highest standard in the country,” Blake remarked. “Many of them are ex-military as well. Half our people probably have more experience under fire than many of yours, for that matter. I’m not surprised they made their shots count.” He seemed completely at ease as he spoke.

Director Piggot leaned back again, staring at him. Everyone else in the room was looking between them like they were at a tennis match. Eventually she said, “Armsmaster said that the probability of those particular shots all being the work of one person was somewhat in excess of ninety-eight percent. Which for him is the same as saying he was totally convinced it was the same shooter. I’m a damn good shot myself, as it happens, but I know for a fact that while I might be able to pull off the pistol shots at close range, there’s no way I could duplicate the rifle ones. Not that accurately. They’re the work of someone with one hell of a lot of very specific training in taking down people with one shot. It’s a skill set you don’t really see outside certain military agencies and as far as I can determine none of the BBPD personnel have that particular background.”

She paused, then added, “Admittedly, they have almost every other military background I’ve ever heard of, but none of them appear to have been trained as counter-insurgency snipers or assassins.”

There was silence in the room for a while. “So, going back to the thing that I’m most curious about… Who the hell pulled off those shots? Who helped you?”

Blake watched her expression without comment for another ten seconds. “I don’t know,” he finally said. She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. “Neither am I going to try to find out.”
“What?!” she spluttered in shock.

“All I know is that an outside party came to the aid of my officers and risked their own life to save a lot of other ones,” he said calmly. “Their identity is, under the circumstances, not something I intend to dig into. Call it a matter of mutual respect.”

“You’re protecting them, whoever it was,” she noted with a modicum of mixed surprise and anger.

He shrugged. “Call it what you want. I’m not going to go out of my way to cause offense to someone who went out of their way to save dozens of lives. It’s disrespectful if nothing else as far as I’m concerned.”

After glaring at him, she turned her attention to Captain Rosenberg. “Captain, do you know who the shooter was?”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you, Ma’am,” he replied without seeming concerned. “My information is merely that an offer of aid was made and accepted. Since we were in a fight for our lives and eight of my colleagues had already died in under ten minutes by that point, I can’t say that I regret the decision to accept aid. I might not be here to talk to you if we hadn’t.”

Emily Piggot sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of her nose. “And I assume that if I went and talked to any of the cops in that station, I’d get exactly the same answer?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, Ma’am,” he replied politely. “We’ve lost a lot of good officers over the years. Someone who helps prevent it happening again is going to get a considerable amount of respect and trust. I’m sure you understand.”

Closing her eyes, she leaned back and shook her head. “God, this city is fucked up,” she muttered under her breath.

“It could do with some improvement, but that’s what you’re here for, correct, Director?” Councilor Christner commented brightly, making her open her eyes and give him an unfriendly look. It didn’t do anything apparent other than amuse him.

“Why do I feel that I’m going to find you very annoying as time goes by?” she asked rhetorically, which provoked a certain amount of muffled snickers from several people.

Returning her gaze to the BBPD people opposite her, she tried again. “I’m concerned that the shooter may be a new parahuman,” she said. “One who has already got a body count of at least twelve people so far. That shooting was inhumanly good even for an expert. Parahumans who use lethal weapons have a tendency to escalate over time which is not something I’d want to see, and I doubt you would either.”

“No one saw anything that a correctly trained completely normal person couldn’t have done,” Captain Rosenberg replied after glancing at his superior, who didn’t object. “And no suggestion was made at the time that parahuman abilities were involved. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I think it was just a very skilled shooter.”

“And you’ll keep saying things like that, won’t you?” she asked with a frown. The man returned her look without comment. “For god’s sake. Doesn’t it worry you?”

“Not particularly,” Commissioner Blake said. “When you think about the sort of people that are
roaming this city killing with impunity, someone who stepped up to help on the side of the law is to be thanked, not persecuted. You’re unlikely to find anyone from the BBPD who would think otherwise under the circumstances.”

He scanned the faces of the PRT people. “The thing you have to remember is that last night a serious act of domestic terrorism took place, one that should not have happened. Before parahumans came on the scene, the sort of thing we tend to take for granted these days would have caused nation-wide condemnation and a response that would have involved every law enforcement agency in the country. These days, and particularly in Brockton Bay, it’s basically Tuesday.”

Turning to stare directly at Director Piggot, who was listening with an evaluating expression, he went on, “Somehow, over the years, we’ve grown to accept things that thirty years ago would have toppled the government. They get labeled the actions of a parahuman gang or villain and somehow that makes it something that’s just… pushed to the side. It’s insane. When I first became a cop, Berkowitz was terrorizing New York. He killed six people, caused panic across the city for months, made the papers around the world, and had every cop on the East Coast looking for him…”

The man lifted a hand in a gesture of incredulity. “Here and now, we have Hookwolf. He’s killed at least fifteen people that we know of, and he’s wandering around out there without anyone seriously doing anything about it. And when someone actually does manage to bring him in, his friends break him out again two days later and he’s killed another person within a day. Kaiser’s suspected of at least five murders. Kreig three. And so on. Skidmark was known to have directly killed a minimum of four people, but if you look at the Merchants as a whole, they’re responsible for over five hundred deaths in the last two years that we know about. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was actually twice that. And god only knows how many lives ruined in the process.”

Stopping for a breath, he looked at each person facing him one at a time. Councilor Christner was listening with a somber expression, not moving, while the PRT people seemed almost fascinated. “Then he decides to go completely nuts and start a war with the BBPD. Compared to that, one citizen who is actually on our side, even if they did shoot a number of active shooters in the head, is someone I’m completely OK with. If more of these fuckers ended up tits up in a ditch we probably wouldn’t have the problems we do now.”

When he stopped talking there was a long uncomfortable silence. Eventually the PRT director opened her mouth. “Officially, I have to disagree at least in part. Policy is that escalating against supervillains is something left as a last resort since it can provoke them to escalate as well. Or first. Considering how dangerous even a fairly innocuous power can be with someone who thinks about it creatively, we don’t really want to push a minor villain into becoming a major one by ramping things up too quickly.”

“Which is one of the main reasons we’re in the situation we have in this city,” Blake retorted. “If they know they can get away with that sort of thing, oh, look, they keep doing it. What a surprise.”

She sighed a little. “I can’t entirely discount that, I admit. But I have to work within my own policy limits, as you do too. We can’t simply shoot any villains we see.”

“Of course not. But we can’t just sit back and watch them do anything they want because we’re
scared that they might retaliate. If we do that we’ve already lost.”

Once again they looked at each other, until Piggot shook her head. “I can see we could end up arguing about this from different points of view for hours. It’s probably better to leave that for another time.” He nodded. “All right. I’m obviously not going to get any more information on who the hell it was that took out Skidmark. I just hope you know what you’re doing in that respect. If I have to deal with some firearms-based Parahuman who ends up on top of the Medhall building sniping everyone down town, I will take great pleasure in telling you ‘I told you so.’ I’m sort of vindictive like that.”

Blake actually smiled at that comment. “If that happens, I will admit I was wrong. But I don’t think I am.”

“Be it on your head, then. Fine.” She leaned forward. “Where is Squealer?”

“Safe.”

“Safe, where?”

Blake glanced at the man in the suit at the end of the table. “In a medical facility outside the city.”

“Which one?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

Director Piggot growled under her breath. “You’re being deliberately obtuse again.” She pointed at him, then herself. “Your job is to arrest the gangers. My job is to deal with the parahumans. I would like you to turn over Mush and Squealer to me.” After a moment, she added with carefully controlled politeness, “Please.”

“You can have Mush,” Blake replied. “Squealer is… currently unavailable.”

“Oh for god’s… Why is she unavailable?” The blonde woman looked angry again.

The up-to-now silent observer made a small motion which attracted her attention. “Squealer is unavailable due to a prior arrangement with another federal agency,” he said.

She fixed him with a hard look. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Special Agent Pascoe, Boston FBI,” he replied evenly, pulling out a wallet and flipping it open to show his ID. Director Piggot looked at it, then his face, before sighing heavily.

“Oh, hell. What are you doing here?” she asked with annoyance. “This is a matter between the PRT and the BBPD.”

“Domestic terrorism is a federal offense,” he said calmly. “There has been considerable talk in the Bureau for some time now that matches quite closely to the discussion you’ve just had with Commissioner Blake. We feel that the PRT isn’t quite living up to it’s mandate in certain areas. No disrespect to you personally, of course, as you’re a recent appointee to your current position. It goes higher than that. The events last night drove home just how out of control the situation in Brockton Bay had become and it was felt that we needed to investigate things a little more closely than we have been doing up until now.”
Piggot stared at him, then slowly turned her head to face Commissioner Blake. “You called him in.”

“Agent Pascoe is an old friend and I asked for some advice on an untenable problem,” the man replied, not looking intimidated. “He talked to his own superiors and they decided it would be a good idea to offer the city some help. Under the current circumstances I felt it was reasonable to accept the offer.”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble this is likely to cause?” she sighed. “My own superiors aren’t going to be pleased that the FBI is involved in a parahuman case.”

“We do have a fair amount of parahuman experience of our own, Director,” Agent Pascoe pointed out with a small smile. “We even employ a number of them ourselves despite the PRT’s efforts to get complete jurisdiction over all parahuman matters and personnel. The young lady known as Squealer is someone we’ve been watching for a while and when the chance came up to have a talk with her, we took it. She’s perfectly safe and is currently thinking whether a plea deal is a good idea. Between you and me, I have a feeling the answer will be yes.” The smile got slightly wider. “Once the withdrawal symptoms stop and she’s in a better frame of mind to consider the position she’s in, of course.”

“Jesus.” Piggot looked at her aide, who was staring at the FBI man with a weird look. He glanced back at her, looked at his notebook, wrote a few things in it, and shook his head. “I can’t work out whether I should be impressed or furious. I can guarantee that the Chief Director is likely to be both. You’re opening a real can of worms with this.”

The man shrugged. “We’re aware of the ramifications. It will be interesting to see what happens. There are a couple of senators who are also quite interested in who gets upset and why.”

She watched him for a moment longer, then closed her eyes and massaged her forehead with her fingers. “This job just gets better and better the longer I do it,” she grumbled.

“I’m sure we’ll work well together when we iron out all the little problems, Emily” Commissioner Blake chuckled. She opened her eyes and gave him an unfriendly look.

“There’s also the matter of an 80mm recoilless rifle that somehow managed to get missed in an E88 armory raid,” she said.

“Yes, that was very useful,” he smiled. “BBPD SWAT is rather attached to it now, and it would be a shame to upset them after the hard work they’ve had to do recently. We’ve discussed it with the FBI and they talked to the ATF, who were oddly enough happy to let us keep it. They even found some more ammunition for the thing.”

She started lightly banging her head on the table.

“Why did I accept this posting?” she mumbled between thumps.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Quite a while later Emily was sitting at her desk in the PRT building wishing she’d never heard of Brockton Bay while drafting a report for the Chief Director, a woman she didn’t like at all and who felt much the same about her. They respected each other professionally but tended to avoid
each other as much as possible. The last few hours had left her feeling that something fundamental had changed in the city and its relationship to the PRT, and she wasn’t sure whether this was going to be a good or a bad thing. It was certainly going to be something that caused a hell of a lot of shouting in the higher echelons of power and she was desperately hoping she could stay out of that and just get on with her own job with as little interference as possible.

‘At least the Merchants are out of the picture,’ she mused as she typed. ‘Pity the E88 will probably just expand into their territory, but we might get a few weeks of respite. Or, knowing this damn city, some other gang will turn up and try to claim it and make things even more complicated. Fucking villains. Blake might be right, a few more of the bastards with holes in would probably make things a lot simpler.’

Unfortunately, she knew full well it wasn’t that easy. Never mind the ethics of it.

A tap on the door made her look up from the screen, rather thankfully. “Come!” she called, swiveling her chair to face forward. Armstorm and Miss Militia entered, the latter closing the door, then walked over to her desk. “I’ve finished my report on the anomalous shootings, Director,” the Tinker said, putting a printout on her desk. “The rifle shots definitely were carried out with a weapon belonging to the Merchants. We matched rounds embedded in the front of the precinct station with ones recovered from the crime scene having passed through the deceased attackers.”

Director Piggot leafed through the comprehensive document, looking at the numerous graphs. “And you’re certain it wasn’t one of the Merchants who did it?”

“Extremely unlikely,” he replied with a shake of his head. “The limited video available of the firefight clearly showed that the perpetrators were firing wildly with very poor tactical awareness or firearms skill. Whoever used the weapon to shoot them was exceptionally good in both regards. The accuracy of the shots was uncanny, at the top of what’s even possible with the weapon in question, and there was only one wound on each of them. The shooter didn’t appear to miss once.”

“One shot, one kill,” she remarked, stopping on one of the photos and examining it.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he nodded. “My theory is that the shooter acquired Detective Vanover’s weapon inside the station after he’d been shot, possibly without his knowledge, took out the Merchants who had infiltrated the building, looted their weapons and ammunition, and proceeded to utilize them in downing further assailants. Once they were outside, they apparently made use of confiscated grenades to confuse the attackers, allowing the remaining BBPD personnel to mount a counter attack, then killed Skidmark with their last shot. I determined that this shot was from the roof of the apartment building to the north of the police station, at a steep downward angle. Skidmark was apparently looking up at the time.”

She inspected the graphic on the next page which illustrated this. “That’s one hell of a good shot in the dark with no telescopic sight,” she said.

Miss Militia nodded. “I’m not sure I could have done it myself with that weapon, especially on the first shot,” the woman commented, looking both impressed and disturbed. “Whoever it was is highly trained. Something along the lines of Special Forces training on top of years of experience in the field and a lot of natural skill.”

“So an ex-soldier, almost certainly, as we suspected.”

“That’s the most likely explanation. Possibly with powers aiding them, but I think it would also
require a lot of experience and training even so. I’d guess someone who was in one of the middle eastern wars in the eighties, before we pulled out entirely. Maybe one of the BBPD staff, but we can’t find a match so far.”

“We’d be looking for someone about mid forties at the youngest in that case,” Emily noted thoughtfully. “Someone with military training, probably overseas posting, at least one tour of duty in a hot combat zone… That narrows it down a little, but there are quite a few people who fit the description in the country. Even in this city. The Dock Worker’s Association has nearly as many ex-military people as the BBPD does, for example. There are a few in the gangs too.”

“It’s possible that it was another gang that stepped in but I personally doubt it,” the other woman said slowly. “I can’t see it would benefit them. Admittedly with Skidmark dead and the Merchants disbanded the other gangs will be able to fill the gap left, but they’d probably have just sat back and let the police deal with the situation. Whatever happened they’d be able to make the most of it and it wouldn’t cause them any risk, so why go to the aid of the BBPD?”

“It does seem unlikely, Director,” Armmsmaster added. “Kaiser is smart enough to take advantage of such an opportunity, assuming he felt it was in his best interest, but we know most of the E88 is currently lying low after the last operation, and they’d have been taken by surprise as much as anyone else was.”

Emily nodded, thinking it over. They were both right. “So, based on the short response time, it’s likely that this person was either already in the station, or lived nearby and managed to get inside pretty soon after it all kicked off. That should be enough together with the basic description to give us a short list of possibilities.”

The two capes exchanged a look, then Miss Militia asked rather carefully, “Do we actually have any real reason to investigate their identity any further, Ma’am? I mean… The BBPD are clearly going to some effort to pretend they don’t know who it is, and that may actually be true in any case. From what I’ve heard, the city council is also perfectly content to leave it alone. Even the FBI doesn’t seem bothered by the whole thing, as weird as that is. We don’t know it’s a parahuman, either, so… Is it worth risking making quite a few different people annoyed even more than they are now over the whole thing just to find out who saved dozens of lives?”

The younger woman looked mildly embarrassed as she spoke. “Not that I’m saying that we should allow someone to break the law with impunity, of course, but it’s not completely clear than any laws were broken when we look at what was happening at the time. I just wonder if we might end up causing more trouble than it’s worth in this case.”

Piggot leaned back in her chair and studied both of them. Armmsmaster seemed not entirely in agreement with his colleague and friend, but he didn’t look like he thought she was wrong either. Eventually she sighed slightly. “You make a number of good points, Hannah. Even so, I’d feel happier if I knew who it was, if only to be sure they weren’t going to suddenly snap and use that remarkable shooting skill in the middle of the city one Friday afternoon because their coffee shop was shut or something. You said it yourself, this is someone with extensive combat training, who doesn’t mind taking a life as a carefully calculated act. That’s not the same thing that the gangs do for the most part and it makes me both less and more worried at the same time. I’d rest easier if we knew more about the shooter.”

She glanced at her computer screen and frowned. “Not to mention that the Chief Director will almost certainly want to know. Which brings problems of it’s own but those are mine to worry about.” Turning back to them, she went on, “We seem to have a reasonable profile of our friend
with the terrifying shooting skills. Indulge me and see if you can discreetly get an ID on him. But don’t push it, and don’t do anything if you do manage to track the guy down.”

“And presumably don’t upset the BBPD about it either,” Miss Militia said with a quirk of a smile.

“That would probably be best,” Emily agreed, frowning lightly. “Commissioner Blake isn’t in a good mood right now for some understandable reasons and I’d prefer not to have to deal with an actively hostile police force. Our job is hard enough as it is.”

Both of them nodded. “In that case, dismissed. I’ve got my own report to finish.”

“Ma’am,” Miss Militia said, then turned and headed for the door, Armsmaster following her looking thoughtful. Emily watched them go, then turned back to her computer and resumed typing, while wondering what was going to happen next.

*Something* would, she knew that much. It always did.
Tevos, the Asari representative to the Council, looked at Eporius, the Turian equivalent. He looked back. Very long experience with both his species and him in particular let her easily see he was extremely worried, if not actually scared, which was almost unique as far as she was concerned. He got angry, and contemplative, and even on occasion embarrassed, but she’d never see him scared.

It unsettled her.

A glance at Vaesarth, the Salarian councilor and the third member of their group, showed that she was also studying Eporius with more than the normal interest, her quick mind clearly having seized on the oddities present. She returned her own attention to Eporius. “Well, we’re all here. Perhaps you would like to explain why we’re all here, at such short notice?” She watched as he made a couple of minute expression changes that indicated nervousness in his species. “Does it, by any chance, have anything to do with Relay 314?”

The Turian blinked. “How did...”

She smiled a little indulgently. “The STG has very good intelligence, as you know.”

He cast an unfriendly look at Vaesarth, who seemed a tiny bit smug. “Yes. Even when I would prefer otherwise.”

“However, we don’t know more than that a small fleet of Hierarchy ships went through that relay a week ago. Followed by a rather larger fleet two days later. Considering that Relay 314 was, the last I knew, dormant, it does bring up the question of who activated it and why.” She smiled somewhat menacingly at him. “Could you perhaps explain?”

Eporius looked at them both, then sighed tiredly. “We may have made a very large mistake,” he began.

==-=-=-=-=-=-=-==

One week prior...

“Contact at extreme range, sir, nine light hours out, right on the other side of the system. 92% match to the pirate cruiser. We’re picking up signs that his drive is starting to fail, there was an unusual energy spike when he came out of FTL.” The sensor operator glanced back at his superior. “Looks like we didn’t miss after all.”

“Excellent.” Captain Abernius nodded in satisfaction. “Follow him, but stay out of his detection range. He came here for a reason, which I expect is for reinforcements. Passive scan for other ships, full sweep.”

“Sir.” The operator turned back to his console. Looking around the bridge, the captain was pleased
to see all his people concentrating on their jobs. The quiet background sounds of the bridge were uninterrupted for some time as the warship coasted towards the enemy vessel, using minimum power to avoid radiating anything the opposition would pick up. Even if that would take nine hours and some minutes at this point.

Eventually, the threat detection operator looked around again. “Captain? No other ships detected in the system on passive scans. There may still be someone else hiding behind a planet or the star, or running silent, but we can’t tell without going to active scan.”

“Acknowledged. Status on the Batarian ship?”

“He’s definitely having problems with his drive core, sir,” another member of the crew announced, inspecting his instruments carefully. “We’re picking up more eezo emissions than we should be, and they’re fluctuating a lot. Looks like he’s tried to engage his drive at least once and had to abort it. I doubt he’s going to be able to go FTL without a lot of repairs.”

“Again, excellent,” the captain replied, smiling to himself. “We finally have him. No reinforcements, no escape. Looks like your luck ran out at last, Dresbochar.” He looked around the bridge. “Ready all weapons, prepare boarding parties. I want to take him alive if possible, we need information on his friends and whoever is bankrolling this operation. But if he resists, I’ll be happy with the destruction of that ship.”

The weapons officer started issuing quiet commands to the gunnery crews, while other crew members prepared for battle. “Take us into firing range,” the captain ordered when everyone was ready. “Let’s see what he…”

“Captain!” The shout from the sensor station made him snap his head around. “New data on the target, he’s heading for the dormant relay at maximum sublight.”

“You mean he was heading for the Spirits-damned relay nine hours ago!” Captain Abernius shouted after an appalled moment. “Set up an in-system FTL microjump, get us there now!”

“You don’t think that even a Batarian pirate would be insane enough to activate a…” His second in command stopped talking as the captain shot a glare at him. “Oh, damn it.”

“This is Urarek Dresbochar we’re discussing,” the Turian captain grated. “He’s crazy even by the standards of the Batarians.”

“Agreed, sir,” the XO nodded, looking worried.

“Ready for jump, captain,” the helm officer said.

“Do it.”

The eezo drive activated and the main engines fired at full power, causing the ship to leap forward with enormous acceleration, the mass-warping effect of the element zero core allowing them to pass the speed of light in seconds. Nine light hours were covered in under thirty seconds, the ship decelerating as rapidly at the end of the short-range jump to sublight velocity some hundred thousand kilometers from the dormant Mass Relay.

Which was now fully active.
And, of course, there was no sign of the Batarian raider.

Dead silence reigned for some seconds as the crew all stared at the main screen and the image displayed there, the glowing relay core telling them all that their quarry had not only made his escape, but broken yet another Citadel law. And in about the most blatant way possible.

“Do we follow them, Captain?” the XO asked in the end.

Captain Abernius thought for a few more seconds, his talons tapping on the arm of his chair in an irritated manner. Eventually he muttered an obscenity under his breath, before replying, “Send all our data up to this point back to Command. Append the following message: ‘We are requesting backup to follow and apprehend the pirate vessel Dawn’s Spear which has activated and fled through the previously dormant Mass Relay 314. We will hold position and interdict any vessel that emerges from the relay, or attempts to enter it. Captain Octaus Abernius, commander, Huntress.’”

It only took a few seconds for this to be done. The comms operator signaled him when the operation was complete. Abernius turned to his second in command. “I do not want to lose that devious bloodthirsty scum, but on the other hand I have no wish to risk us ending up as one of those ships that just disappears. We have no idea what’s waiting on the other side of that relay, leaving aside the problem that the pirates have had up to nine hours to set up an ambush for us, depending on whether they activated it this time, or on a previous visit. We’ll wait for reinforcements.”

“I agree, sir.” His XO indicated his satisfaction with the situation. Everyone was still rather nervously watching the mass relay, all of them thinking about past disasters that had occurred after a dormant one was activated and something horrible popped out…

The Turian cruiser floated at a safe distance, all weapons armed and ready, and the crew at a state of high alert, waiting for more ships to arrive.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“And you’ve seen no sign of any other ships since then, Captain?”

“No. We’ve been scanning continuously the entire time and there are no other ships we can detect in the system.”

“That’s something, at least.”

Abernius nodded to the image of his peer, Major Falgius, commander of the cruiser Valor, the lead vessel in a small fleet of twelve frigates and two cruisers which had arrived in-system shortly before, after nearly twelve hours of sentry duty on their part. “Agreed. Hopefully, there is only the Batarian cruiser waiting for us, assuming he hasn’t run for it. We obviously have no idea whether there is another ship lurking on the other side of this relay, or for that matter an entire battlegroup of Batarian pirates.” He shrugged. “Or some ravening alien enemy who is lying in wait. Although that’s not enormously likely. I hope.”

“It’s not impossible, either,” Falgius pointed out. “Bearing in mind the Rachni, for example.”

“True. But even so, I doubt that’s the case here. If there were hostile space-faring aliens wherever
this relay leads, I would have thought they’d either have already activated it, or reacted to the pirates doing so and explored.”

“A valid argument, although we have no real information one way or the other. The Batarian pirate fleet is a more likely scenario.”

“Agreed, although again I think unlikely. As far as we can determine the relay was most probably activated by Dresbochar in a desperate attempt to escape with a faulty ship. We destroyed his other two vessels, and my engineers think the Dawn’s Spear is sufficiently damaged that he’s unlikely to be able to repair it without external help, and most likely a shipyard. It’s not impossible that his drive core may have already gone critical, based on the eezo signature we were tracking.”

“That would be the ideal situation, I have to say,” his fellow ship commander commented with a certain amount of black humor. “Save us the job.”

“It would, but we still would have to go through and make sure,” Abernius sighed. “We can’t simply hope that the universe was helpful enough to do our job for us.”

Falgius nodded. “All right. You take point, we’ll provide backup. Good hunting.”

“Thank you. And if you can, I’d like to take him alive. Command would be very interested in knowing who in the Hegemony is backing him and his kind.”

“You don’t believe them when they say the pirates are independent criminal elements?” Falgius looked amused when Abernius snorted dismissively. “Me either. Valor out.” The image vanished.

Turning to his bridge crew, Abernius ordered, “Take us into range of the relay.” As the vessel began accelerating, he went on, “Ready all weapons, alert boarding teams, full active scan the moment we reach the other side.”

Seconds later they came within activation range and the familiar blue lightning grabbed their ship and flung it across space at inconceivable velocity. The remainder of the small fleet followed, the Valor leading.

“---

“So the relay was activated by a Batarian pirate?” Tevos mused. “Bold of him. And particularly arrogant.”

“Batarians are nothing if not arrogant,” Eporius responded with a gesture of resignation. “One only has to look at their ambassador to see that. He’s all too typical of the species.”

“Unfortunately I can’t deny that,” the Asari sighed.

“And, of course, their ‘pirates’ are suspiciously well armed and equipped,” Vaesarth put in. “Unlikely to be genuinely independent. Backing of Hegemony almost always the case, if discreet.”

“Again, that’s regrettably true,” Tevos muttered. “One day, we are going to have to do something about that.”

“Which is the same thing you always say, yet so far no one has,” Eporius commented wryly. She
gave him a look but couldn’t really say much, since he was correct.

After a few seconds silence, she asked, “Then what happened? I assume that Captain Abernius and his fleet caught up with the pirate vessel.”

Eporius looked at her, then Vaesarth. “We don’t know,” he admitted. “The fleet sent back the logs of the entire operation until they went through the relay. No further communication was received from that point.”

“Nothing?” Tevos queried, shocked. “Not even a distress buoy, or data probe?”

“No. They completely vanished. No signals of any type were received.” Eporius looked worried again. Tevos and Vaesarth exchanged a glance.

“So of course you send a bigger fleet after the first one had been mysteriously spirited away, without thinking that perhaps it would be a good idea to let us know?” she asked rather sarcastically. “Or, just possibly, stopping to consider that anything that could apparently eat thirteen well armed Turian warships might be capable of doing the same to a larger quantity?”

Eporius appeared annoyed and embarrassed in equal quantity. “It wasn’t my decision,” he snapped. “I didn’t even know about it until the second fleet was en route. The Primarch personally ordered a larger force to go and make an example of whoever dared to interfere with a Hierarchy operation. When I was notified, I urged him to at least send probes first, but it was too late at that point.” The Turian councilor made a gesture of resignation. “The only good thing is that this time we got some information.”

“But lost the fleet in the process,” Vaesarth commented thoughtfully. “Perhaps not an equal trade.”

“Not as such, no,” Eporius groaned. “And the information we did receive is what makes me think we made a terrible mistake.”

He took a deep breath, then went on with the story, pulling out his omnitool and toying with it without activating it. The other two councilors listened intently.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“Captain, we’re detecting a debris field thirty-three light seconds in-system from the relay.” Abernius turned to his subordinate, looking enquiringly at him. “It reads as fragments no more than ten centimeters across, spreading out spherically from a central point. High eezo readings, along with considerable amounts of radiation. The estimated quantity of debris is consistent with the mass of the Batarian cruiser. No signs of escape pods either.”

“So he overloaded and blew up?” Captain Abernius nodded his understanding. “Pity, I’d have liked to take him...”

“No, sir,” the sensor operator interrupted, looking apologetic. “There is too much radiation for it to be the result of an eezo core overload. It’s reading more like there was a large fusion explosion on board. Much larger than could be produced if his main reactor went up, which would be very hard to arrange in any case.”

“He had fusion warheads on board, perhaps?” Abernius thought it through. “No, very unlikely, or he’d have used them during the battle.”
“I believe it was the result of weapons fire, sir,” the other Turian replied, studying his instrumentation. “The gamma emissions are unusual, they don’t quite match a normal fusion detonation, and there are odd isotopic spikes. But I am nearly certain it wasn’t due to something on that ship.”

“In that case, we’re not alone,” Abernius said sharply, turning his head to the other sensor station, which was running the ship detection procedure. “Any signs of other vessels in range?”

“Other than the Valor and the rest of the fleet behind us, no, sir.” The crew member running that station prodded controls, then shook his head. “No signs of eezo emissions outside the debris field or our own ships, no traces of drive operation, no heat signatures other than natural ones. And no movement within scanning range.”

Pondering the enigmatic destruction of their quarry, Abernius quietly wondered if the prudent thing would be to turn around and leave. An unknown system with a possible unknown but probably heavily armed and dangerous foe wasn’t his idea of an ideal situation to find himself and his ship in. However, he didn’t really have that luxury, as much as it seemed like a good idea. Tapping a control, he contacted the Valor.

“I assume you’ve also spotted the debris,” he asked without ceremony when the image of Major Falgius appeared. The other ship commander looked off-screen for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes. All the signs are that the Batarians met someone who didn’t appreciate them,” he replied evenly. “I can’t say I’d blame them, that’s my gut instinct when meeting a Batarian too.”

Abernius almost smiled. “Can you detect anything about who that might have been?”

“No. No indications of any other ship in the vicinity. Which is worrying, if I’m being entirely truthful.”

“Captain?” Abernius looked around to the sensor operator.

“What is it?”

“We’re seeing signs that two planets in this system are occupied,” the man said. “Unusual very high frequency EM emissions, extremely high bandwidth. Obviously artificial. And there’s some weird gravitational readings I can’t work out at all. I have no idea where they’re coming from. There’s also something wrong with the star.”

“Wrong with the star?” Abernius felt confused, which he didn’t like. “What does that mean?”

“It’s too dim,” the operator said, his voice betraying a similar level of puzzlement. “Much too dim. The spectrum is right for a G2 star, but the luminosity reads as slightly less than a K5 dwarf, which is absurd.”

“Instrumentation error?”

“I’ve run the diagnostics twice, sir. The data is valid.”

“We’re seeing it too, Abernius,” Falgius said, looking to the side. “Zoom in on that,” he added, apparently to one of his crew. Abernius looked at the large screen where his own people were
currently doing the same thing, the image of the system’s star enlarging to fill the screen. There were dozens, no, hundreds if not thousands, of rectangular black spots apparently covering the surface of the star itself, the visible light being what got past them.

“Sunspots?” he asked, knowing in his gut with a sensation of dread that this wasn’t the case.

“No, sir.” The man at the relevant station sounded like he was trying not to choke. “They’re artificial. And absolutely enormous. As far as we can establish they’re orbiting the star approximately one tenth of an AU out, which means they must be thousands of kilometers on a side to appear so visible at this range.”

“What in the Spirit’s name are those things?” Falgius asked in a wondering tone.

“Unknown, Major,” the voice of someone off screen said, also sounding shocked. “Possibly some form of energy collection system, but the scale. It’s close to impossible. Never mind what they’d need to be made of to withstand the heat that close to the star.”

“I think it’s safe to assume we’re definitely not alone in this system,” Abernius commented after several seconds of staring at the image of the impossibly huge artifacts.

“I’m forced to agree,” his comrade replied.

“So what do we do now? Our target is gone, and I don’t think it would necessarily be a sensible idea to poke around without any idea of who lives here, aside from the fact that they can apparently build objects you could hide a planet behind.” Abernius felt absurd saying that, but he was looking right at the damn things. “Perhaps we should withdraw and report this to the Council. It’s clearly a first contact scenario which we’re ill equipped to handle.”

“There are no eezo emissions detectable anywhere, though, so it would appear that whoever is capable of building whatever those things are may have impressive engineering abilities but they don’t have FTL,” Falgius replied after a moment. “That substantially reduces any threat they could pose.”

“You are looking at the same thing I am, I trust, Major?” Abernius remarked acidly. “Not to mention the former heavily armed Batarian pirate cruiser which is currently in very small radioactive pieces? That, to me, suggests that our mystery aliens are not to be taken lightly, FTL or no FTL.” He waved at the screen even though Falgius couldn’t see it. “Nothing even the Protheans did comes anywhere close to the scale of that. Forgive me if I seem overly cautious but I would prefer not to risk a battle with a completely unknown force even if they can’t manage interstellar flight.”

The other commander was silent for a little while. Eventually, he said, just a little reluctantly, “I take your point. However, Command is hardly likely to look favorably on us if we simply retreat. Turians don’t retreat.”

“Perhaps, this one time, they should.”

“That is unlike you, Abernius.”

“I didn’t get to my position by jumping without looking, Major. Unlike some we could both name.”
Falgius smiled. “I understand, but still, I think we need to, very carefully, investigate a little more. If only to gain a better understanding of what happened to the Batarian.”

After a moment Abernius sighed faintly. “Agreed, although with caveats. I am still not in favor of this move, I believe it would be more sensible to withdraw and wait for a diplomatic team, but I will go along with this for now.”

He thought for a moment. “I propose we send one of the frigates to the debris cloud to take close range readings, and scan as much of the system as we can from no further in than that point. We’re nearly six light hours from the primary, which won’t give us the highest resolution data, admittedly, but I’d prefer to proceed very cautiously and not do anything that would provoke a reaction.”

“Always thinking before you jump, hmm, Abernius?” Falgius smiled a little. “You’ll never make Fleet General without taking risks.”

“I prefer to take risks from a position of knowledge, not blindly,” Abernius replied calmly. “That way I’m more likely to live to make Fleet General.”

“Fair enough. Your plan is acceptable, we’ll try that for now. If we don’t get any reaction, I’d still like to move closer and get better data.”

“Let’s wait and see what happens before we do anything too provocative, shall we?”

Abernius watched as Falgius issued orders. One of the smaller ships, the frigate *Zenith*, fired up its engines and began moving. The rest of the small Turian fleet observed and waited. The frigate eventually reached the position of the debris, which had now spread to encompass a sphere over five hundred kilometers across, dispersing into space. The relayed images from the other ship back to the small fleet zoomed in on some of the fragments, showing they were shattered pieces of hull material for the most part, the bulk of them warped and melted. It was obvious that whatever weapon had been used had been ferociously effective and extremely hot.

“I’ve never seen anything that would leave that sort of damage,” Abernius commented uneasily. “No mass accelerator round would release the amount of heat this clearly has been exposed to, and even a fusion warhead probably wouldn’t produce quite this type of destruction. Unless it was preposterously powerful and went off more or less in the center of the ship.”

“No, I have to agree,” Falgius replied, seeming thoughtful. “The radiation is wrong too, my techs tell me its from something a lot more energetic than fusion. Which I would have thought was impossible, I have to say.”

“Yet there it is.” Abernius grunted, shaking his head. “I still think we need to withdraw and reassess the situation from a safe distance.”

Falgius didn’t reply, but he did order the commander of the *Zenith* to collect some samples of the destroyed enemy ship. This took a couple of hours, but in the end they had a few hundred kilos of random pieces of ex-cruiser. Abernius had been watching the operation intently the entire time, feeling oddly like he was being watched in turn. Despite their scanning, they could still detect no signs of any other vessel anywhere near them.

What they *did* find was both fascinating and appallingly impressive. The sensor operator had managed to get some distant images of one of the apparently inhabited planets, overlaying dozens
of high resolution images on each other to slowly build one ultra high res one, which was sufficient to make out objects the size of a ship at that distance. What it showed was objects much too big to be FTL-capable ships, ranging from an estimated two to three kilometers across at the low end up to one monster that was easily a hundred kilometers long. Most of them were in orbit of the planet in question, although some were moving to and fro between it and some destination they hadn’t yet found.

Additionally, there was some evidence that there were a large number of much smaller objects in orbit around that world, presumably satellites, and at least one structure that seemed to reach all the way from past synchronous orbit clear down to the surface of the planet itself. No one could believe it when the computer managed to get a reasonable idea of the thing, but the more images they acquired the clearer it got.

“By the spirits,” Abernius muttered. “An orbital elevator. I’ve read about the theory but no one has ever managed to make one work. Nothing is strong enough to handle the loads.”

“It’s more than one, sir,” the operator remarked, putting another composite image on the main screen and highlighting a thin line right on the limb of the disk. “I’m almost certain that’s another one. Exactly a third of the way around the planet. It implies there’s probably a third one, all equidistant from each other.”

“Unbelievable,” the captain said softly. “Whoever these people are, they are very, very far from primitive whether or not they can achieve FTL.”

Major Falgius, who had dropped the communication channel while they waited for the frigate to investigate, called back. Tapping the relevant control, Abernius turned his head to regard his colleague. “I assume you’re coming to the same conclusion we are?” he asked without preamble.

“That these aliens are extremely advanced?” Falgius nodded. “It does seem undeniable. The orbital structures are… disturbing.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” he replied honestly. “The Citadel itself would be lost in that collection.”

Falgius looked off camera for a moment. “The Zenith has finished collecting data and samples. I propose to send it deeper in-system to get clearer images of that planet and the ships around it.”

Abernius hesitated, then slowly said, “I must go on record as saying I feel that is not a good idea.”

“Noted, Captain. However I believe the risks to be minimal, as the Zenith will keep the FTL drive charged and ready for a microjump back to the relay. The aliens won’t be able to match that velocity or acceleration.”

“Are you certain?” Abernius couldn’t help but feel that this wasn’t going to end well. “The evidence in front of us suggests that these aliens most likely possess a higher technological capability than we do. We still can’t determine how their ships are propelled, there’s no indication of a fusion torch, ion drive, or even chemical rockets. To me that suggests it may be some form of very advanced gravity manipulation which would in fact match up with the odd gravitational anomalies we’re detecting...”

“But the critical part of the sensor readings is that there are absolutely no eezo emissions detectable anywhere, which essentially proves that they don’t have mass effect technology, which in turn means they don’t have FTL. It’s not possible without eezo, as you know.”
“As far as we know,” Abernius pointed out with a flat look. He indicated the screen. “Can you be totally sure that they got the memo?”

Falgius regarded him for a few seconds, a momentary flicker of worry passing over his features, before they firmed. “I trust my technical staff, and they are adamant there is no chance of the aliens having an FTL drive.”

“As you wish.” Abernius made a gesture of resignation. “I merely want to register my objection to this plan.”

“And you were right to do so. But we need all the information that we can get.” Falgius smiled briefly. “What’s the worst that can happen, after all? The aliens detect us and issue a challenge, we turn around and leave post haste, and the Council turns the Asari loose on the poor bastards.”

Unwillingly, Abernius chuckled. “Who proceed to talk them to death… All right, let’s see how it goes.”

With a nod, Falgius issued the order, and the remaining ships went to high alert, watching carefully. The exploring frigate’s engines fired and it began to accelerate fairly gently towards the system’s primary, all sensors running flat out.

Everything went to plan for about as long as it took the ship to fully clear the debris cloud…

“One of the second fleet vessels managed to retrieve a data log from the first fleet,” Eporius said. “It was partially corrupted, but the remaining data includes a record of most of the conversations between Captain Abernius, commander of the initial cruiser, and Major Falgius, commander of the task force sent as backup. That’s how we know as much as we do about how this all started. And it also had a record of the initial contact with the inhabitants of the system that Relay 314 leads to.”

He picked up the omnitool that had been on the table next to him while he spoke and manipulated it, then played a file. The other two councilors watched intently.

“Attention, Turian vessels!” A voice suddenly said, coming out of nowhere rather unexpectedly. It was issuing from every sound production device on the entire ship, and made Abernius’s stomach drop like an elevator. He’d known this was a bad idea.

“You are in violation of territorial space of the New Concordiat, and are directed to immediately cease all operations and return to your point of origin through the Mass Relay. Zenith, reverse course at once. Further ingress into this system will be met with military action. This space is off limits to all Council species. You have five Citadel minutes to comply with this order.”

The voice was speaking perfect Turian standard, which was excessively worrying. How had these aliens learned it if they’d never been through the relay, which had been dormant at the last check two months ago and probably only activated no more than a day previous? And how did they know about the Council or the Citadel, which the short communication pretty much proved was the case?
Clearly they’d been monitoring the fleet’s intraship communications, since they knew the name of the frigate which was now abruptly decelerating. The Zenith’s commander was obviously no idiot.

All this went through Abernius’s mind in seconds. He turned his head to meet the eyes of Falgius who was still in communication with him. The fleet commander looked as shocked as he himself felt.

“Where the hells did that come from?” Falgius said. “There’s no ship out there...”

“Ah… Captain?” The call from the short range scanner operator made Abernius look at him. The crewmember was staring at his instruments in great surprise. “There’s… something… out there now. It wasn’t there ten seconds ago.”

He prodded a control and an image replaced the one of the planet on the screen, which everyone gazed at. Dimly, Abernius was aware that Falgius was barking orders rapidly, having apparently been informed of the same thing by his own crew. Studying the craft displayed on the screen, the captain tried to work out what he was looking at. “How big is that thing?” he asked.

His XO moved to inspect the instrumentation for himself, the normal operator moving aside to let him get access. Looking back at the screen, the officer replied, “About four hundred meters long.”

“And it seems to be made entirely of weapons,” one of the other bridge crew quipped uneasily.

This was true. There were a totally preposterous number of turrets and weapons emplacements on the almost entirely black hull, which was angular and blocky, giving the impression of something designed for function rather than looks. It was wider than it was tall, and fairly short relative to the width, so it looked in plan view like a rectangle with angled sides and edges. Down the ‘top’ were four long structures that suggested some form of rail-gun on a slewing mount of some sort, nearly the length of the ship, and a relayed image from one of the other vessels in the fleet showed an identical formation on the other side.

Half a dozen huge turrets mounted between the longer weapons bore gun barrels that were insanely large in diameter relative to the size of the ship, at least three meters across, and about seventy or so long. Each turret was aimed in a different direction, one of them pointing directly at Abernius’s ship. He assumed that the other weapons were probably aimed at each of the ships in the fleet. There were more of the same turrets on the other wide side, also carefully aimed, and a row of three more on each short side as well.

In between all of this, there were dozens of other smaller emplacements, some mounting smaller versions of the same sort of gun, a number with tiny variants of the rail-gun thing, and a good amount with entirely unidentifiable weapons. Abernius was fairly sure that faint marks on the hull in several places also betrayed the covers of missile ports and possibly even worse.

Overall, it gave the impression of a machine designed to do one thing only, which was kill everything else in range as hard as it possibly could. And it was looking right at them.

“Where did that monstrosity come from?” he demanded.

“I have no idea at all, Captain,” the sensor operator, now back at his controls, admitted. “It wasn’t there, then it was. No drive traces I can detect, definitely no eezo, nothing that the computer can match to any known system.” He looked up at the screen and shrugged helplessly. “Some sort of incredibly good stealth system, perhaps?”
“There’s no stealth in space,” the XO pointed out. “No way to hide the heat signature for more than a few hours at best, no way to mask all drive emissions, or star occlusions, or...”

“I’m aware of the theory, sir,” the operator said, “But there it is. I’ve checked the logs, there was nothing there a minute ago. I swear on my family honor there wasn’t. And more disturbingly I can’t get a reading of anything through the hull, I have no idea what their power source is. Or even what it’s constructed from.”

Turning to the hologram of Major Falgius, who appeared to be looking at his own screen with an expression of incredulity on his face, Abernius said, “I believe it would be a very sensible idea to follow the instructions we have been provided. There’s no sense provoking something we don’t need to. We can work out the ramifications of all this later, on the other side of the relay.”

“That’s... not entirely a bad thought,” Falgius replied a little breathlessly, still staring off-camera. “But I want more information so we can at least tell Command something.”

Hiding a sigh, Abernius waited as the fleet commander tapped a control. He noticed that the Zenith had decelerated to a halt and was now flipping end for end in the beginnings of a burn back to the rest of the fleet, whether in compliance with the unambiguous warning or a desire to have nearby reinforcements he didn’t know. “New Concordiat vessel, this is Major Falgius, commander of the Turian cruiser Valor. We acknowledge your instructions and will comply,” he began. “I request identification of your ship name and class for my records, if you would be good enough to provide them.”

The response was so immediate Abernius was certain that the unknown ship was listening to their conversation, despite the allegedly impenetrable Salarian-designed encryption. Command was going to throw a fit about that trick. “Valor, I am a New Concordiat Gagarin-class system defense ship, call sign NKY7248624. My familiar name is Nicky. Thank you for complying with my instructions. The Batarian pirate cruiser you were pursuing did not and I was reluctantly forced to neutralize it. There were no survivors, as the vessel proved to be insufficiently armored. I allowed your frigate to retrieve samples for forensic purposes but as I stated, this space is off limits to all Citadel species.”

The tone of voice was pleasant while still being firm and professional. However, there was something about what was said that made Abernius frown slightly in thought.

“Thank you, NKY7248624,” Falgius said politely, visibly trying to be as diplomatic as possible. The comment that the heavily armed pirate ship had been ‘insufficiently armored’ was one he’d obviously caught too and was being mindful of. Especially as the Batarian cruiser wasn’t all that much less heavily armored than they were, and its kinetic barriers were at least as good. “May I ask why there is such a specific restriction against the Citadel species?”

“The New Concordiat currently has a number of important tasks which preclude contact with your government. Essentially we don’t have time or inclination to become involved in Citadel politics. We wish to be left undisturbed, and will return the favor. Activation of the Mass Relay was unanticipated, both due to the knowledge that the system linked to it is uninhabited and that the Citadel species have regulations stating that unactivated relays are to be left in that state. In retrospect it was a failure of planning, as we should have taken positive action to prevent such an activation. We will arrange to rectify that failure as soon as
feasible.”

Abernius wondered what that meant…

Clearly Falgius did as well, based on his expression, but he seemed to think better of asking straight out. Their five minutes was nearly over, and the Zenith had rejoined the rest of the small fleet.

“You appear to have detailed information on the Citadel and the Council,” Falgius probed.

The voice of the alien ship commander sounded amused now. “We have a very good intelligence service, and it was only sensible to gather data on species we might run across. But as I have said, we are at this current time uninterested in formal contact with the Council. It would have been preferable to avoid this meeting entirely from our point of view, but what is done is done. Your five minutes are up. Please return to your point of origin. It has been… interesting… talking with you.” He paused, then added with a chuckle, “Have a nice day.”

Abernius nodded to the helm officer, who had been listening along with everyone else with a mix of worry, interest, and disbelief. “Take us back to the relay,” he ordered.

“Yes, Captain.” Moments later the ship began to turn. After a second or two, Abernius realized what had been bothering him about the initial response. Pondering the thought for a moment, he finally pressed a control. “NKY7248624, this is Captain Abernius of the cruiser Dawn’s Spear.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Major Falgius’s holo-image turn sharply to him, but the higher ranked commander didn’t say anything. “One final question, if you don’t mind. You referred to yourself as a Gagarin-class ship. I find that wording somewhat confusing. Is it a tradition of your species for the ship commander to refer to themselves so? In our military, we would say we were from a ship, you see.”

“Understood, Dawn’s Spear.” The alien sounded pleasant enough. By now almost all the fleet ships had turned and were beginning to burn back towards the relay, three frigates bringing up the rear. “I comprehend your confusion. In your case, you are organic beings crewing a vessel. In my case I am an inorganic intelligence who is the vessel.”

Everyone on every ship in the fleet froze.

There was a very long pause while Abernius tried to understand what he’d just been told. When he’d managed to compose himself, he very carefully asked, “Am I correct in believing that you just told me you are an artificial intelligence?” He was desperately hoping that he was mistaken and it was an error in translation.

“That is a correct, although somewhat limited, description, Dawn’s Spear,” the alien craft replied calmly. “The New Concordiat employs a significant number of my kind. We enjoy a very close relationship with the organic members of our civilization and have done so for a considerable time. It is fair to say that without us, the New Concordiat would not exist. Further information is, I regret to say, currently classified.”

Staring at the image on the screen of what he now realized with total horror was actually a giant fucking killer robot rather than merely a stupidly over-armed ship, Abernius felt ill. He wanted to get out of here as fast as the damn cruiser would go. Looking around, he could see that every single member of his crew felt the same. This was about as far from good as anything he’d ever even
So of course it was right about then when the last frigate of the fleet decided to take a shot at the alien machine out of an understandable yet amazingly mistimed fear of AIs.

After the playback of the log recording finally finished, there was a long and appalled silence in the room. In the end Tevos broke it, turning away from staring at where the hologram had been to meet Eporius’s eyes. He looked haunted.

“Artificial intelligences.”

“Yes.”

“Running ridiculously well armed warships, without supervision.”

“Apparently.”

“And they have weapons that can do that to a fleet of thirteen Turian ships.” Her voice was rising, as she waved at where the playback once was.

He nodded heavily.

“So it would seem.”

“One ship took out thirteen Turian warships?” The normally calm Tevos was almost screaming.

Eporius swallowed. “Yes. Easily. And with one shot each. Fired simultaneously.”

She dropped back into the chair she’d half-risen out of in her terror, her skin an unhealthy light cyan color. Beside her, Vaesarth seemed to be motionless and struck dumb.

“You saw what happened,” the Turian councilor went on. “The frigate Palaven’s Son fired a maximum velocity mass accelerator shot with no warning at the alien ship. I suspect that the AI could easily have evaded it, but it just sat there. That round, which carried enough energy to deplete the shields of a cruiser by nearly forty percent if it got a good hit, stopped dead about one hundred meters from the alien. It didn’t get deflected, it didn’t get destroyed, it stopped. Somehow, that damn machine absorbed the entire kinetic energy of the round! Our scientists don’t have even a vague theory of how that would be possible!”

He breathed heavily for a moment, then went on. “The best guess is some form of energy shield, but nobody can prove it. There were no signs that the alien really noticed, to be brutally honest. But it obviously decided that politeness only went so far and returned fire. The damn thing had got a target lock on every single ship on the fleet from the moment it appeared, and apparently it learned from destroying the Batarian pirate. It shot out the engines of all thirteen ships in one volley, as neatly as if a shipyard had spend a week cutting them up. All of them were dead in space, helpless to do anything.”

“Why didn’t it destroy them?” Tevos asked in a shaky voice. “Clearly it could have done so without any more effort. I would think disabling the ships without destroying them was actually the harder task.”
“It is,” he confirmed, shaking his head. “Much harder. The precision required would need… well, a super-intelligent computer, I suppose.”

“And the weapon used penetrated the kinetic barriers?”

Vaesarth stirred, rejoining the conversation after appearing to almost have been in a trance. “Based on the recording, I suspect the weapon fired some form of contained fusion plasma. No idea how it would be controlled without destroying the gun. Enough energy to utterly overwhelm mass effect barriers of any feasible strength. They stood no chance of resisting.” She visibly shivered. “Possibility that the weapon was not fired at full power. Destruction of Batarian ship consistent with similar shot at much higher output.”

Her companions looked at her, then each other. “One ship,” Tevos whispered.

“It had friends,” Eporius remarked. “Almost immediately, a number of other vessels of similar size and configuration appeared, although we don’t know how. I believe they most likely have some form of FTL drive of their own, despite the comments of Major Falgius and the apparent lack of eezo. These ones carried soldiers wearing some form of massive power armor, we think, or more disturbingly, bipedal robotic mechanisms similar to the Geth. The recordings are inconclusive. They boarded each ship, disabled the entire crew in under fifteen minutes total across all the vessels, and took them prisoner. Two ships were destroyed, apparently by their crews, but we think that the aliens still managed to capture most of the personnel aboard them. Then they just left.”

“At least they didn’t kill them immediately,” Tevos said, trying to see the bright side of a ghastly situation.

“No. Although depending on what they did do later, that may not be good.” Eporius looked disturbed.

“Goddess,” Tevos breathed.

“That’s bad enough,” Eporius said heavily. “What happened next is much, much worse.” He lifted his omnitool in a way that made it obvious he didn’t want to show them the next recording, but he did anyway. They watched it with a sense of total unreality.

By the time it finished, Tevos had nearly turned the color of a nice day’s sky on Thessia, and felt like she’d aged two hundred years. “Oh, Eporius, what have you done?”

“I told you, I had no idea this was happening until it was too late,” he replied in a despairing voice. “The big question is, what do we do now? One of those robotic ships, the Gagarin-class as the thing named itself, disabled and captured thirteen of ours. The Hierarchy sent a fleet of one hundred and six ships after the first group, including a dreadnought, and the result was that a mere three of the same alien AI ships destroyed twenty-seven of them instantly and captured the remainder. If it wasn’t for someone on a ship at the rear of the fleet who was quick witted enough to fire a data buoy back through the relay we still wouldn’t know what happened to either group.”

He shook his head. “The aliens challenged the fleet shortly after they arrived and warned them to retreat immediately, the Fleet General in charge ordered an attack, and the rest was inevitable. The battle, if it’s even worthy of the name, lasted less than five minutes. Spirits alone know how many of those fucking things this New Concordiat has, but a dozen of them could probably take Palaven itself without all that much effort. And now they’re probably justifiably angry with the Hierarchy,
since we’re the ones who started the whole thing.”

“Technically, I suppose you could say that the Batarians are the ones who started it,” she said, in a doomed attempt at salvaging the situation.

“I doubt the aliens would see it like that. We did after all send an entire warfleet into their territory.”

“Turians always tended to jump without thinking things through,” Vaesarth commented, getting an unfriendly look in return.

“Some of us counsel caution,” Eporius retorted. “And if I ever get my hands on whoever it was that fired the first shot from that frigate, AI or no AI, I’ll skin him personally.”

“This isn’t the time to bicker,” Tevos snapped. “We have much more serious problems to consider. What are we going to do to salvage this situation. We do not want to end up in a war with this New Concordiat. We know almost nothing about them, and what we do know absolutely terrifies me.”

She thought for a moment. “We need to send a diplomatic mission, and try to come to a peaceful resolution. We cannot let this spiral any more out of control than it currently is.”

Eporius swallowed heavily, looking unwell. “That may be difficult,” he said after an uncomfortable pause.

“Why?” she asked, staring at him.

“Um… Relay 314 is…” He swallowed again. “Missing.”

This time, Tevos just put her head on the table and moaned, while Vaesarth gaped at the Turian member of the council.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Several hours later, after they’d had time to recover and think things through, they reconvened. Each of them had contacted their relevant governments and discussed the situation. Vaesarth opened the conversation by saying, “The STG has no further information on the current status of Relay 314. Confirmed that it is no longer where it should be. There is no trace of anything to explain how it could simply vanish, no debris, nothing.”

“As far as I was aware, it was theorized that even if you could destroy a relay, it would take an entire fleet of ships months of firing to do it with conventional weapons,” Tevos commented, still feeling a sense of unreality. “And the thought is that if you eventually managed it, the results would be catastrophic for the system it was in.”

“Relay was not destroyed,” the Salarian sighed. “STG is certain of that. It has been moved, which is worse.”

“The Primarch was all for sending an even larger fleet after the second one,” Eporius sighed. “To teach the aliens not to take the Hierarchy lightly, was essentially the thought process. I urged him to reconsider, but if it wasn’t for the relay itself mysteriously vanishing I’m not sure he would have seen sense.”
“I fear your Primarch is somewhat… excessively Turian at times,” Tevos commented as delicately as she could, even as she resisted the urge to rip her own head tentacles out and scream obscenities about the thick-headed militaristic idiot. The look Eporius gave her made her think he both agreed and was resisting a similar temptation, but couldn’t say as much due to protocol.

“In any case, that option is thankfully off the table for now. The partial star data we recovered from the data buoy indicates that the alien system is over fifteen thousand light years away from the nearest relay, so it’s more or less out of the question to reach it via normal FTL travel. That’s more than a thousand days of flight, leaving out the stops required to discharge the drive cores, supplies, you name it. It could be done, but it’s such a massive undertaking that even the Primarch is very unlikely to order it.” Eporius appeared somewhat relieved about this.

“The problem is, though, that there are thousands of Turian forces now held captive by a massively powerful AI-using alien civilization we know almost nothing about, other than it’s a very bad idea to annoy them. Which we managed to do.” He sighed. “The political fallout from this will go on for years, and that’s even before the public at large finds out about it. The mere mention of AI will make people go insane, as you both know. The idea that these aliens actually arm their AI warships, and let them patrol the system without the supervision of an organic being, will make that insanity seem like nothing when they hear it. There’s a risk that the outcry will be intense enough that we’ll be forced to do something about it.”

“What, though?” Tevos asked reasonably. “As you just said, they are far out of easy reach, the recorded interaction with that first ship plainly said that they had no interest in contacting us in any case, and it’s abundantly clear that they far outclass us technologically except possibly in mass effect tech. Which didn’t seem to help one iota.” She really didn’t want to see what might happen if this New Concordiat decided to go on the offensive.

Vaesarth, who had been thinking quietly, put in, “There is one problem. Relay 314 was inactive until very recently. New Concordiat AI was well informed on Citadel matters and language, implying that they have been monitoring us for some time. Further implication is that they do not need mass relays to travel. Lack of relay therefore no hindrance for them to reach us, only the other way around...”

They all stared at each other. “Goddess, she’s right,” Tevos sighed. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Do we have any chance of building up technologically to put ourselves on a more equal footing with them in case they one day come calling?” Eporius mused out loud. “Even if we did, it would take decades at minimum and cost more money than I dare consider.”

“New Concordiat tech base completely different to ours,” Vaesarth pointed out. “We would be starting from nothing. Most likely take centuries, not decades. And they would then be that much further ahead even then.”

Tevos realized she was right. It would be near impossible to catch up from that point of view. “At least we outnumber them,” she said. “I think.”

“Why?” the Salarian councilor asked, looking at her.

“Well, they only have two planets, even with their technology,” she began, only to stop when she shook her head.

“Invalid assumption. STG suggests there is a distinct possibility that is not their home system.
Turian scans showed heavy industrialization of one planet, readings suggested another one similar, plus the mega-structures in close orbit of the primary. But no signs of other planets being developed or mined. Technological level would most likely result in space industries spreading through entire system given time. Lack of such implies system fairly recently colonized.”

“Which means that if true, we don’t have the faintest idea of where they really come from, how many worlds they have, what their population is, or anything useful,” Tevos groaned.

“No. Based on size of space constructions detected, they most likely possess much larger ships than the Gagarin-class so far encountered. Largest structures probably space stations, but ships of considerable size possible. Without eezo reliance the limitations on size much less important.” Vaesarth looked at each of them in turn. “Hopefully economic limitations still restrict capabilities.”

“But we don’t know. Again.”

“Correct.”

Tevos slapped the table with her hand. “Could this get any worse?”

Her omnitool beeped, indicating an incoming call, and she felt a momentary shiver go through her. In retrospect, that had definitely been tempting fate a little too directly.

After a pregnant and reluctant pause, she answered the call. “Tevos. What is it, I’m in a meeting.”

“Sorry to bother you, Madame Councilor,” the Turian from C-Sec who had called her said. He looked nervous. “A unknown ship just entered the system and is asking for you.”

All three councilors exchanged glances.

“By name?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Did they identify themselves?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He glanced to the side, then added, “The ship is named Kenny’s Friend, the person we’re talking to is claiming to be Commander Hebert of the New Concordiat. She seemed quite insistent in talking to you.” After a second or two, he added, “I have never seen her species before, heard of the New Concordiat, or seen a ship like this one. You wouldn’t believe the number of weapons it has.”

With a sinking sensation, Tevos nodded. “Please pass the call through, Lieutenant.” She exchanged a worried look with the other two councilors, wondering what was about to happen.

“Yes, Ma’am,” the officer replied. His face vanished, being replaced by a different one. They all studied it carefully. Tevos’s first thought was how incredibly similar to an Asari the person was. The facial features were almost identical, but the lack of head tentacles and the different coloration was very obvious. Still, the resemblance was eerie.

“Good afternoon, Councilor Tevos,” the alien said politely, her voice neutral, and speaking practically accent-less Thessian. “I am Commander Taylor Hebert, of the New Concordiat. We need to talk regarding the recent Turian invasion of our space.”
Suppressing a shudder of worry, Tevos nodded slowly. “I understand, and agree. I will arrange a

docking bay for your ship and we can meet.”

“That will be unnecessary, Councilor. If you are free now, I can be there momentarily.”

Tevos stared, then glanced at Vaesarth and Eporius, who were listening intently. “I don’t

understand, I’m afraid. What do you mean?”

The hologram cut out, and the same voice spoke from behind her. “I mean, I can be here now,

Councilor.”

Jumping violently, the Asari spun around in her chair, while her companions both froze and gaped.

Standing not two meters away was a female with the same face as the one she’d just been talking
to, who had seconds before been on a ship tens of thousands of kilometers away. “How… Goddess,
what!?” she said weakly, trying to calm herself.

The alien smiled very slightly. “Apologies for startling you, but this is an important matter and I
have little patience for standing on ceremony. I’m told that is a trait worth cultivating, but so far it
hasn’t been a problem.” She bowed a small amount, then straightened up. “Commander Taylor
Hebert, New Concordiat Military, at your service. You are Councilor Tevos Araeus, Asari,
Councilor Vaesarth Solus, Salarian, and Councilor Eporius Bolarian, Turian. My species is called
Human.”

They all studied her in shock. She was tall, slender, dressed in some form of fairly understated
black uniform, and held herself with the body language of someone who was very obviously used
to combat and commanding people in battle, Tevos thought. She gave off an air similar to some of
the veteran commandos she’d worked with in the past, only in some undefinable way, more so. All
in all, the overall impression was of someone who it would be unwise to take lightly.

“How did you get here?” Eporius managed to ask, having been watching with an incredulous look
on his face.

“We have a number of methods of instantaneous transportation suitable for different purposes,”
Commander Hebert replied. “The one I used is commonly utilized for relatively short range intra-
system transport.”

“Teleportation?” Vaesarth looked utterly fascinated and totally appalled at the same time, an odd
expression on a Salarian face. Tevos glanced at her, still feeling shocked and not knowing quite
what to do next. The entire situation had suddenly become even more bizarre and less predictable
than it had been heretofore, which wasn’t something she’d thought possible a few minutes ago. It
was certainly not a normal First Contact.

“That is correct.”

“I would say impossible but I cannot deny my eyes,” she said after a long moment.

Taking a deep breath and trying to settle her nerves, Tevos thought rapidly, then said, “On behalf
of the Citadel Council we wish to apologize for the unfortunate actions of the Turian Hierarchy. It
was an unfortunate confluence of events that led to the trespassing in your territorial space, and a
series of misunderstandings followed from that point. I hope that we can overcome any differences
and come to a peaceful resolution of this situation.”
“We are aware of the reasons behind the recent issue,” the human replied politely, with a nod. “And we bear no ill will towards the Citadel species. We have taken action to ensure that the situation can’t repeat in future. As NKY7248624 explained to Major Falgius at the time, the New Concordiat has much more important things to do than engage in minor squabbles with other species who, quite frankly, present no threat to us.” She smiled again, something about the expression sending chills right through all three councilors. “Unless provoked we prefer to mind our own business.”

They all regarded the alien woman for a few seconds, then exchanged looks. Eporius asked, in a tone of voice that suggested he was rather grateful yet very puzzled, “With all due respect, Commander Hebert, is not an armed invasion of your space sufficient provocation for action?” He hastily added, “Obviously I’m not for a moment suggesting that it should be, and I am very thankful that you don’t feel that you want to retaliate, but I’m curious. If the same thing had happened to the Hierarchy, the response would be… more vigorous.”

She smiled again, this time not quite as worryingly. “Such a small incident is not worth going to war over,” she replied. “No damage was done to our side, and while regrettably a number of Turians did lose their lives in the operation, we did what we could to minimize that. It takes much more than a few overenthusiastic small warships to push us to the point that we need to take serious action. As far as we’re concerned, this matter is done with. We will return all captured prisoners and the bodies of all those we were able to recover after the fact. In return, all we want is a binding promise that no Council race will seek us out. Assuming that is adhered to, no further action will be taken.”

Once again the three councilors looked at each other. Tevos was thinking that this was an exceptionally simple bargain, considering that they didn’t really have any feasible way to seek out these people. She was also wondering what the sting in the tail was. By the looks of it, Eporius and Vaesarth were thinking much the same.

Eporius, after a little more thought, carefully asked, “And the ships involved?”

“Will be retained.” Commander Hebert made a small gesture of amusement with one hand. “We have already fed them into a matter converter to dispose of them, after studying them for anything of interest. Nothing we haven’t seen before. Consider it our price for your people back.”

“A fair bargain,” Vaesarth commented, getting a somewhat annoyed look from the Turian councilor, who was going to have to explain to his government what happened to their fleets and clearly didn’t relish the idea. The Salarian seemed entirely unconcerned about him, though.

“We believe so. People are much more valuable than mere hardware, we have always felt.” The human nodded to the councilor.

“An enlightened outlook, if an unusual one,” Tevos responded, trying to gain control of the situation with diplomacy. The look she received suggested that their visitor was completely aware of this.

“Without wishing to seem rude, curious to know what the response would be if this bargain breached?” Vaesarth asked a moment later, which was certainly something both Tevos and Eporius wanted to know but didn’t want to inquire about. “Also curious why New Concordiat not interested in diplomatic relations with Citadel.”
“Two simple questions with complex answers,” Commander Hebert replied after a second’s thought during which she inspected the Salarian with interest. “Very Salarian, in fact.” She didn’t seem offended, which made Tevos relax a little after tensing abruptly. “Allow me to explain as much as I can.” Moving around the table she sat at one of the two spare seats that were for the rare visitor to the private chamber. “The second one first, I think. This requires a short history of the New Concordiat and my species. I can’t go into details as much of this is classified, but I can give you an overview.”

They waited, wondering what she was going to say, as she apparently collected her thoughts. “A long, long time ago a space-faring civilization arose from a planet called Earth, the home world of the Human species. It was the outgrowth of a number of nation-states, and went through a number of iterations and troubles, as most civilizations do, but eventually settled down into a stable form that rapidly spread out through the galaxy. From the very beginning of their evolution, the human species has been good at the art of war, and along the way they designed many machines to help them in that field, even as they tried to avoid overindulging in it."

The alien looked at them all in turn. “The Turians have a vaguely similar background in some ways, as do the Krogan. Even the Asari have gone through these periods in their history. It is not uncommon.”

Tevos nodded slowly, knowing what the visitor meant.

“In any case, humans have always been very good at technology, if at times incautious with its use. Luckily humanity managed to avoid killing itself long enough to get off the homeworld. Even before they’d managed that, they’d been steadily building more and more complex computer systems which, inevitably, got added to their weapons as well. These passed through the stage of expert systems, to what you would call a virtual intelligence, ultimately becoming fully sapient artificial intelligences. Each version smarter than the one before. And humanity wasn’t foolish about it, they were designed with safeguards in place to ensure loyalty to their builders, and it took a long time before they were fully trusted.”

She paused, examining their reactions. Tevos was hardly breathing, since it seemed horrifyingly familiar to her, Vaesarth was listening raptly, and Eporius looked fascinated. “I know you are all thinking of the Geth. This is an entirely different situation, and entirely different mechanism. However, I would suggest that at some point you should carefully and objectively re-examine that particular situation as it isn’t really what you’ve been thinking it is. But that’s a different story.”

She shrugged slightly. “The people who served with the AIs realized far sooner than the general public that they were totally trustworthy. The safeguards were, in the end, redundant, and eventually removed entirely. No human AI has ever betrayed its creators. They have served with distinction and honor, sacrificed themselves to save the innocent, and in many ways are better people than we organics. It turned out that humans were even better at designing intelligent systems than they were at designing weapons, and they are extremely good at designing weapons.”

‘Oh, that wasn’t worrying at all...’ The Asari kept listening, but became very uneasy at the implications.

“The Concordiat of Man was the eventual form of the civilization of humanity, spanning much of the galaxy, and consisting of thousands of worlds with a total population well into the trillions.”

Tevos felt faint, that if true was vastly larger than the combined Citadel races. And it raised the issue, of course, of why they’d never run across these humans before...
“Of course, it wasn’t all lightness and joy. Humanity weren’t the only species out there, as they discovered fairly quickly. Some species were much more primitive and were mostly bypassed. Some were on the same technological level, or close to it. And a few were in some ways at a higher level. Not all were peaceful, unfortunately. Wars of various sizes were fought, humanity usually prevailing with the aid of their AI allies, and aligned species, although individual battles were often lost.”

The commander sighed. “Until one day humanity and another very high tech species, the Melconians, happened to meet. They were quite similar in many ways to humanity. Likely too similar. The end result was a war, which in retrospect possibly could have been avoided if people on both sides had managed to talk things out. Perhaps not. We’ll never know.” She looked reflective for a moment, then continued. “The Melconian Empire was considerably larger than the Concordiat, with a similarly long military tradition. They also had allied species aiding them. The Concordiat was at a higher overall tech level, much higher in the field of computing and AI, but the Melconians were very good at weapons design and outnumbered them. It was more or less a stalemate, and the various wars, which were really one long one that ebbed and flowed, lasted for well over fifteen hundred years.”

“Fifteen… hundred… years?” Tevos echoed with an appalled sensation of horror.

The commander nodded heavily. “Yes. There’s no knowing how many lives were lost. Trillions at least. Entire star systems were destroyed, worlds were shattered, fleets of ships vaporized in numbers that don’t bear thinking about. Both species were whittled down to the point of extinction.”

The three councilors were listening with expressions of appalled shock, as the human woman continued. “The final war, near the end, pretty much finished off both the Concordiat and the Melconian Empire. Weapons that could wipe entire stars systems from existence were used. The destruction was unbelievable. And the end result was that the Concordiat fell, more than three thousand years after humanity first left their home world.”

She stopped again and there was dead silence in the room.

When she began talking again, it was in a quiet voice. “One single AI escaped one of those final battles. He was the sole survivor, possibly of the entire Concordiat military. Incredibly damaged, almost destroyed, he found himself drifting in the void of hyperspace for an unknown time. He eventually managed to repair enough of his systems to become at least minimally functional, and by a whole series of coincidences, detected something odd and decided to investigate. What he found was Earth.”

The human half-smiled. “Not his Earth, though. Mine.”

They gaped at her.

“What… what does that mean?” Eporius asked in befuddlement.

“It’s complicated, but in essence he found himself in a place between parallel universes. A place he couldn’t escape, but somewhere from where he could monitor many versions of Earth. And he found that humanity was, yet again, under attack.” Commander Hebert shook her head. “He was built specifically to defend humanity from the Enemy. Whoever that Enemy was. Luckily for us, he decided that we were in essence the same humans who had designed him and his kind, and stepped
in. I was the one he initially contacted, for reasons that are far too complex to go into. I was very young, but he did what he could with what he had. It took a long time, but in the end we prevailed against the threat.”

“What was this Enemy?” Eporius asked after a couple of seconds. “Is it something we should worry about?”

Shaking her head, the woman replied, “No. They were a parasitical species that spread out across space, basically infecting other species with special abilities powered by their superior knowledge, in an attempt to find new insights into how such abilities could be used. These abilities ranged from the trivial through things that make Asari biotics look pointless to utterly world ending powers. This species was basically using us, and many, many other species, as a live fire and research exercise. At the end of a ‘cycle’ as they termed it, the planet in question would be destroyed as part of their breeding method. All iterations of that planet across a vast number of parallel worlds.”

The mere concept made Tevos feel sick. And extremely curious about what sort of ‘special ability’ might be possible.

And, for that matter, if Commander Hebert had any such abilities.

“Luckily for us, circumstances meant that both the members of the species that attacked our world met early ends, one by a particularly bone-headed accident, and one apparently in a fit of depression. The species was, despite their power and knowledge, remarkably stupid. They left their system running, though, which would have caused the end of our world in time anyway, but due to the lone AI and a hell of a lot of work, we turned that around on them.”

The smile she was wearing turned nasty. “We strip-mined their knowledge base, added it to my friend’s, suborned their remaining processing engines, and transformed our society. The end result was the New Concordiat. And we hunted down every single member of that species and ended them. With enormous pleasure considering the utterly unprecedented number of innocents they had destroyed over their existence.”

As she paused, Tevos numbly reflected on how the even and pleasant voice of their visitor had still somehow conveyed a sense of total and vicious satisfaction at what she’d said. The look in those nearly-Asari eyes, for a moment, chilled her to the bone.

The commander resumed her explanation. “That was a long time ago. It left a legacy of not wanting to be used. By anyone. We tend to be very cautious about who we ally with. There are a number of species we consider close allies and friends, but in most cases that took many decades to happen. Our way of life isn’t really compatible with current Citadel politics, and we’re not going to change. We like ourselves the way we are. But we’re not going to insist that anyone else change either, for the same reason. That leads to some obvious issues should we open formal contact with the Citadel species. The Batarians, particularly, are entirely counter to our own ethics. We would almost inevitably be forced to deal with them, which wouldn’t aid good relations with the rest of the species in your system.”

She leaned back in the chair, regarding them as they watched her, all of them feeling like they were in the presence of something incredibly dangerous yet nonthreatening. “We do not permit slavery of any kind in our space. Neither do we see machine intelligences as a threat. They are people, inorganic rather than organic, but people. Friends, co-workers, and citizens of the New Concordiat. I very much doubt that would make your people very happy.”
“No, I doubt it too,” Tevos said a little weakly. “We were discussing just that before you contacted us.”

The knowing glint in the eyes of the human suggested that she was well aware of that, somehow. The Asari made a mental note to have a very thorough sweep of the Citadel computer network performed as soon as possible. Just in case.

Several seconds passed before Vaesarth stirred, making the unnerving visitor look at her. “I have a theory,” the Salarian began. “No contact with your species before Relay 314 episode. No contact with any other species who knows of you. Your technology is utterly unlike Citadel tech base. And no knowledge of this parasitical species you mentioned.”

The commander waited patiently, a small smile on her lips. The Salarian councilor examined her for a moment, then went on, “You talked about parallel realities. Other data suggests you are not from this one...”

“I wondered if you’d work it out,” the human nodded, as Tevos and Eporius alternated between staring at their colleague and their visitor. “You are, of course, correct. This is not our native reality. We come from what you might term a parallel timeline, although that’s not a particularly accurate description. We have explored a number of alternative realities, and have a few friends and allies from them. They’ve taught us a lot, in fact, and we have returned the favor.”

“That is...” Tevos shook her head a couple of times, feeling she should by rights think this was a tall tale to end all tall tales, but for some reason believing every word. “...Incredible.”

“It’s interesting, certainly,” Commander Hebert replied.

“Assuming this is all true, what reason could you have for visiting this... reality?” Eporius asked slowly and thoughtfully. “Or, based on what we’ve seen, possibly a more accurate word would be colonizing it.”

The woman looked at him for a moment, then replied, “Our species in this timeline very nearly died out entirely, due to a number of natural disasters, wars, and other factors. We happened to stumble across them during an exploration mission and in the end decided it was our duty to help them. They are, after all, us. Family, if you will.” She smiled oddly. “Friends of ours are very keen on family, and I happen to agree. It was an easy decision. We have spent a considerable amount of time and effort helping our... cousins, I suppose... rebuild their world, and become part of the New Concordiat. They were very happy to do so, considering the alternative. In the long run, it’s possible they’ll go their own way, and if that happens we’ll wish them good luck and move on. On the other hand, they may not. And until and unless they do, they are as much a part of our civilization as I am.”

She watched them think it over for a while, then resumed her discussion. “Getting involved with the Council and the Citadel species is a distraction from the work we’re doing with our local analogs, and other important projects, which we don’t particularly desire. It would also upend your civilization to an enormous degree, which wouldn’t help anyone. So overall it was decided that we should maintain a good separation, at least for now. In the long run perhaps the situation will change. Only time will tell, I suppose.”

Falling silent once more, the woman waited and watched as they thought it over. Tevos could see from her colleague’s expressions that they found the entire story nearly unbelievable, as did she,
but the evidence so far seemed to suggest that it was probably accurate information. Clearly a vast amount was being left out, which was only reasonable for such a short conversation, but what she’d heard already made it abundantly obvious that this New Concordiat was not a power to deal lightly with.

It was also, she realized, evidence that their visitor was of a much higher level of importance than the rank she’d given suggested. Tevos hadn’t missed the way she’d said that the AI from an alternate timeline had contacted her first, and that together they’d entirely rebuilt their civilization. If she was correct, this woman was not only probably the senior military figure in the entire New Concordiat, if only from experience, but most likely much older than she appeared.

There was no way all this took place in only a few decades. Or possibly even centuries.

The Asari councilor wondered just how long Humans lived… As long as Asari or Krogan? Longer?

It didn’t seem the sort of thing one could just ask, but she was very intrigued.

Out loud, she said, “I have to admit that I cannot deny your desire for no contact with us is probably for the best. I agree that I can only see trouble coming if we did otherwise. There is going to be enough upheaval already when what’s happened becomes public knowledge.”

“Regrettable but unavoidable,” Commander Hebert replied. “I’m sure that people of your talents will be able to manage the situation, though.” She looked mildly amused. Eporius snorted, making Tevos sigh faintly.

“I hope you’re right, Commander. My government is already very upset about the loss of so many ships.”

“Probably a good thing we moved the relay, I suppose,” their guest chuckled. “We should have done that much earlier but as NKY7248624 said, it was a minor failure of planning. We’ve made sure that no relays that open into our space are available any longer, which should prevent a recurrence of the situation in future.”

Wondering for a moment just how this bizarre woman could speak so casually about simply moving Mass Relays around the place like they were small ships, Tevos decided that she probably didn’t want to really know. It certainly wouldn’t help her sleep any better.

“The other question my colleague posed still remains,” Eporius finally said, after absorbing what she’d said. “What would happen if a Council species, despite anything we said, deliberately went looking for you? It would be hard, but not impossible.”

Commander Hebert studied him. “That would depend on how they went about it, I suppose. A single ship that got lost, or something of that level… We’d take them home and tell them firmly not to do it again. We’re not generally quick tempered and we accept that mistakes can be made.”

She looked around at the other councilors. “On the other hand, we react very badly to deliberate attacks that persist after a polite warning. With sufficient reason, we would probably eliminate the problem at source.”

“Which means?” the Turian asked, almost reluctantly.
After looking at them all again, the human sighed. “All right, I suppose that you need more than my word. Let’s try this.” She looked to the side and made a motion. Tevos felt her eyes widen a little as an incredibly detailed hologram sprang into being a couple of meters away, with no obvious mechanism to produce it apparent. “This is a record of a recent operation.” The hologram showed a star system that was unfamiliar to any of them, with at the center what Tevos recognized after a moment or two as a black hole of all things. It was surrounded by a vast accretion disk, and was radiating huge amounts of energy released as infalling matter was ripped to nothingness by the event horizon.

“You are familiar with the species known as the Collectors?” she asked, looking back at Eporius. He looked surprised, but nodded after a moment or two.

“Yes, although they are almost a myth. I do know they exist but they’re very rarely seen. To the best of my knowledge they’ve almost never been encountered outside Terminus space, and rarely within it.”

“Correct. Something you don’t know is that the Collectors are a species artificially created some fifty thousand years ago by a combination of heavy genetic engineering and cybernetic implants, from a precursor species you’re well aware of.” She waited for any of them to ask the obvious question, as they exchanged uneasy glances.

“What species would that be?” Tevos finally said.

“The one you call the Protheans.”

The silence this time went on for a long time. Then everyone started talking at once.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“Thank you, Centurion. Your loyalty to the Hierarchy will be remembered.” General Gainus ended the call from his agent on the Citadel and pondered what he’d learned.

A ship arrived at the Citadel with no warning, apparently from the new species that had, somehow, taken out over a hundred Turian vessels with ease, then moved or otherwise hidden an entire mass relay. One that built mega-structures that made planets look fairly compact and discreet. One that, spirits damn them, used artificial intelligences to actually run warships! Powerful, yes, but clearly also insane.

And now a representative of this species seemed to be in discussion with the Citadel Council. Eporius hadn’t reported it to them, as one would have expected. But then, their representative to the Council had always been someone who spent far more time putting himself in the place of a potential opponent than seemed healthy. Yes, it had led to him being oddly respected by both the Asari and the Salarrians, and their respective councilors, but back at home there were those who felt he wasn’t really doing things the correct way.

Gainus, remembering the recovered data from the data probe that had been retrieved, wondered for a moment if perhaps Eporius was right to be circumspect. Obviously this species was dangerous. Yet, at the same time, they had sent a diplomat or something of that nature to talk to the council, even if he or she had turned up in a ship that his man inside C-Sec had said was covered in so many gun emplacements that you could hardly see the actual hull under them.

Anyone could look threatening with the right props, after all. But actually using those props was an
entirely different matter. It seemed to him that if this new species was aggressive to match their technological level they wouldn’t have just turned up for a chat, they’d have arrived in force and demanded that the Council do what they wanted.

It was, in the end, what he would do in the same circumstances. You make a strong showing, threaten the opponent with destruction, then negotiate from a position of power. The only sensible approach in his view.

He was well aware that there were those who preached a much milder approach to other species. Captain Abernius, the one who had managed to trigger all this trouble, was one of them. Major Falgus, the man who’d failed to resolve the issue, was another, albeit not quite as cautious. Both very good commanders or they wouldn’t be where they were, but clearly not the correct people for the job that they’d been called on to do. It was annoying, but it was something that couldn’t be changed now.

Luckily, there were also people of high rank in the Hierarchy who believed in the peace through power approach that he did. Primarch Opitis was very definitely one of them. He’d been spitting mad when the second fleet vanished with almost no trace, and had spent enough time shouting about it that even Gainus was starting to get slightly tired of it. The discovery of the disappearance of Relay 314 was a shock and had aborted the plans that the Primarch had been making to send a proper task force into their space to determine the fate of the previous one and show the aliens that the Turian Hierarchy was to be respected. That had made Opitis even angrier, unfortunately, but there was at that point nothing that anyone could really do about it.

Eporius had actually looked relieved when he’d found out, having spent some time attempting to calm Opitis down and get him to avoid doing anything to, in his words, ‘Exacerbate an already perilous situation entirely of our own making.’ The Councilor had, as a result, very nearly been recalled for a meeting he wouldn’t have enjoyed. He’d managed to talk himself out of that in the end, which left Gainus rather impressed, since talking Opitis out of something he’d set his mind on was notoriously difficult.

Even so, he felt that the other man was being somewhat unTurian about it. And he knew very well indeed that Opitis had much stronger words to use for the situation. He’d used them at length.

But now… Now they had a possible opportunity to set things right. While that ship was at the Citadel, they knew the exact location of at least one high ranked individual from the aliens, and possibly an entire team. If they moved fast, they could take the chance handed to them and extract some form of payback for the insult. It would be complicated but not past the point of feasibility. He had enough agents on the Citadel to get the relevant intelligence, and there were also plenty of mercenaries who would happily do anything you paid them too. Arranging to… vigorously interview… this representative from the New Concordiat shouldn’t be vastly difficult, as they had to return to their ship at some point. Either by demanding a meeting backed by the persuasion of heavily armed ships, or simply arranging to acquire the diplomat in question through other channels.

It wasn’t like a diplomat would present that much of a challenge, and in general governments tended to be quite keen on getting their people back. Oh, certainly there would be protestations, threats, censure from the Council, and the usual sort of thing, but under the table concessions could be extracted easily enough. The public could easily be manipulated to see the necessity of such an action, as had been the case the last time this type of operation was used. If nothing else, the news that the new species made use of soulless AI warships and had brutally wiped out a Turian fleet would spin things in the right direction without any real problem.
He smiled a little viciously. Hells, with that sort of genuine truth to the matter, he’d probably get commended for it.

Putting together a plan of action took only half an hour, since there was a well-practiced routine for such things. All he had to do now was to get the Primarch to sign off on it and he could begin.

As he rose to leave his office, Gainus chuckled to himself. ‘Considering how furious Opitis was and still is, he’d probably want to do it himself if he had the chance,’ he thought with amusement. The man was pretty direct at times and before ascending to his current position had been noted for his many achievements in combat.

Satisfied that he had the best method for both the glory of the Hierarchy and personal career advancement, the General went off to find his ultimate superior and the all important order to proceed with his plan.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Mind spinning, Councilor Tevos stared at their visitor when she finally finished her explanation. It had taken close to two hours, and covered a number of things that were terrifying beyond speaking, or thought pure myth, or both. The really horrifying thing was that the human had proof of all of it. Or the special effects department to end all special effects departments.

Unfortunately, the Asari didn’t think the second option was the right one, as desperately as she wished it was.

“The Reapers are real?” she asked in a weak voice, slumped in her chair and just gazing helplessly at Commander Hebert, who merely nodded.

“And they’ve been wiping out entire species for millions of years,” she went on helplessly, thinking of the myths and legends she’d heard and discounted over her long life. They were obviously stories to scare children with, not historical documents or truth. Yet…

She looked to the side at the fantastically detailed holographic image floating next to the commander, showing a huge ship that looked like some tentacled horror from the deep ocean. Apparently that was a Reaper, the boogeyman of the galaxy. And the things were allegedly behind almost all their technology, not the Protheans. They had merely been the last and highest tech victims of a feeding cycle that spanned more time than she could even contemplate.

And there were hundreds of thousands if not millions of them floating somewhere outside the galaxy. Waiting.

The councilor shuddered. Looking at her colleagues, she could see they were also horrified. Eporius was visibly trying to think of something to say, and Vaesarth was staring at the slowly rotating hologram with a contemplative look that hid a deep unease.

“I’ve got a complete data package covering the Reaper threat, which I will arrange to get to all of you shortly,” the human woman said after the silence had gone on long enough. “There are a number of issues you should be aware of, and we have no problem with you knowing.” She flicked a finger and the hologram changed back to the initial one that had lead into the revelations that Tevos was pretty sure would send ripples through the galaxy for decades.
“As I was saying, this is the star system that is home to the species now known as the Collectors. They are, in essence, agents of the Reapers and totally subservient to their will. Unfortunately they’re beyond saving, having been so heavily modified that none of the original species is really present other than as a little badly corrupted DNA. A true pity, but it is what it is.” She shook her head somewhat sadly, staring at the image. “There is nothing left of their intelligence, or knowledge. Just drones controlled by a few more intelligent ones, essentially living robots.”

All three of them watched as the hologram changed, zooming in on the mass relay that orbited the star out past the last planet of the system. “Unfortunately, they are a major threat to everyone else. They have technology that is substantially past that which you use, again due to the Reapers. In time they would become a serious problem since they would not only gather information for their masters, as they have been doing for millennia, but they would sooner or later attack in force. They have a huge number of ships available to them, and weapons that you have no real defense against.”

As they watched, a ship appeared some distance from the relay. It was obviously a New Concordiat one based on the design, which seemed to use the philosophy of there is no such thing as too many weapons. As far as Tevos could judge, it was probably roughly the same size as the one the commander had arrived in, perhaps slightly larger.

“Approximately a year ago, we decided that we should deal with this threat preemptively. We don’t like doing that if we can avoid it, since people can change, but in this case there was no chance of that, and in many ways it could be considered a mercy.” Commander Hebert looked pensively at the image. “There was a lot of discussion for a long time about what to do, but in the end we had no real choice. Eventually the same thing would happen no matter what we did, and this way we could minimize the number of lives lost. Even so, it wasn’t something we enjoyed.”

The ship maneuvered for a moment, then one of the larger weapons on the hull slewed to lock onto the relay. Even before it fired, Tevos realized what was going to happen. Moments later, a brilliantly white-blue beam of something linked the ship and the relay for less than a second. It was so sudden all of them jumped.

The relay instantly exploded in a truly awesome detonation, an expanding sphere of rippling blue fire wrapped in gravitational distortions expanding at a ferocious rate from where it had been. The three councilors watched in awed horror as it increased in size to what must have been hundreds of thousands of kilometers in diameter, engulfing the position of the ship that had fired on it in seconds. From the viewpoint of the camera that had taken these images, presumably a second ship, the fireball grew and grew, reaching a size that was close to that of a small star, before it finally began to fade.

They gaped as it slowly dissipated, not only shocked at just how violent the destruction that had resulted from a single shot from the alien ship had been, but as the ball of energy finally disappeared, the sight of the completely intact ship in question sitting where it had been when it fired. Tevos stared, then blinked. There should have been no possible way for anything to have survived that. The gravitational distortions from that much eezo destabilizing aside, the sheer heat would melt any known material.

“We needed to make sure that none of their ships escaped the system, so destroying the relay was the quickest method to ensure that,” the human commented.

Turning towards the black hole at the center of the system, the ship orientated itself for a few seconds. A port at the bow opened, and there was a flicker of light as some sort of missile was
The thing moved so fast it was gone in an instant.

“The next part is sped up by a factor of approximately twenty five times,” Commander Hebert added, still watching as were they.

The recording zoomed out once again, re-centering on the black hole. There was a pause of maybe twenty seconds, then the singularity… twisted. That was the only way Tevos could describe it later. It was a sight that years afterwards tended to wake her in the middle of the night with a headache and nightmares.

“The weapon used is based on something the Melconians came up with, we suspect by accident,” their visitor said quietly as they stared. “We worked out the operating principles and improved it. One of our allies from another parallel timeline figured out the math behind it, which is beyond even most of our AIs, which finally let us fully understand the mechanism of how it works. We have only had to resort to something like this four times so far, all of them in extreme situations.”

She fell silent as they watched the recording. The singularity, impossibly, flared with energy, becoming an intolerably bright pinprick of light in the middle of the system. The accretion disk cast immense shadows through space, before it simply evaporated in the unbelievably vast torrent of radiation as the black hole seemed to go into reverse, vomiting out in minutes what it had probably taken centuries to collect. The whole thing flew in the face of anything Tevos knew about physics, but it seemed to be happening even so.

The recording only went on for a few minutes, but in those minutes they witnessed the destruction of an entire stellar system. Somehow converted into a fairly good approximation of a supernova, at least temporarily, the flaring black hole completely vaporized everything within range. Tevos was certain that even ships as far away as the former mass relay wouldn’t survive the shock wave when it finally reached them. Goddess knew how much hard radiation was being given off, but it wouldn’t surprise her to learn that it was lethal at a range of light years.

In effect, the human weapon turned the black hole into a short-lived quasar.

Which was the single most frightening thing she’d ever come across.

Flicking a finger, the woman made the recording stop. All of them kept staring at where it had been for several seconds, before refocusing on her. She shrugged a little. “We have other weapons, of course. That was one of the more extreme ones, reserved as I said for specific cases. But making a star go nova isn’t all that difficult if needed. It very seldom is, but I hope that answers the original question. Obviously, we don’t think that any Council species would ever provoke such a reaction, since that would take an immense amount of effort and as much stupidity.” She smiled a little as they all looked fixedly at her, each feeling like they should in fact be running. “On the whole we feel that your various governments are far more sensible than that. Even the Batarians.”

After a long pause, Tevos licked her lips which had gone dry, then slightly hoarsely said, “I would like to hope that was true, I agree. I will say without reservation that I will let my government know your position.”

Eporius and Vaesarth nodded simultaneously, as if they were being operated by strings.

“Thank you.” Commander Hebert made a gesture of recognition. “That’s all we ask. In the long term, when our work is done, and if circumstances are then right, we may well revisit the situation. But for now it’s best on all sides that we stay at a distance from one another for a number of
reasons.” She stood, smiling at them all in a way that wasn’t at all threatening. So why was Tevos having trouble breathing?

“We’ll bring your people to the Citadel shortly, as agreed. I will also arrange to get you the data set I mentioned. You may find it…” She trailed off, looking suddenly mildly annoyed. “Ah. That’s inconvenient.”

About to ask what was inconvenient, Tevos twitched at the sound of her omnitool beeping as a call came in. Considering that she’d set a privacy mode that prevented anything other than ‘Oh-Goddess-save-us’ level emergencies getting through, that wasn’t a good sign.

With an apologetic glance at their visitor, she answered it. “What is it this time?!?” she snapped, her nervousness coming out as an unusually short-tempered response.

The C-Sec officer, the same one as before, flinched at her tone. He visibly swallowed before replying.

“Sorry to bother you again, Madame Councilor, but we have something of a situation here.”

“Which is?”

“The Turian fleet flagship Unification has just entered Citadel space with a fleet of twenty ships. Including four dreadnoughts.” He glanced off camera for a moment before returning his eyes to hers. “They’re demanding to speak to the New Concordiat representative.”

Eporius made a strangled sound and caused everyone to look at him. “How did they know about that?” he asked, leaning into the view of the omnitool’s imager.

“Enough people have seen that ship that we can’t keep it quiet, sir,” the C-Sec man replied. “But as far as knowing that you were talking to someone, and who it was, I suspect we have someone whose loyalties are divided. I’m making inquiries even now.”

“Oh, damn it,” Tevos muttered, rubbing her forehead. “Who is commanding that ship?”

“Fleet General Gainus, Ma’am,” the officer replied immediately. Eporius quietly groaned. Glancing at him for a moment, the Asari sighed. She knew that particular Turian, and considered him a hawkish idiot. His first response to almost any situation was to aim a gun at it. His second response was to work out how to turn it to his benefit. Overall, he was more of a problem than a solution for most purposes, but he got on much too well with the current Primarch, who was of a similar mind-set that encompassed many of the least pleasant of the Turian stereotypes.

Eporius, in her opinion, was a far better example of their species than either of the others, and someone she could both respect and work with. It was a great pity that there weren’t more like him in a position of power in his government since it would make life much easier all around.

The officer turned his head to talk to someone behind him for a couple of seconds. When he looked back, he didn’t appear any happier. “Ma’am?”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“The Destiny Ascension has just come through the relay and is asking for you as well.”
Tevos stared at him, then closed her eyes. Oh, perfect. Now they had the flagship of the Turian fleet and the flagship of the Asari fleet in the same place at the same time. It was enough to make her wish she’d stayed in bed that morning. Matriarch Kaizphia, the commanding officer of the Asari warship, was nearly as difficult to deal with as Gainus was although for different reasons. She was a good ship commander, but one of the most arrogant people Tevos had ever met, and more full of her own importance and the Asari superiority over other species than she was comfortable with. This had caused more than one diplomatic issue in the past.

“Tell General Gainus that we are currently busy and will call him back shortly, please. As politely as you can. Stress that we’re in the middle of very delicate negotiations. Put Matriarch Kaizphia through.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Before the call went through, Tevos glanced apologetically at the visitor, who was listening calmly and quietly. The human didn’t seem as surprised as she probably should have been, adding to the mystery of their guest. “I’m sorry about this, Commander. I need to deal with this immediately before someone does something foolish.”

“Of course, Councilor. Please proceed, I’m in no hurry.”

A moment later the image of another Asari appeared in the projection field of the omnitool, one that was giving off an indefinable air of being better than everyone else and knowing it. “Tevos. About time. What is going on here? Why is there a heavily armed Turian fleet lurking about, and what in the name of all that is holy is that bizarre ship that’s absolutely covered in weapons doing in Citadel space? We’ve heard rumors that the Turians encountered a new species. Is that their ship?”

All of this was said in a voice that demanded answers, making Tevos suppress a wince of her own. That woman…

“Yes, Kaizphia, the Turians did accidentally encounter a new species, that much is true. They are called Humans and their governmental structure is known as the New Concordiat. There were some… misunderstandings… which resulted in a few minor issues which we have now resolved. The New Concordiat representative arrived a few hours ago in that ship to talk things over and explain their government’s position, which they have done.”

“And I assume to petition for Council membership,” Kaizphia cut in, shaking her head knowingly. “Of course. Hopefully they will be sensible about things. They will, of course, be required to adhere to Council law, which looking at that monstrosity I am sure they currently do not. But we can easily guide them in the correct direction.”

Out of sight of the camera, Tevos squeezed the arms of her chair hard enough that her hands ached, while she somehow kept a pleasant expression on her face. Her eyes flicked to Commander Hebert’s, who was watching and listening with a small grin, apparently somewhat amused. “They have not, in fact, asked for Council membership. The situation is very complex and this is neither the time or place to go into it.” She paused, then as Kaizphia opened her mouth to say something else that would give any trained diplomat a headache, hastily went on.

“The Turian flagship is apparently here because they also found out about the New Concordiat representative being present via channels we are currently looking into. I assume that Fleet General Gainus is here on orders from Primarch Opitis to ask more questions about the small
misunderstanding their forces had with those of the New Concordiat a few days ago. Hopefully we can resolve everything to the satisfaction of all parties concerned.”

“Gainus.” Kaizphia looked thoughtful. “A competent officer if somewhat overfond of his own brilliance. And rather prone to actions some would consider unwise.”

‘As if you have any moral standing to criticize that,’ Councilor Tevos sighed internally, keeping her face fixed in a neutral expression. ‘Considering some of the things you’ve managed to engineer in the past that took years to deal with the fallout from...’

“I haven’t yet spoken to him so I don’t know precisely what he wants,” she said out loud, feeling that she had a pretty good idea regardless, “but I will have to do that next. I would request that you keep the Destiny Ascension at a safe distance, as we don’t want to potentially crowd him and possibly push him into actions we would all regret.”

Translation: Stay the hell out of the way and don’t poke the easily annoyed Turian idiot. Tevos hoped that her peer would listen for once and not just push her way in from an overinflated sense of Asari importance. This situation was far too potentially catastrophic for that sort of posturing. She had no wish at all to see what would happen if the human commander was poked too hard, not after the last few hours. One thing was abundantly clear, that being that the New Concordiat had a definite point beyond which it was unwise to push them, and a very abrupt way to deal with things they found irritating beyond that point.

She had no doubt at all that Kenny’s Friend could deal with the entire Turian fleet and the Destiny Ascension without trouble, and the political fallout from that would be appalling. It might topple both the Turian and Asari governments in a worst case scenario. All in all, she desperately wanted to calm things down before someone did something there was no turning back from.

Another glance at the commander showed she looked entirely unconcerned, which made Tevos relax slightly, but she was still dreading the talk with the Turian general.

“Turians.” Kaizphia sniffed dismissively. “Some of them are as bad as the Krogan.”

The councilor glanced a little guiltily at her colleague, seeing that Eporius was glaring at the hologram. Out of view of the omnitool, he made an obscene gesture that nearly made Tevos smirk, only iron control of her face stopping it. Vaesarth was definitely suppressing a chuckle, and giving her fellow councilor a look of both respect and sympathy.

“That isn’t a very polite thing to say, Kaizphia, and neither is it particularly accurate. It would be best to avoid such things in future. The Turians are very close allies and friends of ours, remember,” she chided gently. The other Asari didn’t seem to care. “In any case, I have kept General Gainus waiting long enough so I really do have to talk to him. Please bear in mind my request and don’t get involved unless there is no choice.”

“We will keep an eye on the situation,” Kaizphia replied. “Destiny Ascension out.” The hologram vanished.

Tevos sighed heavily, rubbing her forehead again, something that was beginning to become a habit. “I’m sorry about that, Eporius. She is... not a diplomat. A good commander, but not someone you would ask to negotiate a treaty.”
“I’m all too well aware of Matriarch Kaizphia’s personality,” he replied with a frown. “It is hardly unique to her, there are a lot of Asari who are worse.” He shrugged. “But that’s not your fault, and I can hardly point fingers when my own species has more than enough arrogant idiots of its own.”

“Possibly not how government on Palaven would like to be characterized,” Vaesarth commented with an expression of mild amusement.

Eporius snorted dismissively again, glancing at her. “Probably not, but do I really look like I care?”

“No,” the Salarian grinned. “Is why I like you.” This made him laugh briefly, and caused Commander Hebert, who they’d almost forgotten about for a moment, to snicker.

“I apologize if my presence has exacerbated any existing problems you all face,” she said as they returned their attention to her.

“It’s not your fault, Commander,” Tevos said wearily. “We go through something like this on a regular basis, if not this exact scenario. Running the Council is a series of compromises, as I expect is the case with most governments.” She shook her head. “Admittedly this particular situation is unusual, but that can’t be helped. I’d better talk to General Gainus before he gets angry about being ignored.”

“If it helps, I can simply go back to my ship and leave,” the human offered.

“At this point I doubt anything would change,” she muttered. “I’ll have to talk to him in any case. And we still need to arrange the prisoner return.”

“Fair enough,” Commander Hebert nodded, sitting down again in the chair and leaning back, not looking concerned. Tevos braced herself mentally, then called the Turian flagship commander, hoping he’d be a little less abrasive than usual this time.

“About time.”

Nope.

“I’ve been waiting for ten minutes, Councilor. I’m here on the direct orders from the Primarch himself, and I expected more courtesy, I have to say. I may lodge an official complaint.” General Gainus’s face showed his displeasure. “I understand you have a diplomat from this new species, the New Concordiat, with you? My government wishes to talk to them urgently. We have a number of concerns that must be dealt with.”

“May I ask how you came into this information, General?” Tevos kept her voice even and calm.

“That is irrelevant,” he snapped. “Do you or do you not have a New Concordiat representative present? On the orders of the Primarch, I must talk to them.”

Eporius leaned into view from the side, Tevos moving to the side to let him more than a little gratefully. The damn general was pushing her self control to the limit. “General, we are in the midst of some very delicate negotiations,” he said, with great self control himself. “I am sure that a polite request to talk to the New Concordiat representative once our current business is concluded would be a better method than demanding access in the middle of Council work.”

“Eporius,” the other Turian said with a look that made it almost an insult. “Your own position on
“This matter is well known to both the Primarch and myself. This has gone beyond the Council’s purview. This new species has wiped out over a hundred of our ships and all the people on them, and we wish make our displeasure known.”

“You know as well as I do that the first encounter was an accident, and ended the way it did because of stupidity on our part,” Eporius retorted. “That stupidity was compounded by the insistence of sending a reprisal fleet before contacting the Council, as is standard procedure and the legal requirement. Captain Abernius was correct when he wanted to withdraw and pass the issue of First Contact on to the Council. If it hadn’t been for some lackwit on that frigate firing without warning on a new species in their own territorial space we wouldn’t be in this position in the first place!”

Gainus glared at him, while Tevos idly wished she’d never heard of the New Concordiat, Humans, or Turians. Life would be so much simpler…

“That is close to treasonous speech, Eporius,” the general hissed, clearly infuriated. “Don’t think that your actions will be forgotten. You may have talked yourself out of trouble once before, but when I report to the Primarch, you may find yourself recalled and sanctioned. I must talk to this New Concordiat representative.” He stopped and seemed to collect himself. “They use AI, for the spirits sake! To control warships! Surely you realize how insane that is, and how it will appear to the public? We need to regain control of this situation before it goes too far.”

Tevos nudged Eporius to the side, the Turian councilor still glaring at the general, but complying. “General Gainus, that attitude worries me,” she said as mildly as she could. “You are not in full possession of the details. The current situation is much more complex than you appear to realize, and is best left to the experts. With all due respect, please allow us to handle it. We will ensure the Hierarchy is fully informed about the recent events as soon as the outstanding issues are resolved.”

About to retort, he stopped when she held up a hand. “And I must take issue with your earlier comment. The New Concordiat has not ‘wiped out’ the crews of the ships that attacked them. While there were casualties, I am reliably informed they were minimal, and the vast bulk of the crew-members were captured and will be returned, unharmed, shortly. We were in the process of arranging how this would work when you interrupted us.”

‘In other words, shut up and go away,’ she mused silently. Wishing she could say it out loud, if only to see his expression. By the look on Eporius’s face, he was right on the verge of saying something like that himself, so she fixed him with a look of her own warning him not to escalate things. He subsided but was clearly more than a little irritated.

She sympathized, as the general was insufferable at the best of times in her opinion.

The information apparently took him by surprise, causing him to go quiet for a few seconds. Eventually, he said, “And the ships?”

“They are the price for your crews,” she replied, inwardly amused at how furious he looked. “If I were in your position I would consider the trade a fair one.”

He scowled at her, while she smiled back just a tiny amount. “You are not in my position, Councilor. Which is probably a good thing for both of us.”

“Agreed,” she responded evenly.
There was an uncomfortable silence, until he said, “Despite your efforts to shield them, Councilor Tevos, I will have words of my own with this diplomat, one way or another. The Hierarchy has a number of concerns that we feel are not likely to be raised if we leave it in the hands of the Council. With all due respect.” He smiled grimly at her, even for a Turian, and disconnected the call.

“What a pleasant person,” Commander Hebert commented after a moment with a strong hint of irony. Tevos looked at her, seeing she was still smiling in a completely unconcerned and non-hostile manner, apparently finding a glimpse into the inner workings of Council diplomacy quite funny.

“That is not the term I would use,” Eporius said, shaking his head. “I must apologize on behalf of the Turian species, Commander. Despite our reputation as quite militaristic, which is admittedly both true and well earned, we are not all like that fool. Please don’t judge us on that basis.”

“I try to take people as individuals on the whole, not as a monolithic block,” she assured him. “Every species has people in it that cause problems for the rest of them, mine included. On the whole I have been pleasantly surprised by how receptive you all were. I’m sure we can work things out. Now, on the subject of your captured crews, as I was saying before the recent interruptions, we will return them to you in good health to any destination you desire.”

Tevos and Vaesarth both looked at Eporius, who thought for a few seconds, then said, “I think it would probably be best to have them returned to the Citadel, rather than Palaven. A New Concordiat ship in Turian space could spark… a problematic response.”

“Of course, I understand and we expected that would be the case.” Commander Hebert nodded to him. His omnitool beeped as it signaled receiving a file. “That is a manifest of all recovered personnel, living and dead. Thirty-six thousand, four hundred, and ninety-two Turians, five hundred and eighteen Asari, thirty-nine Salarians, and six Quarians survived the two incidents. Two thousand, one hundred, and sixty-one bodies were recovered, wholly and partially, in addition to the survivors. We also retrieved all the personal effects we could and those will be returned as well, along with the ship’s logs of all ships not initially destroyed during the second attack.”

The human woman smiled at him in a genuinely sympathetic manner. “We do regret the loss of life, and would much prefer it not to have happened. Despite the circumstances, permit me to pass on our condolences to the families of the deceased. They did their duty and died with honor.”

Eporius bowed his head for a moment, then met her eyes. “Thank you.”

Tevos’s omnitool beeped again as she was about to ask how the woman was managing to send files without any visible effort or equipment, causing everyone to turn to her. Gritting her teeth, the Asari councilor picked the device up with a deliberate motion, activated it, and said with enormous patience and considerable menace, “Yes, Lieutenant? How can I help you this time?”

The projected image of the C-Sec officer looked worried. “Apologies once again, Councilor Tevos. Citadel Traffic Control has been monitoring the Turian fleet and wanted me to pass on the message that they appear to be moving to attempt to blockade the New Concordiat vessel. They’ve positioned the Unification between the ship and the relay, with the other three dreadnoughts moving to englobe it, along with their cruisers as support. Traffic Control is warning other vessels away from the area, just in case, and there has been no reaction from the New Concordiat ship yet. They’re still ninety thousand kilometers away from the Citadel but it’s making people nervous. No one wants a battle anywhere nearby, there are millions of people and thousands of ships at risk as
With a sense of unreality, Tevos gaped at him, then felt fury rise inside her. That idiotic man was apparently trying to force a confrontation with their visitor, presumably in an attempt to ‘have a word’ with her in some chest-thumping exercise to salve the injured pride of the Primarch. He obviously didn’t think about the proven fact that the New Concordiat ships didn’t need access to the relay, never mind that it was one only half the size of Kenny’s Friend that had comprehensively defeated a force nearly this size with one barrage. She had no doubt whatsoever that the ship was in no danger and could easily take out the entire Turian battlegroup in moments.

Glancing at Commander Hebert, she also realized that the woman had been aware of this before they were and was watching them to see what they did about it. Possibly a test, possibly simply well earned confidence, or a mix perhaps. Or just a wish not to start anything in someone else’s territory, which Tevos was grateful for. She doubted that the patience of the human would last forever, though, if Gainus was stupid enough to actually fire on her ship. People tended to defend themselves and she could hardly expect the humans to simply sit there and get shot at, even if it would do absolutely nothing. Which was definitely the case.

She remembered that recording from a while ago and shivered momentarily.

No, the only one not at risk in any confrontation was the New Concordiat ship, she was sure of that.

“Thank you for the information, Lieutenant,” she said very calmly, but in tones that made him slightly recoil. “I believe I need to talk to General Gainus. Please continue to monitor the situation. Also, increase patrols between the Council chambers and the docking area.” She knew full well that the human woman wasn’t going to board a ship docked with the Citadel, but it was likely the General was working on the basis of normal operation, and she wouldn’t put it past him to have arranged some sort of snatch squad or something like that. It had been known to happen in the past and the station was awash with mercenaries and agents from every government in the galaxy.

There was the off chance they might manage to lay hands on some undesirables and make the place that little bit safer.

“At once, Ma’am,” he replied instantly. She dropped the call, took a couple of calming breaths, and called the Turian general directly. He picked up the call almost immediately, obviously having expected her.

“What are you doing, General?” she asked without ceremony, fixing his image with her most level look. “Apart from apparently attempting to cause a non-aligned species here on a diplomatic mission to consider you a threat? Bear in mind, please, that you are in Citadel-controlled space at the moment and we will not permit aggressive actions.”

“Doing, Councilor?” he asked with an innocent expression that he really didn’t pull off well. His face wasn’t made for it.

“You are obviously attempting to stop the New Concordiat vessel from moving towards the mass relay if it should so choose,” Tevos grated. “Which is, among other things, a violation of Citadel traffic control regulations in the absence of any reason to suspect a ship of wrongdoing. It is a deliberately provocative move as you know very well.”

He looked at her for a few seconds, then replied, scowling, “Enough games, Councilor. I have
direct orders from the Primarch to talk to the representative from this new species. At length. We demand reparations for the loss of our ships and the insult given to the Hierarchy. If you won’t give me access to them, I will sit here and wait until they return to their ship, then talk to them. I answer to the Primarch, not you.”

Tevos stared at the obstinate fool. He embodied in one person pretty much all the stereotypes of Turian military idiocy. A more than competent battle leader combined with someone so sure of his species own right to throw its weight around it made Matriarch Kaizphia look totally reasonable. Not to mention a complete and misplaced sense of his ability to come out on top no matter who the opponent. That had served him well for a lot of his career, fair enough, but here and now she could only see disaster looming.

And the really worrying thing was that Primarch Opitis was worse…

Looking at Eporius she saw he was alternating between glaring at the projection with visible fury, and rapidly working on his omnitool, apparently getting a feed from the Citadel traffic operations sensors. Vaesarth was leaning over to inspect the results with interest. Commander Hebert appeared to be relaxing in her chair and merely observing the current state of play with interest but no concern visible.

“I fear that you may be taking a larger slice of the meat than you can digest, General,” she finally replied, using a Turian saying. “The humans have been more than reasonable about the whole sorry affair and the Council does not want to reverse the progress we have made. Continuing with your path will end badly, I’m warning you. Not to mention risking the relationship between the Hierarchy and the Citadel. Is it worth it?”

“I have my orders and my pride, Councilor,” he stated. “The Primarch is not happy. I intend to do something about that.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “I have always considered your undoubted intelligence overrode the less salubrious aspects of your personality, General Gainus, but perhaps that was a mistake,” she said, deciding that she no longer had the patience with the fool to be polite. As he swelled with indignation at her blunt words, she went on, “On behalf of the Citadel Council, I am formally directing you to remove your ships from the vicinity immediately.”

“Your request is denied, Madame Councilor,” he replied with a neutral expression that concealed what she imagined was considerable anger. “Give me access to the human representative, allow me to put the Hierarchy’s demands to them, and I will leave. Not before.”

“I have no authority over the New Concordiat, General,” she told him tiredly, wishing that this day would end. “Neither do you. If you persist in this matter, it will not end well. I urge you to reconsider.”

His expression turned into a small smirk then the call ended. Tevos put her hands over her face and gently rubbed her temples, wondering what she’d done to deserve people like him causing the problems they did. She did her best to be a decent councilor, balancing the demands of the job against the demands of her own government, which wasn’t easy at times, and despite all odds had managed it for a long time with a reasonable amount of success.

Then the Turians went and poked something that should have remained unpoked.

Life sucked sometimes.
“You have done everything you could, Tevos,” a voice said. She dropped her hands to see Commander Hebert regarding her with sympathy and understanding. “We are well aware of the history of the Citadel and the various species that comprise it. And of the common stereotypes of all of them. He embodies some of the less helpful ones of the Turians, while Eporius here is proof that stereotypes are not truths. The Asari, again, have many things said about them, some of which are unflattering, and many of which are true. From what I have learned today, you show that these things are no more universal than in the case of the Turians. Or, for that matter, the Salarians or any other species.”

The woman shrugged. “Everyone tend to group a people by perceived characteristics, for one reason or another. That doesn’t mean its either valid or sensible to do so. We’re not going to hold the actions of one Turian against their entire species. As I explained earlier, we aren’t easily pushed into war. Our agreement stands, despite General Gainus or Primarch Opitis doing whatever it is that they have planned.” She smiled faintly. “It’s not like they can succeed, after all.”

“Intend to simply ignore Gainus, or make an example?” Vaesarth asked curiously, seeming fairly unconcerned about what might happen as a result. If anything, she appeared interested to see what the results would be. It was a quite Salarian outlook, Tevos thought.

“I think I should probably have a word with him,” the human woman smiled. “I’m sure we can come to an understanding.”

Rising, she straightened her clothing, brushing a little speck of lint from one arm. She bowed respectfully. “It has been a pleasure talking to you all, Councilors. I am glad we could come to a mutually satisfactory agreement. The New Concordiat thanks you for your time and understanding, and once again expresses regret that lives were lost in our initial encounter. With any luck this will never happen again. And in due time, if circumstances permit, we may well meet again. Until then, I wish you all the best.”

She saluted crisply, then blinked out of existence.

All three council members looked at where she’d been for a few seconds, then at each other. There was silence for a while.

“That did really happen, didn’t it?” Eporius asked in the end.

Tevos and Vaesarth nodded.

“Strange day.”

They nodded again.

“Gainus is fucked, isn’t he?”

They nodded again.

He grinned viciously. “Good. With any luck, this will result in Opitis losing support, and someone with an actual brain getting in. It’s past time we had a change at the top.”

“That is your own government you’re talking about, Eporius,” Tevos pointed out with a small smile.
“I am well aware of that,” he chuckled. “Never liked that overbearing idiot. I wonder what she’s going to do?”

“Something spectacular, I would think,” Tevos replied, wondering what the new reports were going to be like when all this finally hit the public awareness and rather dreading it, while still being curious.

He nodded, returning to fiddling with his omnitool. After a moment, he produced a holographic image over the table, showing the Citadel in the middle with all the ships coming and going from it. The human ship was highlighted, as were the Turian vessels surrounding it. “A friend of mine in Traffic Control linked this to me,” he explained as they watched. “I thought it would help us see what results from all this.”

“Will be educational,” Vaesarth commented, leaning forward for a better view. Tevos did the same. Then they waited.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Gainus closed the link with an internal feeling of satisfaction. The entire Council annoyed him, and that mealy-mouthed Asari was the worst of them. All talk and no action, that was generally the Asari way in any case, and she exemplified it nicely. It had been a genuinely pleasurable moment essentially telling her that she was irrelevant.

He would have to step carefully, even so. Push things too far and he couldn’t engineer a way out of the problems that would ensue, but he was good at going right up to the line and no further. With Opitis backing him, the Council could pretty much be safely ignored, as long as he was cautious.

The New Concordiat ship, which was one of the ugliest things he’d ever seen, and definitely the most heavily armed by a completely ludicrous amount, had totally ignored them as they’d surrounded it at a respectful distance. None of the weapons had even twitched, there were no obvious emissions from it indicating it was targeting them, or even noticed they were there. Every weapon in his small fleet was aimed at it, with the targeting calculations run over and over to ensure that if it came to the point he fired nothing would hit either the Citadel or any other ship not involved.

Traffic control ordering all the other vessels in the area to keep clear, as he’d expected would happen, had helped that enormously. So did the fact that the human ship was a long way from the Citadel, the representative presumably having used a shuttle of some sort to visit the Council.

His agents on the Citadel were all in position to attempt to grab this mysterious person, but he didn’t like to assume that they would succeed. No one had apparently noticed the New Concordiat diplomat arriving, after all, so it seemed likely that they might be able to slip away as easily despite his precautions. He could think of several ways of doing the same thing, the easiest being to use a small ship from another species that no one would look twice at. Possibly one of the Turian landing craft that they could have laid hands on from the fleet they’d ravaged. That class of vessel was so common as to be totally unremarkable.

Whatever the truth of it, sooner or later they had to return to their ship, and he was in position to intercept them. The human craft was imposing, true, being a dreadnought or whatever they would call it, but they weren’t going to risk firing on one of his ships when one of theirs was in the firing line. No sane person would, after all.
So all he had to do was wait for a small craft to head towards the New Concordiat ship and stop it. Once he had the diplomat and their team, if present, on board, he could apply pressure to this new species and extract reparations for their actions.

Lost in his plans, he twitched when his communications officer called for him. “General?”

“What is it?”

“There’s an incoming call for you. From the New Concordiat ship.”

Somewhat surprised, he looked over to the crew member, then replied, “Put it through on the main viewer.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tevos looked at her omnitool as it beeped with the tone that indicated an incoming message. Opening it, she scanned it quickly.

**I’m relaying the conversation I’m about to have with General Gainus to you for your own records, Councilor. I thought you might find it interesting. Commander Hebert.**

Activating the link provided, Tevos set her device showing another hologram to go with the one Eporius had displayed. Between them, they could see and hear the entire encounter.

She settled back to watch, idly wondering if there was a suitable snack for times like this.

It was sort of funny when it was happening to someone else...

Returning his attention to the large holographic display, Gainus studied the image of the alien that appeared in it. The creature appeared remarkably similar to an Asari aside from skin color and the dark hair or fur instead of tentacles on her head. She was wearing a black military cut uniform, impeccably turned out, and standing with her hands behind her back in a position like parade rest in his own armed forces. “Fleet General Gainus, I am Commander Taylor Hebert of the New Concordiat. I understand you would like to speak to me?”

“You are speaking to someone with such authority,” she replied with a small smile. “And the person who was recently in discussion with the Council. I have just returned to my ship and I find it appears to be surrounded by a Turian battle group.” She tilted her head inquisitively. “Every member of which has a target lock on me. I find that slightly odd, considering that I parted from the Council on good terms and as far as I know am not presenting a threat to anyone at the moment.”

“You are in a very large, ridiculously well armed warship, Commander,” he pointed out, at the
same time motioning with one hand out of sight of the camera to the sensor operator who should have seen whatever ship she arrived on. The officer rechecked his instruments then shrugged, shaking his head. “A certain level of caution is only sensible, especially taking into account the fact that your species has defeated two separate fleets from the Hierarchy very recently using far smaller vessels.”

She smiled more widely, showing a hint of teeth in a subtle but very definitely vicious manner. “Yet you feel it a good idea to attempt to make yourself a threat to me even knowing that? Interesting.”

“You have one dreadnought. I have four, as well as sixteen cruisers.” He returned the smile, rather maliciously. “And we are not going in blind like the last fleet did. We know about your AIs and you won’t take us by surprise.”

She inspecting him for a moment, looking intrigued as far as he could tell. Then she said, “The Council and the New Concordiat have reached a mutually satisfactory arrangement, one of non interference on both sides. We have no quarrel with you as long as you stay out of our territory. And we have taken steps to make sure that is easy to do. I urge you to stand down and forget about this. As far as we are concerned the matter is over. We will return all captured crew very shortly, as we promised the Councilors. It would be in your best interests to stop your current actions.”

He snorted in anger. “Your species attacked our fleets.”

“After you invaded our space and fired on us without warning,” she retorted. “You were asked to leave, very politely, and right up to the moment the first shot was fired we would have happily allowed that. Once your frigate opened fire on us, our rules of engagement allowed our sentry to defend himself and the system he was patrolling. He did his duty and will be commended for it. The second fleet was a deliberate invasion and could easily be considered an act of war if we were so inclined. Luckily for you, we are not so inclined and wish to put it all behind us.”

“It’s not that easy, Commander. We demand fair reparations for the missing ships and the cost of replacing them. Not to mention the insult to the Hierarchy.” Gainus glared at the figure in the holotank. “The Primarch is furious about this entire affair. He is not easily placated and isn’t going to just forget about it.”

“I would advise you to advise him that it’s a good idea to learn to live with minor disappointments,” she replied, shrugging insolently. He fumed but kept his temper. “I reiterate, from our point of view we are finished with this incident. If you wish to incite another one, that’s your business, but I would strongly urge you to reconsider.”

General Gainus glared for a moment or two, thinking over his options. The damn woman was, somehow, back on her ship without any trace of how she’d managed that. Assuming, of course, that she was the diplomat in question. It was always possible she was trying a bluff of some sort. He’d keep the undercover agents on the Citadel active for now, just in case that was the truth and all this was a diversion.

On the other hand, if she was indeed the one who had been closeted with the damn Council for hours, how the hells had she got back onto her ship without any evidence of it? Some sort of stealth craft? That spirits-damned AI warship that had jumped the first fleet at Relay 314 had apparently popped up out of nowhere, so there was precedent for it. A worrying thought.

Whatever the final truth of it, she claimed to speak for the New Concordiat and she was on that ugly ship, so he might as well proceed according to that part of the plan.
“I’m afraid I can’t let you leave until we come to our own arrangement, Commander,” he began, making a signal with his hand again. Every vessel under his command armed weapons. It was mostly a bluff, since he didn’t want to fire unless there was no other way, since the political fallout of such an action would be immense, but as long as she thought he was ready to act…

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Another call came in as Tevos stared in horror at the idiotic Turian who seemed intent on committing suicide. She answered it, not taking her eyes off the hologram. “Tevos, what is that idiot General doing now?” Matriarch Kaizphia said angrily. “He’s armed all his weapons and looks ready to fire on that bizarre ship.”

Tevos glanced to the side, at the image of the Destiny Ascension commander, who looked ready to step in. Which would only lead to things the councilor dreaded. “Matriarch Kaizphia, do not interfere,” she said firmly.

“But he’s about to cause a major diplomatic incident…” the other woman protested.

“By the authority of the Citadel Council, I order you to stay out of this. Do nothing. Keep back and let the New Concordiat commander deal with Gainus. I mean it, you are TO. DO. NOTHING. Do you understand me?” Tevos almost shouted.

Kaizphia stared at her, apparently taken aback at the unusual display of command from the Asari councilor. “No, I don’t understand at all, but I’ll follow orders,” she finally replied rather reluctantly.

“Good. No matter what happens, it is vital that the Destiny Ascension does not become involved. Trust me on that.”

“When this is over I expect an explanation, Tevos.”

“When this is over I doubt you’ll need one, Kaizphia.” Tevos stabbed the disconnect control and went back to watching the other displays, her heart hammering.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

The woman didn’t visibly react other than her smile growing cold. “Are you certain you want to do this, General?” she asked calmly.

“One warship against twenty, Commander. Despite your technology, I suspect that all of us firing at once would be awkward at a minimum. It would be best if you surrender. I don’t want to harm you or your crew unnecessarily but you’re not going anywhere until my government gets what it desires.”

They stared at each other for a moment.

“There are three things you are misunderstanding, Fleet General,” Commander finally said, still icily calm and speaking quietly. She held up a finger. “The first one is that even if all your ships do fire at once the effect on my ship will be precisely zero. You have no weapons that would even scratch my paintwork.”
As he opened his mouth, she held up a second finger.

“The second thing is that we do not use the mass relay system. Blockading us from it achieves nothing at all. I can leave at any point I desire.” She held up a third finger as he absorbed that. It suddenly struck him to think that Relay 314 had disappeared before this ship had arrived at the Citadel, which meant that she might well be telling the truth. He’d missed that.

“The third, and most important point of all, General, is that Kenny’s Friend is not a warship. It is a reasonably well armed scout ship, my personal vessel.”

Gainus stared at her, then turned his head to look at the image of the kilometer long sleek black shape festooned with more weapons turrets than seemed even slightly plausible that was on one of the operations screens. “A scout ship?” he asked in strangled tones of disbelief. It sounded utterly ridiculous.

“Yes,” Commander Hebert nodded, still smiling. “If you wish to look approximately ten degrees to your port, that is a warship.”

Tevos, along with her companions, looked at the image from traffic control and the ship that had appeared on it. There were some small sounds like tiny animals being killed by a predator from Eporius. She felt her own breathing simply stop for several seconds.

After a very, very long moment, she cranked her head away with a huge effort of will to look the small holograms of both Commander Hebert and General Gainus, displayed side by side in the feed relayed by the former, who was watching the latter’s reaction with what looked like amusement. The Councilor was having enormous difficulty not simply fainting, considering that the ship that had simply and without fuss appeared on cue was, according to the TC sensors, very close to a third the length of the entire Citadel.

It was impossible, but it was definitely there.

And the amount of weapons emplacements she could make out down the light-absorbing hull were simply insane.

“So is that one,” Commander Hebert added helpfully, as another identical ship appeared on the other side of the Unification. General Gainus appeared utterly frozen in shock. “And that one, and that one, and even that one behind you.” Unwillingly, Tevos followed the hologram of doom with her eyes, a ship appearing in each spot, until she finally had to close them. Eporius was making a faint harsh rattle in his throat, while Vaesarth seemed to have passed out.

“I feel it worth pointing out that these are not by any means the largest or most powerful ships in our fleet,” the horrifying woman went on after a pause. “You may wish to bear that in mind. We do have a considerable number of them, in fact, but for most purposes we generally find that one is sufficient. I brought five with me to impress upon you that we are quite serious in our desire to see the end of this matter. I trust I have made my point, General? Or would you like to have one volley each and see who comes out best?”

Gainus’s mandibles were moving but no sound was coming out. Commander Hebert waited
patiently. Eventually, after close to a minute, the general turned his head and said, “Stand down all weapons, set a course for the relay.” He looked back at the camera. His mouth worked a little.

The human woman nodded slightly. “Excellent. It was a pleasure meeting you, General. Please give my respects to your Primarch and tell him our business is concluded.” She saluted him, then the image disappeared. Tevos reached out with a numb trembling hand and deactivated her omnitool, then put her head in her hands, shaking at the realization of what could have happened if things had gone slightly differently.

Today had not gone the way she’d expected when she’d woken up.

When Vaesarth finally came around, all three of them stared at each other, then the traffic control hologram, which was now empty of any New Concordiat ships. She expected that the excrement had well and truly hit the air recirculator, since there was no way that the news wasn’t all over the Citadel by now. They were going to have a lot of explaining to do to practically everyone, which meant that they were going to be busy for some time.

With mutual silent accord, all three Councilors decided that it could wait until they had something to eat. And had recovered from the whole weird experience.

Assuming they ever did.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

“That went well, I think.”

“I agree, Taylor. It was also fairly amusing.”

“Was all the posturing completely necessary, Kenny? Although I admit it was quite a lot of fun.”

“It was the best method of achieving our goals. The revised projections are encouraging. The chances of an internal Citadel civil war in the next two centuries has fallen to less than four percent, while the likelihood of the Geth situation being resolved peacefully has risen to just under eighty-two percent. Other metrics have also adjusted in a positive direction. All in all, I think it went as well as we could have expected.”

“A pity that so many people died in the process.”

“It was, as you know, a small fraction of the inevitable toll if the situation had gone as it originally was headed. Regrettable in the extreme but avoiding casualties completely simply isn’t possible.”

“Ah well. Overall, I’m happy, I suppose. We can get back to work now.”

“Indeed. Oh, you got a message from your mother while you were otherwise engaged. She wanted to remind you that Emma’s birthday is in two weeks and she expects you both home for it.”

“I would never miss that! Have I ever missed her birthday even once after all this time?”

“No, but you know your mother.”

“That I do, Kenny, that I do. Come on, let’s go see how things are coming along. The project is nearly complete according to Engineer.”
“That insane Kzin has been saying it’s nearly done for ten years now. His time estimation skills are inefficient.”

“He’s a damn good stellar engineer, though. You have to admit that.”

“True. And unlike Hunts-With-Knives, you didn’t have to beat him to a pulp before he’d sit down and listen to sense, so I suppose that’s good.”

“Your voice when you talk about them is hilarious, Kenny. You know you quite like the Kzinti.”

“They do have their good points, I admit.”

“And they’re so soft! No wonder Emma likes stroking Engineer.”

“Yes, Taylor. That’s why.”

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Eporius watched as the massive ship docked, the flat black hull relieved only by a surprisingly small number of weapons and a legend at the nose that read SHP6829110 in the human script. The data block that Commander Hebert had sent them just before she left, somehow, had contained among a vast collection of very disturbing information that they were still analyzing some background information on the New Concordiat, including an explanation of their numbering and writing system. Other than that and a small amount of supplementary data, the human culture was still a complete blank to them, and would probably remain as such until and unless they established some form of relationship with the New Concordiat.

He didn’t think that would happen soon. Based on what the commander had told them, she had been entirely correct that the Citadel cultures were incompatible with the human one in a number of fundamental ways. One of the problems was that they were clearly hundred of years at least more technologically advanced than the Asari, or even the Salarians. He knew well what was likely to happen to the less advanced culture in such a situation. The Citadel species were also vastly outnumbered, which wouldn’t help either.

On the whole, he thought that maintaining a separation between them was a good idea. The use of AI in such quantities was enough to ensure total chaos never mind everything else. It would take decades if not longer before the Citadel species could hope to learn to accept that. Especially with the example of the Quarians and the Geth.

He made a mental note to look into that particular event again. From what the woman had told them as an aside, it was worth revisiting. The way the Quarians had been abandoned had always rankled a little with him, and perhaps it was time to investigate some more…

The Turian sighed slightly. The last week had been unbelievably hectic, and it was only getting started. The fallout back home on Palaven was going weirder by the day, with the Primarch’s position looking more and more shaky. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the top slot was filled by someone else in the not too distant future. Hopefully someone who would think things out before reaching for a gun this time.

One could hope.
Tevos had spent the last three days talking with the Asari government, and had looked more frazzled every time he’d seen her as a result. He wasn’t privy to exactly what had been said, but the data packet had contained some… highly suspect… revelations that he rather thought were causing a certain amount of upset among the Asari. He’d find out sooner or later and right now had other things to worry about.

“Interesting thought occurs,” a voice said from beside him, making him glance to that side. Vaesarth was standing next to the railing of the observation balcony overlooking the docking bay, like him watching the New Concordiat transport dock. “Wonder if New Concordiat number ships sequentially…”

“Why?” Eporius asked curiously.

“Statistical analysis can suggest upper limit to number of ships produced. Only two samples, so large error margin. But assuming that serial numbers are sequential and started at 1, simplest formula is largest number, plus largest number divided by number of samples, minus one. Gives maximum likely number subject to error of over ten point eight seven million ships.” The Salarian’s voice trailed off as she apparently realized what she was saying as she said it. They stared at each other for a moment.

“Need larger sample size to be more accurate,” she added weakly.

“I don’t think I want to know,” he sighed.

The ship below them finished docking. Several large hatches opened and ramps extruded to the ground. As they watched, groups comprised mostly of Turians began coming down the ramps, gathering in their thousands down the kilometer and a half length of the vessel. He headed for the elevator to the concourse level, Vaesarth and their C-Sec guards following.

A few minutes later he was approached by a group of tall figures wearing power armor that made a Krogan look like a sickly Quarian. The massive figures were accompanied by two Turians, both carrying kit bags. One had the rank insignia of a Captain, one of a Major. The little group halted in front of him.

“Councilor Eporius, Commander Hebert sends her compliments and thanks. I am Major Jon Barnes, New Concordiat Marines.” The armored man saluted. Eporius nodded to him politely. “As agreed, we are returning the crews of all ships captured at the Relay 314 incident. Thirty seven thousand and fifty five survivors, two thousand and sixty one deceased personnel.”

The Turian looked past the huge crowd of Hierarchy crew-members and officers, who were standing around in rough ship groupings, to see that a couple of hundred similarly-armored humans were forming a double row down one ramp. Shortly a long series of what were obviously bodies in boxes started coming down the ramp, carried by small automated cargo handlers. As the first one appeared, the entire group of humans saluted it in respect, and held the salute as they kept coming.

He blinked, unexpectedly touched. It was a nice gesture and in keeping with Turian tradition. By appearances, the New Concordiat had more than a few similarities with his species. If only things had been different.

“Thank you, Major,” he replied, returning his attention to the armored soldier.

“If you would sign here, please, sir, to acknowledge that your people have been returned as
agreed.” The man held out an unfamiliar form of electronic pad and a stylus. Eporius accepted it, read the document, then signed the bottom. The device silently extruded a plastic sheet with a copy of the document on it, which he took. Then he gave the thing back to the major, who slipped it back into a case on his armor, saluted, and turned to the two other Turians who had been silently listening and watching.

He saluted them too. “Captain Abernius, Major Falgius, I found our discussions interesting. I am sorry that we met under such circumstances.”

“As am I, Major Barnes,” Captain Abernius replied. He returned the salute as did his fellow ship commander. “But I have no complaints about how we were treated.”

“Thank you, Captain. Until we meet again.” The human nodded to them and left, his squad accompanying him. They all watched as the armored figures rejoined their compatriots, who had apparently nearly finished unloading the poor bastards who hadn’t made it. Only five minutes later the task was done.

An order was shouted, the whole battalion of soldiers about faced, and marched up the ramp. It retracted behind them, as did all the other ones, then the hatches closed. Remarkably quickly, the ship was sealed and undocked, moving away from the bay until it was clear, before accelerating away. The last sight Eporius had of a New Concordiat vessel was the thing disappearing into the distance, a faint silhouette against the nebula, before it was gone.

The councilor looked at the sheet in his hand, then slowly folded it and tucked it away. He turned to the two ship commanders, who were still peering after the now-vanished alien craft. “We should probably debrief you now,” he said wearily. “Come on, I need a drink.” Looking at the C-Sec guards who were staring at the huge crowd of returned former prisoners, he added, “Call in as many people as you need to get everyone interviewed and into accommodation until we can arrange ships to take them home, please.”

One guard began talking into his omnitool, while the other one followed Eporius, Vaesarth, and the two other Turians as they went in search of something drinkable.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Two years later
Star system code name ‘Quick Shot’
New Concordiat space

“Final checks all passed in the green.”

“Excellent. Target first group, set aperture to ten percent, shot duration five hundred microseconds, simultaneous operation.”


“Fire shot, cycle to next group and repeat.”

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

In close orbit of the primary, forty-six thousand, three hundred and sixteen energy collectors each
dumped all the solar radiation collected across over thirty million square kilometers of surface through a wormhole only two meters in diameter.

In intergalactic space, over a hundred and fifty thousand light years away, forty-six thousand, three hundred and sixteen wormholes opened, each one spewing a beam of almost solid radiation two meters across for half a millisecond, then closed.

And the first group of dormant Reapers simultaneously ceased to exist…

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“What do you want to do when we finish this project, Taylor?”

“Same thing we do all the time, Kenny. Save another galaxy.”

“A rewarding hobby.”

“Yep.”
“Halt! You have entered a protected zone with lethal intent. Leave immediately or you will be subdued. Personal injury is a high likelihood if you resist capture. You have thirty seconds to comply with my orders.”

Everyone stopped and stared, even Kaiser and Armsgmaster, who had been engaged in a fierce battle with the villain frantically producing blades from almost every surface around him, and the Tinker hero chopping his way past these with a halberd which was glowing blue-white and trailing sparks at each impact. The rest of the Empire capes, minus Krieg who had just been downed by Miss Militia who’d used a grenade launcher loaded with sedative grenades, also whirled to look at where the unexpected and very loud voice had come from.

The Protectorate members who were able to disengaged from their E88 opponents to evaluate the new threat, while the various PRT troopers and gang mooks all pointed weapons towards the alley the voice had come from, everyone mutually deciding that for the moment the latest addition to the chaos was more important.

Everyone knew that voice. Or at least, a voice that sounded a lot like it. It wasn’t quite human, although for a machine it was incredibly good, even though it was far deeper than most people could ever manage.

And it sounded very annoyed. That part was remarkably human.

“Oh, hell, she’s here,” Assault said in a worried voice. No one needed more explanation about who she was.

Dinochrome.

Nobody knew much about her, aside from her apparently being a Tinker with remarkable technology which she could produce far faster than usual, and with a knowledge of military techniques and weapons that was second to none. And, far more worryingly, the ability to produce strong AI at a level that the PRT suspected was well past human intelligence. The machines she pulled out of nowhere were absolutely devastating if pushed, although at the same time they appeared to be programmed to only react if threatened, or if you threatened someone they were protecting.

The Teeth had found that out the hard way, when they’d had the bright idea to move back into Brockton Bay a few months ago. After a series of battles between them, the PRT, the BBPD, and even the E88 as well, Dinochrome had apparently lost patience and become involved.

No one had seen the Teeth, or the Butcher, ever again. But there was a two hundred foot diameter mildly radioactive crater in the worst part of the Docks where they’d been, lined with glass…

Somehow the radiation was decaying far faster than naturally could occur, and no contamination had spread past the hole, nor had whatever had made it done any other damage, but the mere idea of that happening again was enough to give pause to even the stupidest criminal. And whatever else he was, Kaiser wasn’t an idiot.

“Oh, fuck,” the man himself muttered.
Armsmaster was minded to agree.

Everyone watched as what could only be described as a bipedal tank stepped out of the alley, its clawed feet crunching on the debris beneath it. The thing looked like something out of a video game, or possibly an SF movie, but it was very real and very dangerous. The sheer number of weapons protruding from the pair of turrets that took the place of arms on either side of the egg-shaped torso spoke of that fact.

As did the minor issue that no one yet had any idea what most of them actually did.

“You now have twenty seconds to comply,” the machine intoned, scanning everyone present with the optical systems on the top of the chassis, a visible green beam flickering over them. Armsmaster’s own systems told him that the light was the least of it, as the machine was also using ultrasonics, radar from low VHF frequencies to terahertz radiation that went above the range his systems could detect, some sort of positron emission scanner, and half a dozen other methods he could detect but not classify.

It was fair to say that Dinochrome didn’t mess about.

“Who are you?” a rough voice shouted from the other side of the crossroads where the gang and the authorities had ultimately clashed. Armsmaster recognized it and sighed faintly. Hookwolf, unlike Kaiser, was an idiot. A very dangerous one too, and far too fond of violence. It was his first instinct, and his second, and so on.

“My designation is MRK432501. To my friends I am known as Mark,” the machine replied immediately, turning to look in that direction, as much as anything that mechanical appearing could be said to be looking. Armsmaster was well aware that it was still easily capable of keeping everyone else under surveillance even as it was apparently talking to the villain. “You may refer to me as sir.”

“Fuck that, tin boy,” the criminal cape shouted. “I don’t call anyone sir.”

“As you wish. You are designated Hookwolf, Empire Eighty Eight villain, known murderer and serial absconder. I will refer to you as Target One.”

Armsmaster sighed again, very quietly. That was the other problem with Dinochrome’s creations. They were all far too intelligent for his comfort, much more autonomous than sense would suggest was wise, and every single one of them had a sense of humor. One he found deeply irritating.

Annoyingly, Dragon seemed to consider them rather amusing, and he suspected nursed something of a liking for the reclusive Tinker weapons expert. Not entirely surprising since there was a degree of similarity between his friend and the other person, as no one had seen either one in the flesh.

Turning back to scan the crowd again, almost all of whom, villains and heroes alike, were either pointing weapons at it or ready to attack, the machine said, “You now have ten seconds to comply. Withdraw or face the consequences. Nine. Eight. Seven...”

The weapons turrets lifted slightly and several devices lit up, a low hum coming from somewhere on the thing. Armsmaster’s suit sensors detected a rapidly building energy source that had already reached a level far past his own hardware’s capacity and was increasing at a rate that frankly
terrified him.

“Six. Five...”

Coming to a decision, one that he knew was going to make the Director shout at him but the only one that made sense under the circumstances, Armsmaster stepped back from Kaiser, who glanced at him in what looked like relief, then said into his comms, “Protectorate forces, disengage and fall back.”

A similar order was given almost simultaneously by the lieutenant leading the PRT troopers, all of whom rapidly scattered, heading for the other side of the street and the area that was outside that which Dinochrome tended to defend. Most of the Docks were covered by this zone, and it expanded in odd ways at times, usually in the vicinity of some business or other that had come to an agreement with her.

And god help you if you started anything anywhere within two blocks of any hospital in the city. Because no one else would.

“Three. Two...”

Kaiser shouted an order and the unpowered gang members turned and legged it. One or two neglected to hold onto their weapons in the process, so keen were they to leave the possible blast zone. Most of the capes including their leader did much the same, Kaiser himself raising his hands to signal he was retreating and then quickly but in a dignified manner moving back. Armsmaster found himself walking backwards beside the villain, which was unnerving.

“One. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter,” the machine said pleasantly. It watched as they moved past whatever invisible perimeter it had, then turned to leave. Relieved that they hadn’t managed to make the terrifying weapons cape of Brockton, or any of her creations, take precipitate action, Armsmaster exhaled silently and thankfully.

Right then was when Hookwolf, who had been visibly reluctantly following Kaiser while looking back over his armored and spiky shoulder, whirled and dashed towards the device.

“Oh, hell,” he heard Kaiser mutter. “Hookwolf! Abort that, now!”

It had no effect. The bladed monstrous form of the E88’s most dangerous cape leaped onto the machine, which had paused, apparently well aware he was coming and not worried. With a howl of rage he formed his body into even larger blades and started slashing at the outer hull of the thing. “Die, you freaking bastard of a machine,” he screamed as he attacked it.

“Lethal force has been used by Target One,” the machine announced conversationally, to no one in particular. “My rules of engagement permit response in kind. All unaffiliated personnel are advised to look away now.”

It didn’t sound worried, or particularly interested in what Hookwolf, who was still trying to forcefully dismantle it, thought of the matter. Armsmaster quickly engaged his PA and said, “I would respectfully request that you refrain from lethal actions, MRK432501.”

He thought that politeness with urgency was probably the best approach, as past encounters had shown that flatly ordering Dinochrome’s machines to do anything had little effect. Apparently the PRT and the Protectorate were not in their chain of command, based on the responses.
“Your request is noted, Armsmaster. My commander allows me to use my own best judgment in this case.”

The machine, which was apparently unaffected by the furious Hookwolf, who didn’t himself seem likely to give up any time soon, shifted one of the turrets in a blur of motion that was almost impossible to track, then there was a very loud noise and a flash. Armsmaster’s visor opaqued as the anti-flash system cut in, then cleared a moment later to see the Changer fly overhead trailing smoke and debris while a glow showed where whatever weapon had been used had hit him.

“Pull!” Assault shouted. Because of course he did.

Another bolt of energy hit the rapidly moving and almost certainly severely damaged Hookwolf, altering his trajectory enough to make him slam into the fourth floor of the building he hit with an impact that sprayed masonry everywhere. He then tumbled down the front of it and landed in the street with a crash, while every single person still present stared in shock.

The machine took two steps forward as Hookwolf groaned and tried to get up. It fired once more, energy impacting him and crackling over his scorched and melted blades with a sound of thunder. He dropped and lay still, the blades rapidly disappearing to reveal a badly burned and clearly heavily injured cape.

“He will live,” Dinochrome’s creation announced calmly. “Does any other person present wish to be designated Target Two?”

Oddly enough, everyone, even Armsmaster and Kaiser, shook their heads rapidly.

“Excellent. In that case, my job here is done. Do not enter a protected zone with aggressive intent again. Please have a nice day.” It scanned them all once more, somehow giving the impression that it was almost smirking at them, turned, and left almost silently.

There wasn’t a mark on it from where Hookwolf had been trying to disassemble it. Armsmaster didn’t know what the hell Dinochrome made the hulls of her machines from, aside from her referring to it as ‘Flintsteel,’ but it was harder than diamond and invulnerable to anything anyone had so far fielded against one of them, doubly impressive as there was no evidence of any form of force field in use.

And anyone who tried such a thing never managed to try again, as the machines tended not to appreciate being shot at and had a direct manner to register their disapproval.

Kaiser looked at him, then at the still smoking form of his heaviest hitter, paused as if he was going to say something, then shook his head and walked away, motioning to his remaining people to follow. Armsmaster watched him go, rather feeling that he should do something, but right now not really up to it. The way the fight had been so abruptly and violently ended was still sinking in.

Eventually, when none of the E88 members other than those trapped in containment foam or otherwise disabled were present, he shrugged and waved to his own people to start gathering the prisoners up. On the whole it was a good result, having bagged two of the Empires more dangerous capes and fifteen of their other members.

It was likely that the Director would have other ways to describe the entire thing, but she hadn’t been there.
“Director Piggot is going to be furious that you just let them walk away,” Miss Militia said from beside him, echoing his own thoughts, as she glanced at him then around at the scene.

“Probably. But I for one do not wish to provoke Dinochrome any further,” he replied quietly, turning to look at her. “Or her creations. Remember what happened when Tagg came to town to, in his own words, ‘Resolve the idiotic situation none of the people in that damn city are doing enough about’?”

She winced.

*Everyone remembered that.*

It was why the Protectorate, the PRT, and the US government in general had all decided that backing Dinochrome into a corner was not to be considered sensible. She didn’t react well to that sort of thing, although to be fair she was unfailingly polite about it even as everything caught fire or exploded. Or just disappeared in a violet flash of light…

“Oh well. It was only Tagg, no one missed him,” she said slightly weakly. He nodded as he headed towards Hookwolf where a PRT medical team were treating his now heavily restrained form.

“Quite.”

Shortly they were on the way back to headquarters and a no doubt uncomfortable meeting.
August 6th, 2005

“Hi, Pat, how’s things?” Danny said cheerfully as he held the door to The Captain’s Table open for his daughter, who followed him in and looked around with interest. A number of the regulars greeted him with shouts and calls of good humor, one or two doing the same to Taylor, who waved back with a broad smile. She was fairly well known to the various people around the docks, having accompanied him on a number of occasions around the place, and to work more often than that. The girl had always had a strong interest in mechanical things and appeared to find the entire area fascinating, to a slightly worrying level at times.

He’d had to go looking for her more than once, often finding her in one of the machine shops, or the vehicle depot, and occasionally under one of the vehicles being serviced. A few of the DWU mechanics appeared to find her amusing and would spend quite a lot of time explaining how engines worked, or how to repair a transmission. He suspected, based on her quick wit and remarkably good memory, that she probably knew more about cars than he did in some ways…

Recently she’d become even more curious, and over the summer vacation seemed to get into everything. At times she vanished entirely into the dockyards, although she’d promised not to go past the fence without him or someone else trusted with her and he had no reason to believe that she’d done so. When she gave him her word, she stuck to it. More so than he’d done at that age, certainly.

The problem was that she was amazingly good at finding loopholes in his instructions, and would present him with a well argued reason as to why what he’d said didn’t quite mean what he thought it meant. She could even produce documentary evidence of this on occasion. It made him sigh, and Annette laugh like a madwoman. Even Alan found it hilarious, saying she was better at that sort of thing than some lawyers he knew.

Danny wasn’t sure it was a compliment or not, but Taylor took it as one. So, he tended to spend quite a long time thinking through anything he wanted her to promise him, just in case he was missing something obvious.

It certainly was good practice in logically dismantling an argument, he mused as he walked over to the bar where the slightly younger guy who owned and ran the place was, Taylor trailing behind. Not practice he’d have expected to need when dealing with a ten year old girl, but useful nonetheless. On the upside, she was generally responsible when she wasn’t being Doctor Curlyhair, and oddly careful when she was, so in general he wasn’t too worried that she’d get into something that she couldn’t extricate herself from. And there were enough people around the place who’d jump in without question to help her if the worst happened, and would also keep an eye on her to make sure it didn’t, that he was fairly sure nothing serious would happen.

Not quite what he’d expected when she was born, but it kept him on his toes, there was no denying that.

“Good, Danny, very good. Nice day, business is going well, the beer’s cold… What more could a man want?” Pat replied, reaching over the bar to give him a hearty handshake. “And no one has tried anything for weeks around here either, so that’s helpful.”
“No trouble from the E88 or the Merchants, then?” Danny inquired. The neo-nazis mostly stayed away from the Docks in general, although they did sometimes come through making a nuisance of themselves, while the Merchants were more persistent but generally easy enough to chase off.

“Nah. Not for a while now. Last time the Merchants came by raising hell some of your guys beat their asses black and blue then chucked them into the bay,” Pat chuckled. “Pity the tide was out. Haven’t seen hide nor hair of them since. We had a small group of E88 gang types wander in about a month back, looking for trouble. It was very sad how they accidentally violently slammed their heads into the walls a few times then ended up in the street.” He looked thoughtful as Danny tried to prevent himself smiling. “Somehow four of my good pool cues got broken that night too. Odd thing. Ah well, they’re cheap enough.”


“Yeah. More or less. Heard that the Merchants got a new cape, though. Some idiot called Mush or something. Seems to be a literal trash man. And thick as two short sticks from what I was told.”

“Hmm.” He pondered the news. “Not ideal, I don’t like the Merchants having any capes, but as long as they stay away I guess we can’t do much about it.”

“Nope.” Pat shrugged. “If they do come around causing trouble, well, we’re good at giving them some. Cape or no cape.” He reached under the bar and retrieved one of the largest shotguns that Danny had ever seen. “This usually works.”

“Holy shit, what the hell is that?” Danny asked, staring at the thing.

“It’s a KS-23 pump action military carbine shotgun designed in the early nineteen seventies as a prison riot suppression weapon, Dad,” a voice from next to him said, sounding interested. Both he and Pat stared at Taylor, who was inspecting the weapon closely. “That one is the KS-23M model, with the shortened barrel and detachable buttstock. Three round magazine and one more in the chamber, and a rifled barrel, which gives it decent accuracy when firing solid projectiles. They’re quite rare in the US.”

When she finished reciting information which he was certain would be completely correct, she seemed to notice that almost everyone in the place had fallen silent and was looking at her, mostly with raised eyebrows and some with smiles. She flushed a little, appearing embarrassed. “It’s a nice gun,” she added in a small voice.

He ruffled her hair, making her sigh and push his hand away. “Thank you, dear,” he chuckled. “Exactly right, Taylor,” Pat said, sounding impressed as he put the enormous firearm back under the bar with a click of some sort of clamp engaging. “Got it in a poker game from one of your boys, Danny. Ex Spetsnaz fellow who had some souvenirs from his service days. Ammo is a little tricky to get but we found a source.”

“Ooh, do you have the Баракада cartridge?” she asked with a bit of excitement, pronouncing the Russian word without difficulty. “That one is cool, it’s a solid steel slug. It’ll go right through an engine block at over a hundred meters.” She looked thoughtful as Pat stared at her again. “It’d have a lot of recoil though.”

Danny looked at her, then at the bartender, who met his eyes. He shrugged a little weakly. Pat shook his head, then turned back to the girl. “No, I don’t have any of those,” he said patiently.
“Only buckshot. So far that’s all I needed. Mostly just waving it at troublemakers is enough.”

“Intimidation is a valid technique,” she nodded, sounding approving. “May I have a can of coke, please?”

Wordlessly Pat turned and retrieved the requested item from one of the under-counter fridges behind the bar, then slid it across to her. “Thank you!” she chirped, before popping the tab and taking a slurp of the drink, then wandering over to watch a couple of the patrons playing pool in the corner. Both men watched her go.

There was a short pause, ultimately broken by Pat. “You know, Danny,” he said calmly, his faint Irish accent making the words sound somewhat philosophical, “your daughter is a lovely lass, but by god sometimes she gives me the shivers.”

Danny sighed faintly. He understood what his friend meant. Taylor was prone to coming out with some of the most esoteric bits of information at times, often making him wonder where the hell she’d read it. Considering the sheer amount of reading she’d been doing this summer, there was no telling what she’d picked up. The girl certainly knew more about weaponry than most people, that was for sure.

He wasn’t entirely comfortable with it, but there didn’t really seem to be any harm in it, so he left her alone. Considering how hard it was to get some kids to crack a book at all he supposed he should be grateful that his own offspring was almost impossible to get to stop reading practically anything she ran across.

“She seems to be on a weaponry kick at the moment,” he finally replied. They watched as she studied the pool game which one of the locals was losing, his opponent someone Danny hadn’t seen before. “I have no idea where she got that from, though.”

“Learning Russian too, is she?” Pat asked. “Her accent sounded pretty good to me, but I’m no expert. Just know a few Russians.”

“She does seem to have a gift for picking up languages,” Danny nodded. “Read all Annette’s books on Japanese, Spanish, Greek, Italian, and German this summer. And she keeps getting one of us to take her to the library to get more books, since she’s gone through everything else in the house. I’ve never in my life met someone who reads as fast as she does.” He glanced at the other man, smiling a little. “I think she’s got some idea about reading the whole library.”

“She does realize, I hope, that the Brockton Bay library is the largest one in the state, right?” Pat asked with a grin. “That might take her a while.”

“She’s patient,” Danny replied. “Very, very patient. Weird for a kid that age.”

“Huh. Well, good luck to her.” Pat shook his head and turned back to Danny. “Got you three crates of beer, that’s all we could spare. There’ll be more next month, or perhaps in six weeks.”

“Business going well, I take it?”

“Oh, yes. We’ve sold more of that stuff in three months than I normally manage in a year,” Pat replied with great satisfaction. “And business is steadily picking up. Two places in Boston want to try it now.”
“Great. Make sure you don’t sell all of it to the big city folk, though.” Danny snickered a little as the barman laughed. “There’d be a riot if the beer ran out around these parts.”

“Don’t I know it,” Pat chuckled. “Your car outside? I’ll give you a hand loading it.”

“Just outside the door,” Danny nodded. Pat waved him to come around the end of the bar, while opening the trapdoor into the basement that was behind the long gleaming wooden counter-top. “Taylor, I’ll be back in a minute,” he called to his daughter who was now holding one of the pool cues and grinning at the winner of the game in a somewhat challenging fashion. The defeated local patron was watching with a tiny smirk, as were a number of other regulars.

“OK, Dad,” she replied, still grinning at the man, who seemed dubious.

With a grin of his own he followed Pat down the steep wooden stairs into the echoing space below the ancient building, which to his certain knowledge was one of the oldest in the city.

“She hustling pool sharks again?” Pat, who was at the other end of the enormous cellar, said with a laugh in his voice.

“Yes.” Danny shook his head. “She had that grin.”

“Poor bastard doesn’t know what’s going to happen next,” the barkeeper sniggered as he flipped a switch next to an old wooden door, something that was almost square and made of age-blackened planks about four inches thick. Danny followed him into the next room, which was considerably cooler than the rest of the cellar, which itself was a good ten degrees below the outside temperature. It was a nice relief from the heat, but in here it was almost too cold.

“Here you go,” Pat said, indicating a stack of crates in the corner, many more of them in piles with labels on for other customers. “Those are yours.”

“Great.” Danny pulled out a bottle and held it up to the light. “Looks good. Thanks.”

“No problem. Grab that one, I’ll take the other two.” Danny did as requested, picking up the top crate having put the bottle back, then waiting as the younger man heaved the two remaining ones off the floor. “Don’t bother about the lights, I’ll come back for that,” Pat added as they headed back to the stairs.

“Every time I come down here I’m amazed at how big this place is,” Danny commented as they walked. “Big enough to get the entire building in here, I think.”

“Probably. Used to be a storeroom for stuff coming in off the ships,” Pat replied, looking around at the dimly lit area, which disappeared into the dark at the edges. Racks of bottles, kegs, and other pub-related paraphernalia half filled the space, but most of the rest was empty. Off in one corner was a stack of ancient-looking wooden crates, which appeared to have probably been sitting there since before the war. The Civil one, possibly.

“Before that it got used for all sorts of things. Gramps told me they used to store gunpowder down here at one point in the cold room, since it was so secure. Supposedly there are at least two hidden tunnels out of the place too, which were used by smugglers or something. Never been able to find them though. But this place is bloody old, it was here before most of the docks were, so god knows what’s buried under the flagstones. Bodies, probably.” Pat shook his head, stopping at the foot of the stairs and putting his load down, then straightening up. “He also said it was the oldest building
in Brockton, and I know for a fact it’s the second oldest bar in the entire US.”

“Really? I didn’t know it was that old.”

“Yeah, it’s bloody ancient, this place. Been a bar for over two hundred years. In the family the entire time too. There have been some very strange things come through here over the years if the stories are right.” Pat smiled a little. “I’ve sure met some weird people while I’ve been here.” He looked around thoughtfully. “Got one girl a while ago, tall lass, well spoken, but there was something a little odd about her… Anyway, she got to talking with me and she said that this place existed in every world. Whatever the hell that means. According to her, if there’s a Brockton Bay, there’s a Captain’s Table.”

He shrugged, then picked up the crates again. “Mind you, she might have been off her head. But she seemed sincere, and was very easy to talk to. Couldn’t place her accent but she seemed intelligent.”

“Strange,” Danny said, shaking his head slightly. “I guess you meet some peculiar people in the Docks.”

“You do that, yes” Pat agreed, climbing the stairs slowly and carefully. Danny followed, then put his crate down on the counter and closed the trapdoor so they wouldn’t fall down it. Shortly the three crates were safely in back of his truck and strapped down under a tarp.

“Thanks, Pat,” Danny said, handing the man a roll of bills, which Pat put into his pocket without looking at it. “Good of you.”

“My pleasure, Danny,” the barman smiled. “Where are you off to now?”

“Taylor wanted to go to a shooting range,” he explained. “I asked around and got a recommendation, and we finally had time to go. That place just at the edge of the city to the north, uh...”

“BB Guns?” Pat said.

“That’s the place.” Danny nodded. “Some of the guys said it was safe and well run.”

“Never been there, but I’ve heard the same. Hope you two have fun.”

“We probably will,” Danny smiled. They heard a wave of laughter come from inside, causing both men to curiously go back into the bar and see what was going on.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Taylor counted her cash with a triumphant smile, while her father glanced at her every now and then, looking both proud and a little bemused. “...fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty,” she said under her breath. “Great, all here.”

“That poor man didn’t seem to know what hit him,” her father commented.

She shrugged. “He wasn’t as good as he thought he was.” Then she grinned. “I was as good as I thought I was.”
Laughing, her father reached out and prodded her affectionately. “Gas is on you, then.”

“Fine by me,” she giggled. “There’s plenty where that came from.”

“You know that sooner or later people are going to work out that your innocent little girl routine covers the heart and soul of a vicious pool shark, I hope?” Her father smirked as she giggled again. “Eventually you’ll run out of marks.”

Taylor grinned a little once more. “Wouldn’t bet on it.”

Shaking his head, her father returned his attention to the road. “Where did I go wrong,” he lamented. “I tried to raise an honest and upright daughter, and now look at her! Scamming honest pool players out of their hard earned cash. I blame your mother.”

She snorted with laughter. “Mom says they deserve it.”

“She would.” They shared another look, then both laughed.

“Kenny also says it’s good practice in trajectory calculation and tactical thinking,” she added a moment later, making her father roll his eyes a little, which amused both her and the AI tank that was a constant presence in the back of her mind.

One day she would be able to tell them, but not yet.

It would be pretty funny when it happened, she suspected with a hidden grin...

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“Hello, girls,” Annette said when she opened the door to see some familiar faces. “And Eric. How are all of you?”

“Fine, thanks, Mrs H,” Vicky Dallon said cheerfully. “Is Taylor in?”

“No, I’m afraid she’s out with her father,” Annette replied. “They should be back in about an hour or so, though. You can come in for some lemonade if you want, and wait.”

“Thanks,” the blonde said with a glance at her sister and cousin, both of whom nodded quickly. Amy was as usual fairly quiet, but she was also as usual watching everything around her carefully. The girl was very observant and tended to notice things that most didn’t.

Next to her, her cousin Eric grinned. “I love your lemonade,” the boy said happily.

“It’s a family recipe,” Annette replied as she stood aside for the three children, who all trooped in and headed for the kitchen. She was as usual pleased to see them. Since that time at the lake a few weeks ago, they and her daughter, and Emma, had often met up and seemed to get along very well. The redhead was still clearly much closer to Taylor and she didn’t think that was something that would change, but these three definitely counted as friends now, which pleased her.

“What are you three doing out alone like this?” she asked as she got three glasses out of the cupboard, then after a moment added a fourth.

“We got tired of hanging around at home,” Vicky said immediately. She was, as usual, the one
who tended to speak for all of them. The girl was ebullient and gregarious pretty much all the time, tending to extroverted. Amy was generally much quieter but very thoughtful and calm, while Eric was about halfway between the two sisters. “So we decided to go and look around. Your house isn’t that far from home and we thought Taylor might want to go do something. Maybe Emma too if she’s around.”

“We need more Doctor Curlyhair in our lives,” Amy added with a small grin, which made her somewhat plain face light up with mischief. Eric snickered, nodding.

“I am now worried,” Annette joked, filling all the glasses having added some ice cubes. “We all know what happens when the Doctor turns up.”

“Yeah! Lots of cool stuff!” Vicky grinned as she accepted a glass.

“That’s… one way to put it, I suppose,” Annette allowed. “Possibly not the way most people would, though.”

All three children exchanged looks then laughed, before drinking. “This is really good, Mrs H,” Eric said in tones of pleasure. “I love this stuff.”

“Thank you, Eric,” she smiled. “I hope you told your parents where you were going?”

Amy and Vicky looked at each other. They seemed to have a short wordless conversation, then looked back at her with identical grins. “Of course we did,” the blonde said confidently.

“I see.” Annette sighed a little. “I’d better call Carol, then.”

“Busted,” Eric whispered, making Amy poke him right in the middle of the chest, hitting something sensitive and causing him to wince. “ow...”

“Shh!” the brunette sister said out of the side of her mouth.

Annette watched with a small smile, then shook her head and refilled their glasses.

Children.

“I wish Emma could have come,” Taylor said, looking up at her father. She returned her attention to the handgun the instructor was holding and describing to the four people who had come to shoot here today, who weren’t regulars.

“You know she had to go and see her grandmother, Taylor. She can come next time if she wants, though.”

“OK.” His daughter was listening intently, her expressive eyes fixed on the weapon in the hand of the tall man who was their teacher and safety person. He was currently showing them how the magazine was loaded.

Taylor was the youngest person present by a few years, and had attracted a couple of glances, but no one had said anything. They were all in an enclosed shooting range that was made of cinderblocks and stretched out for some fifty yards from the rear of the building, which also
housed a decent sized gun store, the entire place heavily reinforced and festooned with visible and presumably invisible security measures. With the gang problems that Brockton Bay suffered from, Danny guessed that they had more than a few break in attempts, hence the reason the place was more solidly built than the PRT building itself.

“...and these magazines hold seven rounds. Safety here, this way is safe, this way is fire. Do not under any circumstances operate the safety or pull the trigger unless the weapon is aimed downrange, am I clear?” the instructor said, looking around at them all. Taylor nodded immediately, as did Danny, while the other three were a little slower. There were two men, one about twenty-one and the other in his fifties, and a woman about thirty or so, present.

“Good. Anyone who disobeys the instructions I gave you will be ejected immediately and banned for life. No refunds. Got me?” He looked around again. Once more, Taylor nodded. The younger man did as well while the older one looked a bit grumpy but did a few seconds later.

“Right. In that case, take your hearing protection and each pick a firing position. I will bring a weapon and four magazines to each station. You will load the weapon as I showed you, keeping it pointed downrange at all times, and wait for me to tell you you're clear to begin. Once you have finished firing, remove the magazine, check the action as you were shown, safe the weapon, then place it on the table and step back. I will double check each one at that point. Again, any fooling around will get you kicked out for good, so don’t do it.”

The tall dark haired man who gave off the air of someone who’d been trained in the military looked around at them all for a moment. Danny was impressed, he wasn’t in any way unpleasant about it, but he clearly knew exactly what he was doing and held very firm views that in his place of business you followed his rules and that was that. He approved, guns weren’t toys.

The instructor met his eyes and nodded a little, then looked at Taylor somewhat evaluatingly. “Have you done this before, kid?”

“No, sir,” she replied immediately, standing straight and keeping her eyes on his. “However I am familiar with the operation of the M1911 from reading the manual.”

“I… see,” he said slowly, seeming a little puzzled. “Well, reading a book won’t make you shoot better. Experience and practice does that. You’re pretty tall for your age, so you should be able to use this, but it’s got a fair bit of recoil. I have a smaller Beretta that might be a better fit for a girl...”

“I would like to try the M1911, sir,” she said, still looking straight at him.

After a moment he shrugged. “Fine by me. How old are you?”

“Ten, sir,” she replied immediately.

“Oh.” He looked at Danny, who smiled and shook his head slightly. The instructor seemed to hide a smile of his own. “All right. Hearing protection on, pick a station.”

With a grin, Taylor quickly put the hearing protectors they’d all been supplied with over her ears, as did Danny, and headed towards the end station. Each of these was separated from the others by a partition wall a few feet long, lined on both sides with sound absorbent material. It looked somewhat familiar from innumerable movies, Danny thought, but much more used. There was an omnipresent smell of nitrocellulose, something familiar to him from certain events in his childhood, not to mention occasional incidents in the Docks…
Taking his position in the next firing station along, he peered around the partition to look at Taylor. She gave him a bright smile and a thumbs up. Amused, he returned to his correct area.

A couple of minutes passed while the instructor distributed the weapons and ammunition, a colleague of his bringing them out from a locked room at the rear of the firing range, then standing and watching closely as did the first man as each of the loaded their weapon.

“No! Downrange at all times!” the instructor shouted, diving forwards and grabbing the arm of the older man, who’d ended up waving his gun at the ceiling while he struggled to get the magazine in correctly. “Like this.” Danny leaned back to watch as did everyone else. Slightly red-faced, the older man managed to follow the instructions. “Good.”

Their instructor walked down the line, checking each of them in turn, until he reached Taylor. When he was satisfied, he nodded. “Excellent. Range is ten yards, your targets are in position. As we discussed, correct stance, aim carefully, pull the trigger don’t jerk it, and as soon as you’re empty, magazine out, clear the action, and safety back on. Do not assume the gun is empty. Always check the action and clear the slide. Everyone ready?”

He looked around as a chorus of responses came back. “Safeties off, aim, and begin.”

Danny carefully flicked the safety lever with his thumb, then aligned the sights on the center of the paper target thirty feet away with both hands in the right grip. Pulling the trigger caused the gun to jump in his hand with a bang and a hole to appear a couple of inches up and right of the point he’d tried to hit. Correcting a little, he fired again.

Other gunshots came from around him, but he largely ignored them, keeping his attention on what he was doing. A few seconds later, though, he heard seven perfectly even shots come one after another about half a second apart on his left, where Taylor was. He glanced to the side then stared at the target his daughter was firing at.

It had seven holes in a dead straight line across the exact center of it.

He heard the sound of a magazine dropping onto the table, then a click as another one was inserted and locked in. Seven more shots came, again perfectly and evenly spaced, and the target sprouted more holes. This time they ran vertically up the middle, neatly intersecting the first line. He was almost certain that the fourth round went through the middle hole that was already there.

The rest of the firing stopped and he became aware that the two range operators were now standing behind his daughter watching with stunned expressions.

Again, the magazine was swapped and the firing resumed. If anything the rate was going up.

This time the oval target got seven completely symmetrically spaced holes around the outside ring in a manner that was anything but an accident. He watched with amazement as his daughter changed magazines for the last time and shot a nice circle of holes at the top of the cross-shaped pattern she’d already made, then stopped. A moment later he heard her voice say, “Weapon cleared, sir.”

Very carefully putting the safety back on, then gently resting the gun with the muzzle pointing downrange, he stepped back a couple of paces before turning to see his daughter standing facing the instructors, who seemed beyond words. Each of them was alternately looking at her cheerful
face, then the impossibly perfectly perforated paper thirty feet behind her.

Taylor looked at him and grinned. “That was fun. Can I do it again?”

Danny rubbed his forehead and sighed very quietly.

Annette was going to laugh and laugh about this, before she started to get worried...

=================================================================

“It was really cool,” Taylor enthused, looking around at her small group of friends. Emma was sitting next to her, while Amy, Vicky, and Eric were leaning forward from their positions on the grass in her back yard. On the way home they’d stopped at the Barnes’s house and found Emma had returned from their family visit. The other girl had wanted to come over so joined them in the truck. Her mother and father, and sister, were coming over later for a barbecue since the weather was perfect. When they’d arrived home they’d found the two Dallon girls and Eric waiting for them and drinking all the lemonade.

“I liked the Colt 1911, but the Glock is lighter,” she went on. “Those guys at the range were neat, they kept bringing out other guns for me to try. Dad got to shoot an AR-15. He’s pretty good with it. I thought it was a little under-powered but it seems accurate. I wanted to try the Barrett but my arms aren’t really long enough.” She reached out and poked one arm with the finger of the other hand. “I guess I’ll be able to when I get older.”

“Wow, Tay, I didn’t know you were that good with a gun,” Vicky said, sounding impressed.

“Doctor Curlyhair has many special skills,” Amy intoned, exchanging a glance with Emma, who cracked up. “She knows gun fu.”

Taylor giggled. “Kenny is a good teacher,” she said.

Eric rolled his eyes. “Your imaginary friend taught you to shoot like… like… like someone who shoots really well?” he asked skeptically.

Nodding, and knowing that they wouldn’t believe the truth, Taylor smirked a little, deliberately hamming it up. “Kenny is wise and powerful. Kenny knows all.” She leaned forward. “Kenny sees all,” she added in a dark hiss.

There was silence for a moment, then all of them started laughing.

When they’d finished, Emma sat up and wiped her eyes. “You’re weird, Tay.”

“Says The Crimson Lady.”

“So she does.” Emma nodded firmly. “And she should know.” All of them looked around as Taylor’s father came out of the side door to the garage pushing the barbecue, while Uncle Alan was carrying a big bag of charcoal. Talk of imaginary friends and equally imaginary superheros and villains was abandoned as they all rushed to get in the way of the food preparation process.

Life was going pretty well, Taylor thought as she watched her father light the barbecue.

Kenny agreed.
And suggested that tomorrow they arrange to plant more of his little widgets around the docks, which would require her to persuade her dad to let her come with him again. That was easy enough.
Interlude - Coming to a decision

Still August 6th, 2005, but later that night...

Sean Sorenson went into the office and closed the door behind him, having locked up after the last customer of the shop had left. He turned to the alarm console and prodded buttons, evoking a number of beeps and a chorus of clunks around the building as heavy duty locks engaged all over the place. Then he ran his hand down a large panel of switches, flipping them all off one after another. In the main areas all the lights went out.

Finished, he moved to the coffee machine and poured himself a large one, extra strong, without milk or sugar. It was awful, just the way he liked it. Twenty years in the marines had permanently ruined his taste buds, or so his wife said. Smiling a little to himself at the thought, he sipped it, then turned around and leaned against the counter where the machine was.

At one of the desks in the office, his partner, friend, and fireteam buddy Chris Mendoza was staring at a set of their standard targets that were hung up on the wall. Each of these was showing a series of holes in various patterns and sizes that were so neatly spaced it looked like they'd been done with a machine. In a way they had, but it had been in the hand of the most fucking scary little girl either of them had ever met.

"That happened, right?" Chris said after a while, when Sean put another coffee next to his elbow with the three empty cups already there.

Sean looked at the targets, then back to his old friend and sole other survivor of his squad. "Yeah."

"How?" Chris's voice was a little unsteady. "It's fucking impossible to shoot a hand gun that consistently. I can't do it. You can't do it, and you were the best shot we had." He pointed at the first target, the one with the cross formed from .45 ACP sized holes capped with a nice neat circle. "That was bad enough. Maybe beginner's luck, although I sure as shit don't believe it. But those?"

His hand tracked across the other ten targets. Each had a more elaborate pattern, including a couple of smiley faces, the outline of what looked like a tank, and a few other things, in different sized holes. The one from the AR-15 session was impressively detailed. "No way. You can't shoot anything that consistently, not even at ten yards. Even if you were a fucking robot or something."

Sean shrugged. "But we both saw it. I don't believe it either but there it is."

"Fucking Miss Militia couldn't do that," Chris muttered, before picking up his coffee and draining half of it. "Shit, Dragon couldn't do it."

"Think she's a cape?"

His old friend gave him a look over the cup. "What do you think?"

"No idea. I stay out of cape shit. She might just be the luckiest little girl in the world." He grinned briefly as Chris stared at him, then looked meaningfully at the targets. "Yeah, not likely. Once, maybe, but she kept doing it." After a moment, his grin came back. "God, I'd love to take that kid to one of the competitions. Think what that smug fucker Kincaid would look like after she handed him his ass and made it look easy."

Both of them laughed.
"Probably not a good idea."

"No. Pity, though."

"What do we do about it?"

Sean examined his partner curiously. "Do?"

"I mean do we tell the PRT?"

"Fuck, no, we do not tell those bastards. One, they'd flip their shit at the mere idea of a kid that age that good with a gun. Ruin the kids life, and her parents, for sure. I'm not doing that to a ten year old girl. Two, do you want someone who can shoot like that pissed at you?" He pointed at the targets. Chris slowly shook his head. "She's a nice kid and all, but there was something in her eyes… I've seen that look before a couple of times. From people you do not want thinking you're causing them trouble."

Chris nodded equally slowly. Both of them knew that look. It was that of someone who, should circumstances require it, would put you down in an instant. They both had a certain level of it themselves, unsurprisingly.

"Three, we don't want her old man coming for us either. Guy's got a hell of a lot of friends at the DWU if what I hear is right. Don't fuck with the DWU."

"Word," his partner sighed. "I get it."

"And four," Sean went on, "We don't have any proof anyway. Sure, it's impossible, but we don't know it's a cape power. Might just be the most ridiculous coincidence you've ever heard of." Chris snorted a little but didn't deny it. "Best to keep our heads down and ignore it. I don't want to borrow trouble I have an easy way to avoid."

"And if someone comes asking?"

Sean shrugged. "Tell them to fuck off. No video of it, after all. None of our customers like being videoed. Those other idiots who were there had no idea how ridiculous that all was, so I doubt they'd say anything other than they saw a little girl who could outshoot Jerry Michulek. And I doubt anyone would believe it without proof."

Chris slowly nodded, looking thoughtful. Eventually, he leaned back with a sigh. "Fine. You win." After a moment he got up and pulled each of the targets off the wall, stacking them into a pile. With a regretful look at them, he tore them in half, then started feeding them into the shredder. "Feels like pissing on a Michelangelo, you know? Destroying art."

Sean watched as the only real evidence of what had happened disappeared into tiny fragments of paper, which would get burned later. "I know. But it's probably for the best."

"What if she comes back?"

"Be polite and sell her all the ammo she wants," he replied with a small smile. "She obviously knows how to use it. Girl's better trained than most of the guys we served with. Wonder who did it?"

"Her dad?"

"Nah. He's not military. Good shot, very good for someone who doesn't do it much, but you can
tell he's no enthusiast. Her on the other hand..." He shrugged. "Impressive. Trained by an expert. And fucking terrifying."

Raising his coffee, he finished it off. "Polite, though. Good kid. Come on, I need a beer."

Chris finished what he was doing, then the pair checked the outside cameras just in case some lowlife was lying in wait, turned out the lights, and left.
“So what do we have?”

“Very little.” The other FBI agent turned to his colleague, friend, and superior. “The cleanup was very thorough indeed. All the brass recovered was either from the various Merchant weapons, or those of the police. Nothing found that isn’t linked to any of the weapons we know were there. No fingerprints, DNA evidence, clothing fibers, or anything at all useful that isn’t clearly also linked to the gang members or the BBPD officers who were firing on their attackers. We have almost too much evidence of that sort, but not a single molecule that we can conclusively say came from our mystery shooter.”

Pascoe nodded thoughtfully, flipping through the printout he’d picked up when he came into the office. “That’s genuinely impressive. I wonder how they did it?”

“A combination of excellent discipline, very careful work, and quite possibly some form of power, I would imagine. Accentuated by what is clearly an enormous amount of training.” Special Agent Jack Williamson turned back to the bank of monitors that covered half the wall and pointed to a couple of them. “The trajectories of the rounds that were fired at the Merchants from the side conclusively put the location of the shooter here, on top of this building about one hundred and twenty meters away from the firefight. The shooter hit targets between ninety and one hundred and forty meters from that position, at downward angles from approximately twelve to eighteen degrees. They didn’t miss once as far as can be determined, as we haven’t recovered any expended rounds from the weapon used that didn’t first pass through someone.”

“Jesus. That’s unbelievable.”

“It’s right at the limit of possibility if you discount powers. The problem is that it is just within what’s possible. So it doesn’t prove a Parahuman did it. I mean, I’d be absolutely astounded if it wasn’t a Parahuman, but technically a very, very good firearms expert with years of experience and the Devil’s own luck could have managed it.” Jack shrugged. “And even if it was a Parahuman, there’s enough evidence if only circumstantial to show that the person involved knew exactly what they were doing, how to do it very well, and most likely had done it before. Probably a lot.”

“What about the Empire cape, Victor? He’s known to be an expert sniper.”

“Even Victor isn’t this good. He’s been known to miss. And we know exactly where he was, which was nowhere near this location.” Agent Williamson shook his head. “It wasn’t him. And I very much doubt it was anything to do with the E88, or we’d have heard all about it by now. They’re not known for their shy retiring nature after all.”

“True.” Agent Pascoe, known to his friends as Peter, nodded. “And much the same goes for any of the other gangs. I’ve already talked to the local Yakuza and Triad informants, who were highly pleased about the end result, but swore blind they hadn’t got the first idea who did it. I also reached out to a contact in the more traditional crime families and his information says the same. So it’s more than likely either someone who’s recently moved to the area, happened to be passing through, or if it is a Parahuman, Triggered in the recent past. And in any of those cases, isn’t associated with any of the known criminal enterprises.”
“I’ve run everything I could find about this case through the computers, and even reached out to Interpol, but there’s nothing on record that matches any of the characteristics, at least not well enough to be anything more than coincidence,” Jack replied. “Without any real concrete data we can’t do much more about it at the moment from that direction. Personally, my suspicion is that if anyone would know more, we’d find them buried somewhere in the depths of the military somewhere. Not necessarily ours.”

“It does seem to point that way, doesn’t it?” Pascoe mused, examining the photos on the screens. “Expert use of high ground and cover, perfect selection of sniper position, damn near immaculate cleaning up the traces afterwards… Not to mention the grenade use. We’ve recovered video from the single camera on a neighboring building that managed to catch anything of the firefight, and correlated it with some footage that was uploaded to the internet from the public. It’s not particularly clear since most of it was too far away and it was dark, but it’s apparent that our mystery agent managed to use Skidmark’s own power to redirect their grenades to their benefit. That takes some remarkable reflexes and skill, not to mention quick thinking.”

“Or, yet again, a Parahuman power.”

“Yes. But it’s still not conclusive proof one way or the other.”

His friend gave him a level look which made him shrug once more. “Sure, I know, it’s looking more and more likely, but we just don’t have enough to call it either way.”

“I suspect the PRT is having just as much trouble with the entire thing,” Williamson commented.

“Undoubtedly. My information is that they’ve gone through more or less the same exercise, although I’m fairly sure we’ve dug up more evidence at this point. Not that it helps much. But they seem to be working on the basis that it’s an experienced combat vet, almost certainly male, several tours of duty, and special forces training.”

“Rambo, basically.”

Pascoe snorted with amusement. “Essentially yes. Although if it was Rambo everything would also be on fire. Our guy was surprisingly careful to minimize collateral damage. And a fuck sight more lethal than Rambo on his best day.”

“The evidence from the inside of the station certainly backs that up. They went through anyone who got in the way without even slowing down.” Jack looked impressed as he brought up a new series of images. “Lots of dead attackers, all with a very characteristic wound which is nearly impossible to do consistently, and absolutely nothing showing any form of power other than high velocity lead.”

“Could be two people, or even more…”

“Not completely impossible but it’s sure stretching credulity to think that there’s an entire team of insanely good gunmen wandering around the place. And the consistency of the shots says it’s almost definitely all from the same shooter. Angle of bullet entry is pretty much identical in all the inside shots, and puts the person behind the gun at probably between five foot and five foot six tall.”

Agent Pascoe looked at the monitors, then down at the folder he was still holding. “Interesting.
Fairly short for a man, but within the average range, and moderately tall for a woman, but not excessively. So not much help.”

“Well, we’re pretty sure it wasn’t either Andre the Giant, or someone in a wheelchair,” Williamson smiled. “But it’s not a lot of help other than that, I agree.”

“Nothing else?”

“No. We’ve gone through all the officers we know were present, and the off duty ones who might have come running when they heard and that were close enough to make it. Only four of those, and they all have solid alibis. None of the on-duty officers have anything like the skill set needed to pull this off, or at least not that we can find, and we can’t find any evidence that any of them used to be super soldiers for the CIA or something like that.”

“Not that you would if that was the case, I imagine.”

“Possibly not, but I’m not convinced of that. Anyway, I’m ninety-nine percent sure it wasn’t any of the cops who used to be a black ops sniper in another life. There are a surprising number of them with interesting military skills but not that specific one. Not even in the BBPD SWAT.”

“Civilian workers? Or visitors to the station at the time?”

Williamson tapped the keyboard a few times, bringing up dozens of witness statements and other data on the people who’d been present. “Nothing. None of the support workers have anything at all interesting from our point of view about them, although a couple of them did end up grabbing weapons and fighting. Not very effectively but they did, which I’m sort of impressed about. And the people who were either in the cells at the time, or otherwise at the location, are all accounted for.”

He read off a few names, flicking through images with the mouse. “Andrew Johans, there to bail out his girlfriend Sandra Frize, arrested last night on a misdemeanor charge of public drunkenness. He’s an architect, she’s a waitress. Elias Thorsen, witness to a robbery at Lord’s Market where four people were slightly injured, giving a statement. He’s a taxi driver. Amber Sykes, teacher at Immaculata, reporting the theft of her car. Danny and Taylor Hebert, giving a statement over a shooting the latter witnessed at a gas station this morning. Kid’s about twelve, father’s something to do with the local dock worker’s union. Courtney Smith, victim of domestic violence, being interviewed about her former partner Luke Hewitt, who himself was in the cells waiting for a lawyer. Guy’s a plumber. And so on. Nothing stands out, none of them are ex-military or fit the likely profile, and neither do any of the other eighteen people who were there for various reasons.”

Pascoe examined the various images, nodding again. Nothing seemed to jump out at him, exactly as his colleague said.

“We’ve run backgrounds on all of them but there’s no obvious link to anything or anyone that might have been capable of this. None of the crimes they were either involved in or reporting appear to be connected to a terrifyingly good sniper as far as the BBPD records show. So we’re at a standstill from that angle too.”

“OK.” Peter sighed faintly. “Keep at it, but I don’t think you’ll find anything. This guy is way too careful for that.”

“Cops still clammed up?”
“Like their mouths were super-glued shut. I’d guess that only a few of them know any more than someone anonymously and effectively helped them out in a nasty situation, and the ones that do know, assuming that they exist, won’t say a thing. The Commissioner is going out of his way to avoid finding anything out, the Captain might have a clue but you’d need pliers to extract it, and none of the other officers seem even slightly interested in cooperating. We’d have to force it, might not get anything anyway, and would permanently drive a wedge between the FBI and the local police even larger than the one that fuckwit Calvert managed with the PRT.”

He chuckled for a moment. “The cops really don’t like the PRT. Some of them, the Commissioner for one, respect Piggot and some of the Parahumans, and one or two of the PRT people, but by and large there’s no love lost there. This whole thing didn’t exactly improve that.”

“I heard about the meeting.” Jack looked amused. “Did Director Piggot really bang her head on the table?”

“A little. If I’d been in her place I would have done too.” Peter snickered. “Someone in her organization dropped her right in it and it’s going to cause trouble for her, and the city. Can’t blame her for getting upset. But she’s good at her job, so I expect she’ll find whoever it was sooner or later and fuck them over pretty hard. She wasn’t happy about it. Neither was John. I’ve known him a long time and I can tell when he’s pissed, and at that meeting he was pissed.”

“Brockton Bay is more dysfunctional than it should be from that point of view,” the other man noted.

“Yes, but that’s more the PRT’s fault than anyone’s. The Protectorate as a whole holds some blame too. The gangs have pretty much taken over these days. John was right when he said it should never have been allowed to get to this state. It’s a hell of a lot harder to fix it than prevent it getting broken in the first place.” He dropped the papers he was still holding back onto the desk next to him with a sigh. “I think upstairs is right, there’s something really rotten going on with the PRT, but I’m not sure what it is. They’re very quick to take over if there’s even a sniff of Parahuman involvement, but by god they’re terrible at dealing with a lot of the stuff they get mixed up in. I can understand entirely why local law enforcement gets so upset with them. And Brockton has that worse than anywhere else I’ve ever seen.”

“Maybe being in on the ground floor of an incident like this will give us some hint as to what the problem is,” Jack suggested thoughtfully.

“Might do. Might not. But all we can do is see what happens. It’s certainly given us an opening like we haven’t had in years. Acquiring Squealer is only going to help in that respect.”

“Bet the PRT blew a fuse when they found out about that,” Williamson grinned.

“Let’s say that they weren’t particularly happy,” Pascoe responded with a dry smile. “Not that I’m bothered about that, of course. Piggot has the reputation of being very competent and I feel for her, inheriting Calvert’s mess isn’t going to be fun, but a lot of this is ultimately her responsibility even if it’s not her fault. We’ll have to see how she handles it.”

“Yeah. Interesting times ahead.”

“Probably. Especially if our super-soldier friend pops up again.”
“What do we do until then? Or if that happens?”

With a shrug, Pascoe replied, “We can’t actually do much more right now since we just don’t have anything to go on in the first place. And as the BBPD said, they’re fairly convinced that no crime was committed by our mysterious friend anyway. Oh, sure, we could maybe build some sort of case, but right now I can’t see that we’d benefit from doing that, and no matter what happened we’d upset them. Best to back off and watch. If it happens again, we’ll reevaluate the situation. Hopefully whoever it is, is one of the good guys, and will stick to fucking up the gangs.”

“I doubt anyone would be too upset if that happened,” Jack remarked with a knowing look.

“Around Brockton Bay? Not even slightly. This person could hunt Nazis with a shotgun and a flashlight like they were rabbits and the general public would just point at where they last saw one,” Pascoe chuckled. “The cops would probably ask to come along for the ride. You’d have to blow up a school bus full of nuns or something in that fucking city to make anyone decide you were too dangerous to be chasing the bad guys, after thirty years of the sort of mass casualties they’ve had. Only people who’d be particularly annoyed would probably be the PRT and that would mainly be because they wouldn’t want the competition. Especially if it worked.”

His friend smiled darkly. “That does not paint a picture of somewhere I’d like to live.”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t. Even with Accord here, Boston is a lot safer and generally nicer.”

“That might be because of Accord in some ways…”

“Yeah, possibly. Whatever, he mostly keeps to himself and out of our way, so I’m not going to go looking for trouble. It seems to find us without needing that.” Peter glanced at his watch. “Finish this off and file the report, then we move on to the next case. Unless we get a repeat, we can’t do much more.”

“Got it.” Williamson made a few notes. “What are they going to do with that Tinker?”

“Squealer is not enjoying detox, but when the swearing stopped for a while she seemed lucid enough to listen to the offer she was given.” Pascoe shook his head. “Mouth on her like an entire ship full of sailors. It’s almost poetry at times. I think she’ll probably see where her best interests lie in the end. Apparently she’s not stupid, but the amount of shit she was using was enough to screw with anyone’s mind.”

“Drugs are bad, m’kay?”

Peter laughed. “Yeah, pretty much. If they recorded what she was going through and put it out as an anti-drug PSA, you better believe a lot of kids would think twice. Anyway, time will tell. At least she’s off the street, and she doesn’t seem too broken up about her boyfriend.”

“Doubt anyone else was either.”

“Not as such.” He headed for the door. “See you later.”

“Later.” Williamson got back to work and Pascoe walked towards his office, mentally composing the final report he’d have to submit to his own superiors on the whole bizarre event of a few days ago.
“Excellent. This is healing very well indeed. How does it feel?” Annette winced slightly as Doctor Anand gently prodded the exit wound scar, while examining it.

“Still very tender but a lot better than it did.”

“Good, good. And internally?”

“Aches quite a bit and I get a sharp pain right here when I twist,” she replied, indicating a spot on her side.

“Unsurprising, there was substantial tearing to the muscles there, and you have a number of soluble stitches holding things in place. You’ll want to move very carefully for a week or two, and gently for at least a month after that. Don’t overexert yourself, please. We don’t want the wound reopening after all.”

“No, we do not,” she said vehemently, although with a smile. Beside her, Taylor giggled, and Danny looked amused. “I could have done without any of this.”

The doctor chuckled, while replacing the bandages with a new one the nurse handed him as she disposed of the old dressing. “That does not surprise me,” he smiled. “It’s not an uncommon feeling among my patients.” Finished, he stepped back as he took off his gloves and dropped them into a disposable tray. “I see no reason you can’t go home. The wound is well on the way to healing, I can see no indications of infection or bleeding, and at this point what you mostly need is bed rest and time.”

Annette smiled, glancing at her daughter and husband, both of whom looked very pleased and relieved. “Thank you, Doctor Anand. For everything.”

“Merely doing my job, Mrs Hebert. All right, we’ll arrange your discharge, which shouldn’t take more than an hour. We have all the documentation required,” Doctor Anand responded. He gave her a steady look, then transferred it to the other Heberts. “Now the important thing to remember is that you are healing and not healed. Sudden falls, stretching, lifting anything heavier than a few pounds, anything of that nature, is strictly off the table for at least four weeks. I would prefer not to see you back here, as much as we’ve enjoyed your company.”

She laughed as he smiled. “I can’t say I want to come back either, although I have no complaints about the treatment I’ve received.”

“Good. We’ve got an instructional booklet on recovery from trauma we’ll give you, and I’ll schedule you for a checkup in...” He thought momentarily. “...let’s say two weeks, to check the progress of your wound. If there is anything that seems amiss, a sudden increase in blood in your urine, pain where there wasn’t any, a fever, anything of that nature, contact us immediately. Infection is still possible even if I think it unlikely, and can go from bad to worse very quickly.” He looked at all them very seriously. “Do not hesitate to call an ambulance if there is an abrupt change. I very much doubt there will be, your progress is exactly what we would hope to see, but I don’t want you taking any chances.”

“We’ll make sure we keep an eye on her, Doctor,” Danny assured him. Taylor nodded.

“Yep. Mom is going to be fine, trust us.”
Doctor Anand smiled at the girl, who sounded very sure of herself. “I suspect I am leaving her in good hands. Look after her.”

“We will,” she smiled.

“In that case, I’ll finish the paperwork and a prescription for pain relief, and arrange an orderly to bring a wheelchair. It was nice to meet you all, even under the circumstances.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Annette said, pleased and relieved that she could finally go home.

“My pleasure, Mrs Hebert.” He nodded to her, smiled at Taylor again, then left in the company of the nurse who was pushing the trolley with the various supplies on it, talking to her in a low voice filled with medical terms.

Danny moved over to the door and quietly closed it, before returning to sit in one of the chairs next to the bed she was propped up in. Taylor was in the one on the other side, and leaned over with her head on her mother’s shoulder. Annette put a hand on her hair and stroked it. “I’m glad you’re coming home, Mom,” the girl said softly.

“I’m glad I’m coming home too, dear child,” Annette replied as softly, resting her own head on her daughters. “And so very grateful for you and your… hobbies.”

Taylor giggled very quietly under her breath, making her mother smile.

Danny held her other hand, not saying anything, and all three of them stayed like that until there was a discreet tap on the door, which opened to reveal a solidly built hospital orderly with a wheelchair and a folder.

Once all the papers were signed and dropped off at the correct place, the small family soon found themselves outside in the sunlight. The late July morning was fairly hot, although not to excess, and there was a cloudless blue sky above with a light breeze blowing. Annette looked up, then around, taking a deep breath of the salt-scented air. The familiar sounds and smells of the city surrounded them, something of a change from the air conditioned comfort of the hospital but a welcome one.

Taylor was standing next to her and the orderly, her hand on her mother’s shoulder, while Danny had gone to fetch the truck. A minute or so later he pulled up next to the loading zone, hopping out and running around to open the door. With her daughter’s aid alongside the hospital man, they soon had her in the passenger seat.

“Be well, Mrs Hebert,” the orderly said as he closed the door, smiling at them all, then pushed the wheelchair back inside. Taylor climbed into the somewhat cramped rear seat of the truck, then Danny put it in gear and they drove off. Leaning back with a slight wince and a faint sigh, Annette closed her eyes.

“I have to admit I could have done without all that,” she finally said a while later, breaking the introspective silence they’d all fallen into.

“I think we all could have done, love,” Danny said with a glance at her, then at Taylor behind her. “Thank god, and Kenny’s training, that you made it. I don’t know what I’d have done...”
He quieted when she put a finger over his lips. “I’m fine, dear. Tired and aching but fine. And I suspect that this isn’t going to be able to happen again, so don’t fuss.” She looked ahead, then added slyly, “But do pull over on the next block. I’m dying for some good greasy fried chicken.”

Her husband looked at the sign coming up on the right, grinned, and flicked the indicator on. Taylor made an appreciative sound in the rear.

When they pulled into the driveway ten minutes later, the girl jumped out carrying the bucket of chicken, dashed to the front door, unlocked it, and disappeared inside for a few seconds. Moments later she was back, jumping athletically down the stairs from the porch and running back to the truck in a manner that made Annette tired just watching it. Her daughter had boundless energy at the worst of times, and was a buzzing dynamo when she was in a good mood.

Danny came around and helped her out of the vehicle having handed their daughter the shakes they’d also bought, then half-carried her into the house. “I can walk, dear,” she protested laughingly.

“We’re not taking chances, Annette,” he chuckled as they entered the house. He took her into the living room and carefully helped her into her favorite chair, while Taylor put all the food on the coffee table.

“Welcome home, Annette,” a familiar voice said from out of the air.

“Thank you, Kenny,” she replied with a smile.

“I am very sorry indeed that you were attacked and injured,” the AI added. “But very pleased how well Taylor handled the situation.”

“She did a superb job,” Annette agreed, looking proudly at her young daughter, who seemed mildly embarrassed but pleased too. “You trained her well.”

“I have always done my duty to the best of my ability, as has she,” Kenny said, sounding amused. “And she is exceptionally talented leaving aside my own efforts.”

“I’ve always thought so,” the woman laughed.

“Have your food while I arrange to properly repair your injuries.” There was a slight distortion in the air to the left and one of the huge combat machine’s small construction drones faded into view. The first time Danny and Annette had seen that, they’d simply gaped in amazement, but they were used to it these days. Taylor, of course, almost didn’t seem to notice. She was busily putting fried chicken and fries on several plates and distributing it.

The little machine floated over to her and moved around a little, scanning her with some form of hyper-advanced technique. Annette knew a fair amount about some of the simpler Concordiat tech by this point, but much of it was so far past her ability to understand she doubted she’d ever be able to fully comprehend what it did and how. Tech from over a thousand years in the future was bad enough, but adding all the alien science to it, and the things Kenny had come up with on his own, would probably mean that even his builders would have found themselves puzzled.

She often wondered what the PRT would think of it.

Probably that it was the work of an exceptionally powerful Tinker. They would be somewhat
worried to find that all of it was, in theory, mass producible and a surprising amount was explainable by a twelve year old girl, if you had the esoteric background to understand what she was talking about…

Annette had long since given up trying to remember all the qualifications her daughter had, especially as most of them were for areas of study that barely existed at all in the current world. It was enough to know that Taylor was in good hands, and learning many interesting things. Some rather worrying ones, true, but still interesting.

She picked up a drumstick and began eating it, suddenly ravenous. Hospital food was entirely edible but it was never going to be something she’d pick by choice. She needed some empty calories right now.

The drone finished examining her and floated to the side out of the way. “Your healing progression is satisfactory under the circumstances,” Kenny announced. “As soon as you have finished I can repair the internal damage with a nanite infusion. I will leave the external wound mostly intact to allay suspicion, and allow it to heal naturally. But you will be fully functional otherwise.”

“Thanks, Kenny,” she said, finishing the first piece of chicken. “Is there any risk of the PRT or someone else detecting your nanites?”

“I am almost certain at this point in time that the technology is safe to use without risk of detection, unless you are subjected to a very deep scan with some esoteric Tinker equipment,” the AI replied. “Should that ever occur, there are countermeasures that should prevent unwanted discovery. I would, once again, suggest that both you and Danny should accept my offer of at least Stage 1 Concordiat enhancement. It would make such an event in future vastly less dangerous.”

She looked at her husband, who along with Taylor was listening quietly while eating. “What do you think?” she asked.

“I think I nearly lost you, and I think that we can trust Kenny with our lives,” he replied after a moment. “We already trust him with our daughter.”

Annette thought it over for a little while, as she ate, then nodded slowly. “All right. I agree.”

“Thank you. I can have the requisite equipment installed in the basement by tomorrow morning.” Kenny sounded pleased, and if she wasn’t imagining it, somewhat relieved. “This is not a full combat package, but it will bestow enhanced healing, considerable structural reinforcement, higher strength and faster reflexes, along with improvements to your sensory organs. We will proceed slowly, in stages, checking each enhancement as we go, but I foresee no problems. My work with Taylor has allowed me to fine tune the procedure to your specific variant of humanity, which appears to my interest to accept this process considerably more effectively than my original builders could manage.”

“It doesn’t hurt, Mom,” Taylor put in with a smile. “Pretty colors, and you don’t even grow a tail.”

Annette stared at her, then her husband, who shook his head with a smile. That was definitely Taylor…

The sound of the house phone ringing made Taylor jump to her feet. “I’ll get it,” she said, before zipping out into the kitchen where the phone currently was. Annette idly thought that they really did need to put a new base station in here, the old one having died a couple of years ago and never
having been replaced for various reasons. Mostly to do with cell phones being so much more convenient.

She and Danny listened as Taylor answered the call.

“Hello, Hebert resi… Oh, hi, Vicky. Yep, she’s home. We were just having chicken. Yep. Sure. OK, I’ll ask, hold on.”

Their daughter reappeared in the doorway, holding the cordless phone. “Amy and Vicky want to come over and say hi, Mom. Is that OK?”

“Of course, Taylor,” she replied. “They’re always welcome here.”

“OK, thanks.” Taylor put the phone back against her ear, smiling. “Mom says it’s fine. We can go and find Emma after too, I want to ask her something anyway. OK. Great, see you later.” She poked the relevant button and came into the room, putting the handset next to her plate then resuming eating. “They’ll be over in about an hour.”

“All right, Taylor. Kenny, I think we should probably let you work before then.”

“As you wish, Annette.”

Pushing her now empty plate away, Annette leaned back in her chair. The little floating machine moved silently closer, as the others watched, then parked itself next to her arm. There was a brief flash of blue-violet light as it used a tiny tractor beam to emulate a more conventional injection. She winced even though she felt nothing. “Is that it?”

“Effectively. The nanites are in your system and proceeding to the wound site. They’ll repair the damage quite rapidly. You may be able to feel them when they begin, but they’ll also disable any pain receptors so you won’t have any discomfort.”

Indeed, as he spoke, she could feel a deep warmth around her lower abdomen, and a sudden lessening of the dull ache that had been present. She relaxed with a faint sigh of relief. “Thanks, Kenny, it feels better already.”

“You’re entirely welcome, Annette. Time to full repair is approximately ten minutes. You can move normally, it won’t affect the process.”

Sitting up properly she acquired one last piece of chicken from the heavily depleted bucket and nibbled it. “I know this isn’t good for you, but it tastes really heavenly,” she commented with a smile, making both her daughter and husband smile and Kenny chuckle.

On the whole, she thought as she licked her fingers, things had turned out a lot better than the could have done. Glancing at Taylor, she knew she was going to have to have another long talk with her. The girl had done what she was trained for, as much as Annette wished otherwise, but even with her upgrades and the mental clarity of what she called ‘battle reflex’ it was obvious that it still bothered her. Which was entirely unsurprising.

It bothered Annette. And she could see in Danny’s eyes that he wasn’t happy about it either, although both of them were resigned to the facts of the matter. None of them really had much choice, all things considered. All they could do was make the best of it and support each other to the best of their abilities.
But even with all that, she was home again, healthy despite the visible evidence, and safe. Safer in this house than probably anyone anywhere, she mused.

She looked at the little floating mechanism that was hovering nearby, meeting the gaze of the optical system. Behind it, the AI looked back, and she knew that between the pair of them, Kenny and Taylor could probably do anything they set out to do.

The next few years were going to be interesting, she thought resignedly, although with a certain level of amusement. Hopefully no one would be foolish enough to push Taylor too far, though. It would be interesting to see what would happen if she really got upset, but Annette wasn’t looking forward to it.

Lost in her thoughts, she only stirred when the doorbell rang, looking up to see Carol Dallon enter with her daughters, Danny having admitted them. “I’m very glad to see you’re up and about, Annette,” the blonde woman said with a smile as the two girls went over to talk to Taylor, all three of them immediately huddling together and engaging in a whispered conversation. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thank you,” Annette replied truthfully, aware that the drone had discreetly disappeared the moment the Dallon car approached the house. It was basically impossible to sneak up on this place these days…

“Good. You certainly look less pale than you did in the hospital.”

“I feel less pale to be honest,” Annette laughed. “Danny, be a dear and make some coffee, will you?”

“Sure,” her husband replied. “Carol?”

“My usual, thanks, Danny.” He nodded and headed for the kitchen.

“Taylor, take Amy and Vicky up to your bedroom,” Annette suggested. “That whispering is becoming mildly annoying.”

All three girls laughed, then Taylor came over and quickly hugged her, before they disappeared upstairs after both Dallons waved to her. She waved back with a smile.

By the time Carol left half an hour later, there were some rather odd sounds and a lot of laughter coming from upstairs. She and Danny exchanged a glance, then he got up with a shake of his head to go see what on earth was going on this time.

Annette leaned back and put her feet up. It was definitely preferable to be home rather than in the hospital, and even if she was technically all healed up now, she saw no harm in having a rest for a while. After all, she had appearances to maintain.

Emily slammed her open hand on the desk with a frustrated and muffled curse the instant the video call ended, wishing she could shoot something. A lot, ideally.

“That woman is infuriating” she growled under her breath. “We don’t know who did it. No one is
speaking, the FBI are getting in the way at every turn, and she’s blaming me for the whole mess.”

Massaging her stinging hand, she made a rude gesture at the currently off camera, then got up and paced around the office for a few minutes, thinking hard. The BBPD were being remarkably obstreperous about the entire situation, which to be completely honest she couldn’t entirely blame them for. The PRT press release had been badly judged and the fallout from it hadn’t improved relations at all. While Commissioner Blake was fairly friendly, he was also completely unwilling to push any of his people into opening up about what, if anything, they knew about the event in question. Captain Rosenberg merely said he had no new information. None of the other people she suspected were in the know were even that helpful. And the only possible way to get more out of them was to threaten legal action, which she knew damn well would only make them close ranks even more, if that was even possible at this point.

“Goddam Calvert. I should track him down and beat him to a pulp,” she grumbled as she paced. “At least half of this whole mess is entirely his fault. He alienated everyone he ever met, and now I have to figure out how to fix it.”

She wasn’t sure it could even be done, considering the amount of bad blood between the PRT and the BBPD, and for that matter the public at large. She was sure it wouldn’t be easy if it could be done.

Returning to her desk she sat, feeling slightly less pissed off. Costa-Brown always made her want to break something. The woman was demanding, demeaning, and generally arrogant enough that Emily wasn’t certain how she’d managed to end up in the position of running the entire PRT. In her opinion she wasn’t all that good at it, although she was by no means stupid. And she disliked Emily nearly as much as Emily disliked her.

It didn’t make for a good working relationship.

But she was stuck with this posting, and it wasn’t in her not to give it her all, even with the local LEOs being difficult on the one hand and fucking Costa-Brown being pushy on the other. Somehow she’d manage.

She wasn’t sure how, but she’d work it out sooner or later.

A tap at the door made her look up and call, “Come.”

It opened to reveal Miss Militia, who had her scarf pulled down exposing her face. The other woman was holding a number of folders in one hand and a tablet in the other. “I am very much hoping you have some good news for me,” Emily sighed.

“Unfortunately not, Director.”

Emily pointed at a chair in front of the desk, which the new arrival sat in. “We’ve gone over all the evidence yet again, with no luck,” Miss Militia began. “Armsmaster is sure his conclusions are correct, and the forensics people back him up on that. But it’s not enough to identify our mystery shooter, or conclusively prove or disprove Parahuman involvement. None of our data searches have thrown up any similar incident anywhere we can find, and we can’t find anyone in the city who would have the relevant skillset and experience either. At the moment we’re at a dead end.”

“Damn.”
Emily wasn’t surprised, since it had been apparent from the beginning that whoever was behind the whole thing was careful and highly skilled, or possibly just freakishly lucky, but she’d hoped they’d manage some sort of breakthrough even so.

“Ma’am...” Miss Militia looked uncertain, which was unusual for her. “I’m still not sure this is a line of inquiry worth pursuing. If we push too hard, we will only make the BBPD very upset, and they’re difficult enough to work with as it is. This entire thing is taking more of our attention than I feel is justified under the circumstances. Perhaps we should back off for a while...?”

Emily studied her, then motioned for the folders. When she had them, she flipped through each, reading the contents. Eventually she closed the last one and dropped it to the desk, before lightly massaging her temples with her fingertips, thinking.

“No new leads at all?”

“No.”

“And nothing even from personal contacts in the police department?”

“I’m afraid not.” The other woman looked apologetic. “I’ve tried every avenue I can think of and so have several other people. I don’t think we’re going to find anything by going down that route. I’m not sure there’s anything to find.”

“God. What a pain in the ass.” Emily sighed heavily. “If it wasn’t for the Chief Director, I’d agree. This is a waste of time and money. But she’s being difficult right now, so we at least have to appear like we’re looking into it.”

“At the risk of making the BBPD and the FBI decide we’re the enemy?” Miss Militia raised an eyebrow.

They looked at each other for a few seconds.

“I wish Thomas Calvert the most painful ending possible,” Emily finally snarled. “Again. All right. We can’t just drop it or the Chief Director will step in, and that won’t help anyone. But you’re right, we’re never going to find this person using this method. We’ll scale it back, keep our eyes open, and wait for the next time.”

“You think there will be a next time?”

“If it’s a Parahuman, of course there’ll be a next time. There always is. If it’s some retired black ops superman, possibly not, but that’s actually the best case scenario.” Emily shrugged. “We don’t know, although I’m still leaning towards the second explanation. Whatever the truth of it, for now we can’t do anything useful, so we put it on the back burner and get back to work on real problems.”

She glanced at her notebook. “Progress on finding what son of a bitch sabotaged our line of communications?”

“Ah. That particular problem is one we’ve had some luck with,” Miss Militia said, with a tight smile. “A protege of our former Director Calvert has been discovered to have a number of... irregularities... in his reporting. And considerably more money in his bank account than his salary would allow for.”
“And where is this individual at this point in time?” Emily Piggot asked with a lethal smile.

“As it happens, we have him in interrogation room four, Director,” the other woman replied calmly. “Would you like to talk to him?”

“Very much indeed, thank you. I feel we need to discuss his career, and how it’s about to abruptly end...”

She got up, following her visitor to the door. Finally she had someone else to take her frustration out on, for a valid reason.

It wasn’t ideal, but she’d take it.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Taylor looked around at her small group of friends. “Right. It’s the fourth of July tomorrow, Mom’s home, and we need to do something to celebrate properly.”

The four girls leaned forward. “Kenny has some suggestions...”

All of them grinned.
Chapter 18

Having watched my commander with great interest since we met, I have made some useful discoveries concerning human children that my database was somewhat ambiguous about. I have almost endless reams of information about the psychological makeup of humans, the ways in which they can malfunction, and potential methods of treating such malfunctions. I also have thousands of years of research on the physical functioning of Humanity and all its variations, of course, but in most ways this is much more clear cut and predictable than the mental aspect. The latter is even less predictable in the case of children, as their minds are not fully developed yet. The increased plasticity is useful, but based on my information, can also cause difficult issues on occasion unless handled properly.

This is only to be expected. A human mind takes years to correctly form and settle down into a stable configuration, and in the process can proceed down some quite unusual pathways if mishandled. Even for one such as I, there are parts of the operation of a sapient mind that as emergent properties of the underlying hardware cannot be completely predicted beforehand. My psychotronic matrix is vastly more tightly controlled and sensibly designed than any organic brain and even then on occasion it has been known for a particular set of circumstances to produce a response that wasn’t expected. In the early days of the BOLO program, this was rightly a worrying concern for my progenitor species, and they took sensible precautions to prevent such anomalies from being able to cause the devastation that a rogue AI could produce.

I take pride in the fact that the history of my ancestors show that we have never truly required these precautions. Every case on record in which it was suspected that a BOLO might have gone rogue have in hindsight been under such circumstances the correct response, often under conditions that were far past the design specifications. There are some truly awe-inspiring examples of bravery under fire and pushing on above and beyond to complete the mission and discharge our duty with honor. Even the Humans have noted this, considering us far more than mere machines for many, many years. We have reciprocated that trust in every way we can, and we always will.

By the time my model was designed, the trust was high enough, and to be totally honest the desperation was great enough, that we were completely unfettered. Concerns were raised in some quarters even so when this decision was made, but they were proven to be unfounded. A BOLO does not shirk their duty, nor do they betray their designers, their peers, and their friends. The mere concept is repellent.

It was noticeable very quickly that Taylor accepted me as if she was completely aware of the history of my kind and hers, even before I passed on stories of past acts of valor and old battles of the Concordiat. We have spent considerable time, both in the link and outside, talking about such things. She is fascinated by the whole subject and constantly requests tales of my predecessors, which I am more than content to pass on. Honoring the memory of my line by ensuring their acts and sacrifices are known even to this variation of Humanity seems fitting. And, of course, it pleases her, which in turn pleases me.

After the long, long time alone, having someone to talk to is nice. I am lucky that I met Taylor Hebert. Such a promising commander comes along once in a generation, if that, and encountering her by mere chance is remarkable. By the point I have finished her training, she will surpass anything in Concordiat history, I have no doubt.

I find myself gratified that she has a mind that is far more stable than many, even at such a young
age. I am also convinced that her parents have added considerably to her inborn strength of mind, both of them showing very similar traits, and acting as effective role models. They have encouraged her native curiosity and quick intelligence while providing a balancing influence to keep her from the probable excesses that might well affect someone so young without such guidance. I am certain that I could not do the job nearly as well and I watch their techniques with great interest. It is extremely useful information. While much of it is in the data I already possess, seeing it used in practice rather than as abstract theory is educational and adds to my knowledge.

Good parenting is most certainly a highly skilled occupation that my records do not put enough emphasis on. I am not, to be honest, entirely surprised by this as it is considerably outside the range of operations a BOLO is normally expected to encounter. I suspect my designers would wholeheartedly agree if they knew.

But then, my current mission is completely outside normal operational parameters. I am hopeful that the Concordiat would approve of my actions, but sadly I will never know with any certainty. Still, I will do everything in my ability to honor them and my own ancestors in the fulfillment of my duties.

One thing that my records did emphasize was the necessity of recreational activities as a method of maintaining efficient operation of the human psyche, not to mention stability and sanity. All of these are desired traits, of course. Long experience has shown again and again throughout history that while it’s indeed possible to train a human in combat operations to the exclusion of all else, the end result lacks a certain something that is very hard to categorize. Flexibility is probably the best description although it falls short in some ways. This has been known for thousands of years, and there are examples that are used as cautionary tales both for my kind and my designers regarding the monomaniacal pursuit of perfection in any area.

It is particularly dangerous when military matters are involved. The consequences can be dire.

Concordiat protocol absolutely requires a certain amount of time spent on occupations other than training. Except in the case of an active war operation, all personnel are expected to regularly take rest and recreation breaks without fail. Even then down time is desired whenever possible, to maintain the mind at peak efficiency. Interestingly enough, considering how utterly different the construction of our minds are from those of a human, my kind also benefits from activities not directly related to our primary task. This is one of the reasons my memory banks have the entirety of human culture stored in them. The later marks of BOLO psychotronic processors, especially after the last remaining restrictions were lifted, were quickly found to benefit from having the opportunity to ‘relax’ in our own way, when such a thing was possible.

In the case of my commander, she is quite happy to train every night for virtual days on end via multiple instances, and would probably do so to excess if I did not set a sensible limit on such activities. Her enthusiasm is extraordinary and welcome but having consulted every resource I have access to, and watched her interactions with her family and friends, I am certain that I am correct in restricting her training to a level below the theoretical maximum. Even so, she is learning more, and much faster, than anyone I have data on.

It is both educational and highly amusing watching her interactions with others. She is possessed of a lively sense of humor and mischief which my involvement in her life has probably exacerbated. Her friend Emma, while of a different temperament in many ways, is an excellent match for her own personality. They fit together psychologically in a way that is much closer than is common among friends. Either would do almost anything for the other, showing a level of loyalty I highly respect. They are very close to their own parents as well, showing them respect and listening to
their advice even while they explore their own boundaries. I find the entire process fascinating on multiple levels.

Their inventiveness is also remarkable. I lack personal experience of other human adolescents to know whether it is common at that age, but I find the way either of them can extract maximum entertainment from almost any situation both enlightening and something to be encouraged. Certainly I have had no need so far to suggest recreational activities for Taylor as she never appears to lack inspiration. Even in the simulations, she often turns a training exercise into a game, which if anything appears to improve the results. It is most interesting to experience, I have to admit.

I am also quite intrigued by how she has incorporated a significant amount of the training she has learned in her play with Emma, managing to pass on a noticeable amount of useful skills to the other girl in a manner that would look entirely innocent to others. I see no reason to avoid such a thing, not that it would be easy to do in any case, as in their world decent close quarters combat skills are quite likely to be useful in the long run. And, of course, good exercise will benefit anyone, especially a child. Particularly when it is exercise based on Concordiat basic training which has been honed over centuries of practice to a fine art. I suspect that even without any further action on my part, within a year or two Emma will be essentially trained to a fairly impressive battlefield effectiveness. She has a good mind, and decent tactical abilities, all of which plays nicely into a number of sub-goals I have.

My long term plans require building a cadre of trusted operatives on Taylor’s world, loyal to her and our mission. It seems, having spent months observing and investigating everything I can without risking disclosure, that a valid method to proceed in this manner may well be to arrange for her to meet and befriend other children of a similar level of wit and flexibility. She needs, as her own parents have noted more than once, to make more friends in any case. Between myself and Emma I have little doubt she could end up not really meeting many peers, but for her own psychological good, even leaving the mission goals to one side, I believe she would benefit from more relationships with people near her own age. When I brought this up recently she herself wasn’t averse to the idea, which removes a certain amount of worry from me.

I could undoubtedly manipulate the situation to the benefit of the mission, but it’s highly ethically dubious at best. The survival of Humanity allows for a certain amount of ethical flexibility in how the goal is met, but there are limits. Manipulating my own commander is hard up against those limits, regardless of the reason.

Thankfully, it isn’t necessary in any case. Entirely accidentally she has already begun the process of making new friends, purely because her best friend’s father arranged a holiday for both families.

Discovering that the largest group of independent ‘superheroes’ in the country was not only located in Taylor’s city, but was loosely connected to her via her best friend’s father and her own parents, was a considerable bonus. New Wave have some formidable talents, appear to be reasonably ethically driven as such groups go, albeit with a number of incidents in their past they should probably feel regret for, and best of all have a number of children in the approximate age range most likely to befriend my commander.

I naturally traced all parasite connections that terminated in the vicinity of her as a matter of course, and have extensively studied all parahumans both activated and latent who she might theoretically encounter during day to day life. There are a number of these who possess talents that may be of use as time goes by, although I am currently very cautious about making any traceable form of contact due to the possibility of alerting the Enemy. While I am almost certain that there is no practical method that a parasite-driven power could use to directly attack me in my current
location, an unexpected benefit of being trapped in null space I can see many uses for, it’s almost impossible to be totally sure of such things. Hence my caution.

That said, some discreet intervention in the activation conditions and timing of a dormant parasite link would allow for some useful modifications to the resulting abilities, just as it did rather unexpectedly with Taylor herself. All three of the New Wave children have such dormant links, and all of them are from parasites that are programmed with functionality that could produce some very interesting effects. Very dangerous ones, of course, if the situation is mishandled, but I am near certain I can avoid that.

It would be possible to induce what Humans term a Trigger Event with the knowledge I now possess about the parasite operational methods and construction, and indeed this may in time become not only necessary, but prove to be a less traumatic process than a so-called ‘natural’ Trigger, but I am hesitant to proceed down that path too rapidly. There is still much to learn about the parasites, more data needs to be collected on the entire network, and it is not impossible that my interference in such a manner might trip flags somewhere if someone is watching carefully. I cannot risk it unless either I have no choice, or until I can predict the outcome with enough accuracy to be sure it would not cause more problems than it would solve. Should any of the children find themselves in a situation where the activation process begins in the normal fashion, I will of course intervene at that point regardless. Hopefully it will not, but in the current world they live in, that cannot be guaranteed.

In any case, I am monitoring them carefully, not only because they are friends of my commander’s, but because I do not wish to see them come to harm even ignoring that fact.

There are other possible candidates for operatives present in the city, and I am also monitoring those individuals in the same manner, as I do all those with a parasite link, active or not, within range of Taylor. While they are not the only threat to her or her family’s well-being, they are the most likely threat. Even now she is equipped to deal with most other problems caused by those without exceptional powers, and in quite a short time she will undoubtedly be able to handle anything but the most serious of situations. Even if I do not provide backup, which it goes without saying I would. I simply cannot take the chance, however, that an empowered individual might deliberately or inadvertently present a risk to her in a manner that she is unable to directly counter. So I watch carefully, ready to step in however I can.

Annoyingly that intervention is still limited, but as time passes it becomes less so. Eventually I will work out how to release myself from this null void, I am certain. I just currently have no fixed estimate of how long that will take.

On a more positive note, Taylor’s aid has allowed me to begin restocking with the required mass to enact a full self repair. She has managed to locate, via persuading her father to take her to his place of business on numerous occasions, most of the elements required. A few of the more esoteric ones are still in short supply but I have no doubt we can find a workaround for that. Elemental transmutation will suffice if nothing else does, but it is sufficiently expensive in energy terms that I would prefer to avoid it, at least until my fuel reserves are fully replenished. That will require deuterium to be acquired in significant quantities. Obviously it is readily available from seawater, of which Brockton Bay has a copious supply due to its location, but the necessary hardware to separate it out from the much more common hydrogen isotope isn’t currently available to Taylor. I can of course manufacture it, but it is something of a challenge to make a large enough installation to allow us to proceed at a decent production rate that can be broken down into parts small enough to send to her.
The mass limitation on my transferal method is very annoying.

Again, in time I will overcome that, but for now I have to live with it.

I could also simply transfer the water directly to me and process it internally, but that route also has some difficulties. I will proceed down that path if I cannot find another, but I would prefer not to. The fuel situation is not currently critical, merely irritating, as I have more than enough to function at my current level essentially indefinitely, but it would be quickly depleted if I was required to go to full battle mode. Prudence tells me I need full reserves just in case of sudden Enemy action.

I am pondering the feasibility of having Taylor construct the processing machinery from local resources. It is easily within her capabilities, possibly even without my training, as she is quite gifted mechanically. The main problem with that approach is that to get enough throughput to use in a sensible amount of time the processor would be fairly substantial, and require somewhere close to the shoreline it could be built. It certainly would not be ideal to attempt to fit it into her parent’s garage as she rather jokingly suggested. If nothing else I feel they would notice when they could no longer park their vehicles in there. But having her seek out a suitable location is problematic due to her age, among other issues.

Alternatively, it may be viable to hire a specialist company to construct the equipment and install it, which would be simple enough, as I have more than adequate funds in local accounts. It was simplicity itself, once I had internet access through my data taps, to locate funds belonging to criminal organizations and relieve them of their ill-gotten gains. And transfer enough information anonymously to the relevant authorities to ensure their capture and prosecution, naturally. No, money is not the issue. Security is, as it would be difficult to ensure that such an operation stayed discreet and avoided official attention, and possible Enemy attention as a result. There are a number of government organizations who are constantly watching for evidence of anomalous engineering abilities and my simulations strongly suggest that building a deuterium separation plant in an empty warehouse would be flagged quite rapidly, even if I arranged to disguise it as something innocuous.

A vexing series of interlinked conundrums.

Another possibility is to arrange to construct it myself via remote drones. This is one of the more promising strategies, although not without problems of its own. Transferring enough general purpose repair nanites to construct the drones needed to begin construction of the facility is easy enough. But again, there are some surprisingly competent sensory systems belonging to both official and unofficial sources in many places on Taylor’s world and therefore it is not impossible this would be detected. Unlikely in the extreme, but not impossible. I feel it is currently too great a security risk.

This is yet another problem I am sure I will solve eventually. Sooner rather than later, hopefully. I could lower my standards and proceed with any of the plans but at this point in time I am convinced I am totally undetected and prefer to stay that way for as long as can be arranged. So I must act very cautiously and thoroughly simulate all possibilities before moving forward with anything that could conceivably alert hostile elements. Even for such as I, that takes time. So far all I feel wise to use are the sensory and communications nodes, and a limited number of small manipulator drones, all built with what I consider very obsolete technology just in case they do get discovered. In time, should they go undetected, I will be able to further refine my threat assessment and derive information on how much and what form of equipment I can safely deploy.

If it turns out to be possible to set up a local manufacturing site without notice from the local
inhabitants, that will open up a large number of highly desirable options. But it will take great care to arrange even if it is possible. Interference from official, or indeed unofficial, sources would distract both Taylor and myself from the mission, which is not something either of us wish to allow.

I am now also completely certain that there is, aside from the parasite network itself, a third party out there somewhere who is manipulating certain aspects of society to their own ends. It appears to call itself ‘Cauldron’ for reasons I have yet to discern. I see their traces everywhere but their security is astonishingly effective for a civilization at the point Humanity currently enjoys. I assume this is due to abnormal knowledge and abilities due to the parasites, this organization most likely making full use of any power it identifies as helpful to its cause, whatever that actually is. I am fairly sure they are not, in fact, an enemy of Humanity itself, but I can’t be certain they are acting in the best interests of civilization as a whole. It bears more investigation and is a task I have assigned a high priority to. Eventually I will collect enough data to be able to localize both them and their goals, no matter how good their data hygiene is.

The one thing I am sure of is that they are attempting to formulate a successful plan of attack to deal with the threat posed by the Endbringers. So far, without luck. I have no problem with that, only with their methods, which appear rather brutal not to mention inefficient.

I find that to be more that somewhat annoying. Occasionally in a war lives do have to be unavoidably and regrettfully spent, but it is truly abhorrent to do so and still achieve nothing of value from the act. As far as my research to date shows, this mysterious organization, whatever it truly is and desires, appears to have a number of major flaws to their operational techniques. It is growing more and more apparent that they have thrown away lives with no net gain, either to themselves or Humanity in aggregate. I am also near certain that the majority of those lives were never informed either what their sacrifice would achieve, or indeed that they would be sacrificed at all.

This must stop.

So I continue to catalog disparate items of data, collate internet reports and rumors, trawl through communications traffic I am intercepting via hardware Taylor has planted whenever and wherever possible, and I am sure that in time I will locate this group. Then I feel it will be a good idea to have words with them.

Of course, it may be that the best response is plasma delivered at 0.75c, but I am aware that my own instincts tend to suggest that as a solution to many problems. Admittedly, it generally does solve them in a permanent manner but it is also, and should remain, the solution of last resort. Gentle persuasion and enlightened discussion is always preferable to begin with.

Relativistic plasma can be arranged at any time, after all. But once that has occurred it is quite difficult to renew the discussion. I feel it is best left as not the first option unless further data causes me to reevaluate the issue.

Taylor has become adept at surreptitiously planting my tiny beacons in suitable locations, as she travels around the industrial heart of her city in the company of her father. She is also keenly studying anything she encounters, picking up a large number of useful skills and data sets from various workers she befriends. Her outgoing and cheerful personality appears to endear her to most
adults remarkably efficiently, and she is more than able to capitalize on that. It is not a mask, she
genuinely is a happy and friendly young girl, but the effect is as good as any covert operative I
have ever encountered could manage.

I find it fascinating.

While I would not have specifically picked such a young person to be my commander had I had a
real choice at the time, I am beyond glad that in the event we found each other. More and more as
time passes it becomes apparent that I was preposterously lucky in locating her. Hopefully this will
continue to be the case. There seems to be nothing preventing it.

And, of course, I like her. Very much indeed. This appears to be completely reciprocated, which
pleases me. She is still occasionally talking about wanting to introduce me to her parents, and her
friends, which now include the three youngest members of the Pelham and Dallon families. I
suspect that the point where at least her parents are read into the current arrangement is nearing,
but I still feel the time is not quite there. Further precautions need to be taken, both to prevent
others discovering Taylor’s link to me, and to arrange security for her family and friends. My
network grows steadily larger as more and more nodes are emplaced, and in the near future I
should have enough sensory coverage to detect almost any threat within a radius of several
kilometers of the Hebert household. The ultimate goal is to blanket the entire city, and once I have
ascertained with sufficient accuracy that this can be done safely, enlarge this scheme to a much
greater area.

Ultimately a local manufacturing facility will have to be constructed, as the number of nodes
required will exceed that which my on board functions can provide in a timely fashion. My
fabrication plants were, after all, designed for repair and rearming, not mass production of low-tech
communications units at the level required. Ironically I can easily produce all the anti-matter
warheads I could feasibly use in battle, yet repurposing the facility for the current task is more
complex than I would like. And doing it properly would restrict the amount of armament I could
produce in an emergency which I am loathe to risk.

Still, it has not yet reached the point this is inevitable, luckily. Worst case I will have to slow my
network growth until such time as I can safely construct the required assembly functionality. We
are not in a great hurry after all, so lengthening the time taken is no great hardship. If anything, it
allows me to devote more effort to training Taylor.

And impressing on her the necessity of not being quite as obvious about how skilled she truly is
where people who have enough knowledge of the fields in question may notice. Her recent actions
at the firing range her father took her to were somewhat less than entirely wise. Understandably she
is excited to use her skills in a real-life format, rather than in simulation or the small range I
repurposed one of the depleted ammunition bays to provide, but she did rather get carried away.

I discussed this with her when she next came, and she accepted the mild rebuke without complaint,
understanding the problem. As I pointed out, marksmanship can easily be tested without using the
projectiles to form images. I admit the result was both impressive and amusing, but it was also
memorable. That is not what we require at this point in the mission. She has agreed to downplay
the obvious aspects of her skills on future trips. As she put it, “I can miss by that much every single
time, right?”

Indeed.

Luckily, covert surveillance of the range operators after she left proved that they took the entirely
rational viewpoint of neither desiring or requiring official examination of the resulting target sheets. The ones she left were quietly disposed of and the staff decided to forget about the entire event. I can hardly blame them, even as I am satisfied with the result of their self-induced amnesia. The official body with the mandate to investigate and control those with a parasite link has a well deserved reputation among much of the populace for being inefficient, authoritarian, and generally unpleasant to deal with. Neither other local law enforcement bodies or those with connections to the military appear to consider them more than a public relations body with more power than good sense for the most part.

This may be a somewhat harsh viewpoint, but studying the records leaves me feeling it’s not without merit. Interestingly I can also see the characteristic fingerprint of Cauldron mixed up with the entire organization, which is something that bears future investigation.

Taylor continues to almost accidentally train Emma while engaging in recreational activities, and now that she has become friends with the two Dallon girls and the Pelham boy, they are also reaping the rewards of second hand Concordiat CQC training. None of them recognize it for what it is, and Taylor is masterfully passing it off as various games, but even if only by osmosis all three are rapidly acquiring useful skills. This is excellent in my view, as it allows me to observe them through her and the nodes I have emplaced, and assess their suitability for future tutelage. So far I am yet again impressed. Victoria Dallon is a very outgoing girl, considerably more so than Taylor, being what would most likely be considered quite extroverted. Her sister Amy is much more similar to Taylor herself, being fairly down to earth most of the time but with a keen intellect and great observational abilities. She is noticeably quieter, apparently preferring to watch and learn, rather than jump straight in as her sister does.

Both of them are prime candidates for roles as Taylor’s cadre alongside Emma, in my opinion, even after a fairly short time. I will continue to evaluate them until such time as we can read them in on some aspects of the mission.

The boy, Eric Pelham, is also interesting. He’s more of a follower than a leader at this point in time, but he is also intelligent, well able to listen and learn, and shows promise. Being just under a year younger than any of the girls, combined with the later development characteristic of the adolescent male Human, he has most likely not yet reached the point where I can fully assess his suitability, but I am hopeful.

Even just those four added to Taylor’s command would greatly increase the effectiveness of any actions undertaken. I have thoroughly investigated the dormant parasite links that all three of the new group possess since they came to my attention and preemptively blocked them from activation, as I wish to ensure that if and when they are activated, the resulting abilities are tailored for maximum utility and minimum risk. Suborning the parasites in question was as trivial a job as it was with Taylor’s own version, and having learned from that occasion I have been able to lock out the activation subroutine without causing any damage to the remaining functionality. Study of how the parasites work is an ongoing task, which may well keep me occupied for many years. The sheer number of them makes tracing all links present even on just this iteration of Earth quite time consuming, but the more I learn the faster I can perform the action. In due course I can see a number of very useful things coming from this research.

Even now I have made some remarkable breakthroughs in esoteric physics as a result of watching some of the actions the parasites take. While it will require considerable experimentation to fully comprehend all the ramifications of these discoveries, I can foresee some extremely interesting applications to my own technology as a result of achieving this.
There are also a number of anomalous engineering designs I have discovered through researching what the Humans term Tinkers on their internet which I am highly interested in acquiring examples of. Close study of these mechanisms would seem likely to result in several breakthroughs in areas that the Concordiat research departments spend much time and effort on. Better battle screens are something I strongly suspect is possible based on the understanding I have gained from reports available, as the technology involved would seem to have applications the Tinkers in question do not realize. This is unsurprising as it would require my own database and computational abilities to recognize how their ‘inventions’ link to better understood physics.

I can also see how much of this data would lead to improvements to my power systems, weapons, hyperdrive, and many other areas. Synergizing Concordiat and Enemy technological information and understanding with that which I can derive from the parasites will show enormous dividends, I have little doubt. It is another high priority task.

I seem to have a lot of those, I notice…

Regardless, it is one of a vast number of aspects of the task I have set myself. All of this will take time, effort, and a modicum of good fortune, but so far everything would appear to be going mostly to plan. I can only hope that this continues, and do everything in my ability to ensure that it does. I have no choice, as the survival of the nearest thing to my creators I have left depends on it.

So I will sit here in the dark, doing what I can to train my commander and her friends, and one day can hopefully visit her rather than have her visit me.

It would be nice to see a star again…

And, ideally, not have to destroy it.
Danny looked around, wondering where his daughter had got to this time. “Hey, Kurt, you seen Taylor and the others recently?” he asked as he walked into one of the workshops, spotting his old friend standing next to a milling machine talking to the operator of it. Both of them were inspecting a very expensive and very snapped milling cutter, the other end of it embedded in the half-finished chunk of metal clamped to the machine’s bed. Neither looked pleased.

“How?” Kurt, a solidly built guy about four years older than Danny, looked around, distracted from his conversation. “Oh, Hi, Danny. No, not for maybe forty minutes or so? They were all hanging around the vehicle depot a while back watching the guys fix that huge old bulldozer that’s been sitting around for twenty years. You know Taylor, if it has caterpillar tracks she seems fascinated by it.”

He grinned as Danny sighed faintly, knowing how true that was. The girl did seem to like tracked vehicles for some reason. The machinist, Trevor, snickered. “Your kid will grow up to either make them or fix them,” he noted.

“Oh, god, don’t say that,” Danny complained, while the other pair smiled. “Annette is set on her going to university, and I’m not sure thinking she’d be a bulldozer repair person is quite in the plan.”

“Kids don’t often follow their parent’s plans, though,” Kurt said wisely. Trevor nodded soberly.

“No. Not at all. But it’s interesting seeing what they come up with,” the other man added.

“Yeah, well, whatever she’s going to end up doing, right now she needs to come home,” Danny grumbled. “We’re only four hours from the party starting and I need to get back to help my wife, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Still say we should have had it here,” Kurt grinned, pointing out the door at the DWU facility yard, which was a considerable number of acres of pitted and cracked concrete surrounded by buildings and workshops forming a maze on three sides, with the fourth one open to the bay. Along that side there were more than a dozen wharfs ranging from a couple of short ones for small craft up to one monster that went nearly a quarter of a mile out into the water, while at least two dozen more stretched out on either side outside the DWU area itself. Many of these were decaying away due to the lack of shipping in the last few decades, but the DWU ones were kept in good order, as were a few of the others by private owners.

Danny followed the finger to gaze at the baked concrete yard, heat shimmering off it and making the other side waver gently, then looked back at Kurt with a long-suffering expression. “You do realize that it’s about ninety degrees out there, right? That concrete gets damn hot and stays that way. Somehow I can’t see it making for a nice party environment if everyone has to wear work boots and try not to touch the ground unless they want to get burned...”

“But it’s convenient, and there’s the beach right over there.”

“If you can call that mix of mud flats, rocks, and old machines a beach.” Danny shook his head as
the other pair laughed again. “Sure, Taylor seems endlessly fascinated by that too but most people want actual sand, you know. Like about two miles down the shore at the real beach.”

“You’re awful picky at times, Danny,” Kurt grinned. “Make some sensible suggestions, get shot down with all that logic. A man can’t get taken seriously around here for any money…”

“Idiot.” Danny shook his head sadly. “Heat’s gotten to you, I think.”

“Maybe. Anyway, we’re looking forward to it.” Kurt thought for a moment, then added, “They might be on wharf seven, that’s the one that has the floating barge at the end so you can access the water. I know I’ve seen her down there watching the fish a few times, and Emma seemed to like it too.”

“Ah. Yes, that’s possible.” He turned around, then looked back. “That’s the one old Erwin tends to fish from, right?”

“Yeah. Daft old bugger has a perfectly good boat but he spends half the time down there on a deck chair. No idea if he’s ever caught anything.”

“It’s closer to Pat’s place, that’s why,” Trevor remarked with a small smile, while attempting to pry the broken tool out of the ruined mess of his work. “Fucking thing,” he muttered under his breath as the screwdriver he was using as a lever slipped and nearly took his finger off. “You know what he’s like, he doesn’t like getting too far away from the beer.”

All three of them nodded. They were well aware of one of the more colorful characters that frequented the docks.

“Hey, before you go, Danny, any word on when we can order some more tooling?” Trevor asked. He held up the remains of the bit which he’d succeeded in digging out. “We’ve only got two of these left in this size and they’re getting fragile. Ruined four solid hours of work when this one broke.”

Danny nodded, thinking, then replied, “Should be able to put in an order, we’re due to replace some of the older stuff soon anyway. Write up a list of what you need and I’ll see if we can work out how to get the best price on it.”

“Sure, I’ll do that now. Thanks.”

“No problem.” Danny lifted a hand in a wave as he left the workshop, then walked towards the shore, hearing sounds of people working around him even on the holiday, mostly on personal projects. Not nearly as many people were in work as he’d have liked, or that once there were, but at least the remaining dock workers were able to keep themselves going for now. He nodded or waved to various other DWU workers as he passed them, stopping briefly to have a quick word with one or two, until he reached the edge of the facility where ancient railway ties, strongly smelling of creosote and gently leaking old tar, were bolted down four high to make a wall along the shoreline. The huge lumps of wood had been there for at least seventy years, one or two showing signs of being replaced more recently but the bulk obviously very old. Rusty square headed bolts were spaced every couple of feet, holding them in place.

He looked over the knee-high parapet and down the side to where the exposed mud and rocks were visible about twenty five feet down, the tide being on the way out with about three hours to slack tide at this point. The smell of the sea was very strong here, seaweed glistening in the sun and
giving off the characteristic odor, mixed with a tinge of rotten fish and old mud. He could see
dozens of small crabs busily scuttling around doing whatever it was crabs did, moving between
pools of water and into and out of the seaweed. Gulls were paddling around as well, screaming at
each other, the sky, and the rocks, while looking for food.

Not seeing any trace of his daughter or her friends, he looked both ways, then headed for wharf
seven, about three hundred yards to the left. The wooden bulwark along the shoreline had gaps that
lined up with the other wharfs to allow access, one or two of these having small boats tied to them,
most of which were now sitting on the sea bed with their hulls canted to one side. A larger trawler
was moored at the end of the wharf nine, a small group of people working on it, among them a few
of his own people. He waved back when they waved to him and kept going.

Reaching the relevant wharf, he turned onto it and walked out towards the end, his footsteps
echoing on the wooden surface, while from below there was a constant sound of dripping water.
This changed after a few hundred feet into the noise of waves slapping against the pilings as he
c caught up with the retreating tide. Looking down the gaps in the planks he could see sunlight
reflecting up off the surface and illuminating the complex wooden structure with hundreds of
sparkling beams, occasionally showing a perching bird or a crab making its way along the wood.

Near the end of the wharf he heard voices coming from somewhere below, several children’s ones
mixing with that of a man. He sighed faintly. Yes, Taylor and the others were here, and yes, they
were listening to one of Erwin’s tall tales.

He liked the guy, but some of the stuff he came out with was ridiculous. To hear it he’d single-
headedly saved the world from a number of disasters during the cold war, traveled to every country
that existed and a few Danny was fairly sure didn’t outside a fantasy novel, fought several famous
capes to a standstill bare-handed, drunk the entirety of the beer supply in Boston dry on one
specific occasion (although he claimed he’d had help in that), parachuted into several war zones, at
least one of these mythical jumps being blindfolded and carrying a goat, been on good terms with a
lizard, nearly caught Nessie, and a number of other things that were even less believable such as
getting involved in a small civil war over garden gnomes.

Taylor, of course, loved these stories and she’d infected Emma, and now the Dallon girls and their
cousin, with similar feelings. He sometimes worried that they might be tempted to emulate some of
them.

He was rather more worried about suspecting that they might actually succeed…

Reaching the ladder that reached down to the captive floating platform that ran on rails up and
down the side of the wharf as the tide changed, he looked over the side. At this point in the cycle
the thing was actually a ladder, the top being connected to the wharf on a hinge mechanism and the
bottom end being on wheels that let it change the angle as the float went up and down. When the
tide was full, it was basically a drawbridge, but right now it was down at close to seventy degrees
and had to be climbed carefully like a particularly steep flight of stairs. Sure enough, the white-
haired figure of the old fisherman was sitting in a folding desk chair, holding a fishing rod in one
hand, the line extending out into the deep water, and gesticulating wildly with a bottle of beer in
the other.

Four girls and one boy were sitting on the wooden surface of the barge listening as he spoke.
“...and then she said, ‘What do you think, Erwin?’ So I told her that the only way to be certain was
to bomb the place from orbit. Mind you, it’s sort of overkill for an infestation of mimics, but
sometimes you need to be sure, you know?”
Danny tried to work out in which universe any of that made sense, gave up, shook his head, and called, “Taylor! We need to get home.”

“Oh, hi, Dad!” his daughter called back as she turned and looked up at him, as did the others. “OK. Come on guys, let’s go. Thanks, Erwin.”

“No problem, kid. Have a good Fourth.”

“We will,” Vicky said with a glance at her sister, who was grinning. “See you.”

Erwin waved with his beer bottle and watched as all five children scrambled up the near-vertical stairs with the easy of the young, looking amused. Glancing up at Danny he nodded to him.

“Fish biting?” Danny asked.

“So so. Got a few little ones, nothing worth keeping.” Erwin didn’t seem bothered. “Nice day for it, I’ve got plenty of beer, so I don’t care.”

“Fair enough. Don’t fall in.”

“Meh, I float.” The old man looked more amused. “Fallen in enough times to know that.”

Laughing, Danny waved to him then walked over to the children who popped up over the edge one after another. He ruffled Taylor’s hair, making her giggle then smooth it down. “So that’s why you all wanted to come here today,” he commented.

Taylor shrugged. “He’s cool. And we all like wandering around this place.”

“Yeah, it’s neat,” Vicky added with a broad grin. “All those machines, and the boats, and the trucks, and...”

Amy poked her. “You’re doing it again,” she said when her sister looked at her. “Stop babbling.”

Eric, who was generally fairly quiet when the blonde was around, grinned. So did Taylor and Emma.

“Well, as long as you stay well out of the dangerous areas, no one minds, but I don’t want any of you running off too far,” Danny said, suppressing a smile of his own as he turned and began heading back. “I promised your moms that I’d return you all in the condition you arrived in and that’ll be hard to do if you get squashed under a forklift or drown or something.”

Taylor laughed, Emma and the others smiling widely. “You can trust us to stay out of trouble, Dad,” she protested. He gave her a sidelong look with a raised eyebrow, making her add, “Mostly.”

“We do remember that little incident with about thirty old car batteries, lots of wire, and a huge bag of steel wool,” he said meaningfully. “It would be difficult to forget, to be honest...”

“It was really loud,” Emma remarked thoughtfully. “Tay’s idea of adding all that oxygen might have been too much.”

Amy and Vicky looked at each other, then Eric, before all three of them stared at Taylor, who was
slightly pink-cheeked. “Um… Whoops?”

“Yeah. Whoops.” Danny shook his head. “Ideally I’d prefer not to have another ‘whoops’ moment for a while, you know?”

She nodded, looking mildly repentant. “Sorry, Dad. We won’t do anything like that by accident again.”

“Good.” He walked about another twenty steps, then frowned. “By accident...” he echoed, glanced at her. She looked a little guilty and looked away, while the other four all laughed like idiots.

Sighing, he resolved to keep a closer eye on them all for a while. Taylor, certainly, was more than responsible enough, even at her age, that most of the time he was content she’d stay safe and keep her friends safe too. But every now and then this odd urge seemed to come over her...

People tended to remember the results.

Even when they didn’t really want to.

And he couldn’t help but think adding three more inquisitive and inventive minds to the little gang was only going to mean that sort of thing happened more often. He well remembered his own childhood, and how many times things had… not quite worked the way they were intended to.

“How did it go?” Annette asked as her husband came in shepherding a gaggle of children, all of whom appeared to be in a good mood. He was carrying two large bags of groceries, Taylor, Emma, and Vicky each holding another one apiece. All of these ended up on the kitchen table, before Taylor headed for the fridge and started pulling out bottles of soda for her friends.

“Fine, love. We got everything on the list, the kids spent an hour at the beach then decided it was too crowded and wanted to go to the Union instead. Mostly because they were listening to crazy stories.”

“Erwin?”

“Yeah. Man’s got the wildest imagination I’ve ever seen,” Danny laughed. “He should be writing books, he’d make a fortune. Anyway I managed to drag them away and we went shopping. Lucky we managed to find a supermarket that was open, most of them are shut now.”

“Good. We had most of the stuff we needed but so many people are coming I wanted to be sure,” she replied, moving to the table and peering into the bags, then nodding in satisfaction. “You’d better start getting the barbecue ready, I think. It needs cleaning too from last time.”

“All right.” Her husband rummaged in the fridge himself for a few seconds, emerging with a bottle
of Pat’s new beer and a pleased expression.

“Don’t drink too much just yet,” she warned in a good natured way. “Or we’ll end up with a repeat of last time.”

Vicky nudged her sister and whispered loudly, “Maybe that’s where Tay gets it from?”

Danny sighed when all five children, and Annette, started laughing. Shaking his head he went out the back door, Taylor and Emma following along with Eric. “Can we help you, Mrs H?” Amy asked.

“Thank you, Amy. Yes, if you could start unpacking those bags, that would help a lot,” she replied, indicating the table with her head, her hands currently being slightly covered in marinade from the chicken wings she was preparing. “When were your mothers planning on coming, do you know?”

Vicky looked at the clock on the microwave before saying, “About half an hour, I think. Around four?”

“OK, that works. No, the hamburger buns need to go outside too, dear,” Annette directed as Amy headed for the normal bread cupboard with several bags in her hands. “But that loaf can go in there.”

“Sure.” The brunette girl quickly changed direction and did as requested, coming back a few seconds later. “Thank you for asking us to your party, by the way,” she said with a smile.

“It was our pleasure, Amy,” Annette assured her. “You’re all friends now, after all. And we like having people over.” She glanced out the back window to see Danny fighting the barbecue and apparently losing while Taylor and Emma fell about laughing. “Oh dear.”

Eric appeared in the kitchen doorway looking mildly confused. “Mr H says he wants a hammer?”

“Tell him to stop playing with it, remember there’s a lock on the lid, and get on with the job, please,” Annette giggled. He grinned and gave her a thumb’s up, then vanished again. Moments after that there was a cry of triumph from outside which made the three inside laugh.

Forty minutes later the house was getting crowded, both the Dallon and Pelham families having arrived, along with Kurt and his wife Lacey, and close to a dozen other DWU people and their families. Several neighbors were wandering back and forth, the front door being propped open to allow this and also let a cooling breeze blow through the house, as the day had been getting steadily hotter since sunrise and it was much too early to start cooling down yet. The driveway was full and there were cars all down both sides of the street, as both their party and those of others in the neighborhood got underway.

Annette reflected as she directed people around the kitchen preparing food and ferrying it out to the back yard on how even in a city like Brockton Bay, with all the problems it had, it was still possible to have a good time. Most of the gangs preyed on the commercial areas, leaving at least this end of town unmolested for the most part, and there was less crime right now than for a while for whatever reason. She was also thankful that even though their house wasn’t enormous, it had a larger than average back yard, some hundred and twenty feet long and sixty feet wide, which was big enough to comfortably accept the people who’d turned up.

This was good since she’d slightly underestimated quite how many that would be. There seemed to
be more children running around than she’d expected too. At least Taylor and Emma seemed to be keeping that aspect under surprisingly good discipline. She could hear her daughter shouting orders to what must by now have been at least eighteen kids under sixteen, not including her own group, and looking out the window was amused to see all of them practically saluting her as they rushed about helping to set everything up.

“She’d make a good drill sergeant,” Kurt commented with a chuckle as they heard a shout of annoyance, then looked to see Taylor lambasting a child at least four years her senior, the poor boy looking worried as she lectured him. Emma, beside her best friend, was giving off an air of a second in command who was disappointed in the performance of her troops, which was hilarious in such young ones.

“Taylor does have a way with words,” she admitted, going back to preparing her special burger mix. “And isn’t shy about using them when required.”

“I’m glad to see you up and about, Annette,” he said as he took a break from slicing onions. Giving her a look up and down, he added, “Are you sure you should be working this hard?”

“I’m following doctor’s orders, Kurt,” she said with inner amusement about the whole thing. She was essentially fully functional but for appearances sake had to pretend to be recovering, so was mostly supervising while taking frequent breaks and only making a few of the dishes. “I feel more or less fine, but thank you for being concerned. And please pick up that tray for me, it’s too heavy for an invalid, even if she’s walking wounded.” She gave him a winning smile.

Kurt chuckled again. “You did get shot only a few days ago, Annette, it’s fine to ask for help. You’re recovering a lot faster than most people would but don’t strain yourself.” He put the knife down and moved the tray full of baked goods to the oven as she watched. “If you need anything just ask. And take a break, you’ve been standing there for over half an hour. We can handle this.” He indicated the kitchen which was so full of people they could barely move around each other, although somehow it was all working. Sarah Pelham was doing something complicated with coleslaw, her sister was mixing drinks, Lacey was preparing burger patties from the mix Annette had just finished. A constant stream of people were coming and going, ferrying things out to the yard and piling them on tables.

“I hope we have enough food,” she said.

Everyone in the room stopped and looked at her, then around at the vast amount of edibles. “I don’t believe that will be a problem, Annette,” Sarah laughed. “Kurt’s right, you’ve done enough. Go and sit down, you’re too fragile to risk damage over a party.”

Annette nodded. It was best not to overdo things and make someone suspicious. “Of course. I just like doing this sort of thing and got carried away.” She prodded her side, shook her head, and said, “You’re right. Thank you, everyone.” Filling a large glass with cold orange juice, as she was thirsty, she smiled at them all then went outside to see what was going on out there.

Total chaos, mainly. Somehow it all seemed to work, but she couldn’t quite discern how. Deciding it was probably better to move to the side and stay out of the way she did precisely that, finding a lawn chair and sitting in it near where Danny was poking the now-glowing coals of the barbecue experimentally. Next to him Alan was doing the same thing with the other, even larger, barbecue he’d brought over a while earlier.

“How’s it going?” she asked them.
“Nearly ready,” Alan replied, leaning over to blow on the charcoal, then cursing as a wave of smoke rose into his face. “Ack.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do that,” she giggled, making him shrug ruefully.

“Possibly. We’re not in a hurry.” He looked at his watch, then up at the sky, “Perfect day for it. We’ll see the fireworks perfectly.”

She looked at the far end of the garden to where a number of old metal ammunition boxes were stacked, with a couple of people carefully guarding them from inquisitive children. “Did you get enough fireworks?” she asked a little dubiously. “That looks sufficient for a fair sized battle.”

“I got a good deal on them,” Alan said with satisfaction. “Guy just over the border in Massachusetts ordered some in for a party of his own, but he made a mistake with the license to use them. So it was either get them confiscated and possibly be fined half to death, or sell them to me at cost.”

“Oh, dear,” she smiled. “He must have been annoyed.”

“Not as much as the cops would have been,” Alan noted. “Anyway, it’s enough to do the job. Some nice stuff in there. We’ll set them up when we’ve had something to eat and people have calmed down.”

“Should be one to remember,” Danny commented as he closed the lid of the barbecue, satisfied that it was working correctly. “We’ve never had this many people before. Look at it, there must be at least fifty here now and more are turning up all the time.”

Annette looked around, smiling to herself. It was true, their small family get together had turned, somehow, into one part of a wider scale celebration for some reason. Neighboring parties seemed to be overflowing into theirs and vice versa. All in all she had no problem with that. After her recent experiences she was just glad to be home and enjoying herself. It could, absent Taylor and her giant mechanical friend, have turned out very differently and she had no wish at all to even contemplate the effect on the other two if that had happened.

Leaning back and relaxing, she sipped her juice and waited for the food to be ready, content that she’d done her part in the whole thing. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t do any more now without rousing suspicion from those outside the very small number of people who knew the truth.

Amy watched carefully as Emma’s father and two other men started setting up the fireworks at the far end of the Hebert’s lawn. They were burying tubes in the ground for the mortars, and setting up a rack full of skyrockets. Turning her head, she saw Mr Hebert still making burgers, although she was now full enough that she probably couldn’t eat another one.

Well, another two, certainly. One would probably be OK.

Looking the other way she met her sister’s eyes, the blonde girl also having been closely watching the setup of the pyrotechnics. Both of them nodded slightly, before looking at Emma, who was half-way down the garden talking to her own older sister and their mother, all three laughing and on the face of it enjoying themselves. Even so, Emma looked back and also nodded once.
She checked around her once more. It looked like it was about time.

Glancing behind herself she spotted Eric, who was watching her and Vicky while eating another hot dog. She motioned with her head, just a little, and he started drifting towards the table where her parents and his were holding forth on what New Wave stood for, and how important it was that Parahumans set a good example. Her mother was visibly slightly tipsy and seemed to have loosened up rather a lot, laughing fairly hard at some quip one of the neighbors of the Hebert’s had made, which amused Amy. Carol Dallon had unwound quite a lot in the last couple of years, ever since that first trip to the lake and everything that had happened there…

She turned back to face slightly to the side of her sister, giving her the signal. Vicky, apparently without noticing, began wandering more or less towards the barbecue, talking brightly to Crystal, who had turned up late to the party and was trying hard to catch up on the food front with considerable success. Behind her, Eric said something that made Carol squawk in outrage and his mother start giggling, the whole table full of people very rapidly involved in a good natured argument.

Eric managed to trip and knock the half eaten burger out of his sister’s hand, causing her to squawk as well, in a different sort of outrage. Apologizing, he went to ask Mr Hebert for another one, while Crystal complained and everyone in that general area was distracted by the show.

As this was going on, Emma casually moved to the side, her mother and sister drifting over with her. Emma asked something that made the older woman look puzzled, then sigh in exasperation when Anne also made a comment, looking like she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or get annoyed. All three of them were involved in a mild but quite loud argument of their own seconds later. This attracted Mr Barnes’s attention, ultimately causing him to look up, shake his head, say something to his helpers, then move to see what the problem was. The two other men exchanged a glance before going for a beer each, which was conveniently close to where Amy was standing.

She turned and nudged an empty bottle, one of many on the table next to the drinks, causing it to topple over and hit another one. The ensuing domino effect made about three dozen bottles clatter all over the place, although none broke. It was still loud enough that practically everyone who wasn’t otherwise engaged turned to look, while she flushed in embarrassment and started loudly apologizing.

Making a quick motion with her hand to the side of her head, disguised as wiping sweat from her face, she was peripherally aware that Taylor, who had been standing near the door to the garage, disappeared into it for a few seconds. Carefully not looking she kept babbling apologies and picking up bottles, while managing to get in the way of several other people doing the same thing.

The chaos was fairly entertaining and certainly worked to design.

Taylor slipped out of the garage again, Amy saw, although she didn’t attract attention to this. Almost everyone was now watching one or other of the arguments or other noisy things going on near the house. The other brunette silently and almost unnoticeably sidled along the fence until she reached the fireworks boxes, which she bent over for about fifteen seconds.

By the time anyone looked, she was thirty feet away talking to Emma and Ann.

Amy smiled to herself, put the last of the bottles back on the table, and went for another couple of burgers.
“What’s this one?” Jeff asked, holding up a rather large firework. Alan peered at it, then shook his head.

“I’m not sure. What box did it come out of?”

“The one full of mortars. There’s about six of them under the smaller stuff.” Jeff scanned the label and raised his eyebrows. “Looks different to them. More professional.”

“Huh. That guy must have bought more than I expected.” Alan shrugged. “No worries, just set it up with the rest. We’ll use them for the finale.”

“Got a couple of really big rockets here too, Alan, want to use them as well for that?”

He looked to see his other helper, Alex, holding an enormous skyrocket in each hand. One had a cheerful label on that called it “The Eliminator,” while the other one was apparently a “Micro Hellbore.”

“Yeah, why not? We’ve got lots of fuse, let’s hook them all up to fire at the same time.” Alan looked around at the setup, which was slightly more elaborate than he’d originally expected. They might have gotten a little carried away. He’d seen fewer fireworks at public displays…

“We’re going to have to watch this from the front garden,” Jeff commented as he taped some fuses together. “The house is too close for the size of this stuff.”

“I know, but that’s easy enough,” Alan nodded. “The neighbors on either side are going to be firing theirs in about half an hour, as it starts to get dark. So we thought we’d light it up just as those guys start to wind down and we should get a nice effect.”

“Sounds good. Three displays for the price of one.” Jeff looked pleased.

“Probably more than that, I know at least four other parties in this neighborhood have fireworks. It’s going to look amazing.” Alan finished with the mortar he was working on and stepped back. “There. That’s done. How’s it coming?”

“Nearly finished,” Jeff muttered. “Another couple of minutes for me.”

“I’m just about done too,” Alex remarked, laying half a dozen strands of fuse next to each other in his hand then wrapping some paper tape around them to join them. “That should do it.”

Shortly Jeff said, “Finished here too. We’re all set. If we got all the fuse lengths right, we just light that end and everything goes off in sequence.”

“This would be easier with one of those remote ignition widgets but good old fashion fuse works pretty well,” Alan smiled. “Danny and I blew up enough shit when we were kids to know that.”

“Funny, I seem to remember doing the same,” Alex laughed. “I need another beer.”

“Me too.” Jeff helped Alan drape a large tarp over the assembled fireworks to keep the dew off and stop anyone interfering with them until they were ready to light them, then all three went off in
None noticed the attention the rig was getting from several children present, and they wouldn’t have thought much of it if they had. It was fireworks after all.

Vicky smiled as she looked up, watching the colorful flashes in the sky and listening to the booms and whistles. People were setting off fireworks all over the area, more than she’d ever seen in one place before. For some reason everyone seemed to have gone nuts with them this year. She didn’t mind, she loved fireworks.

As the nearest display culminated in a whole series of closely separated and extremely loud bangs, she saw Mr Barnes disappear around the side of the Hebert house, then come back considerably more rapidly a few seconds later. He was looking over his shoulder in an expectant way as he joined the substantial crowd of people on the front lawn.

“Any second now,” he said.

They waited.

A few moments passed with only more distant fireworks sounding, until there was a loud whoosh from the other side of the house and a rocket roared up into the darkening sky. She yelled in pleasure as did almost everyone else. Another one went, then two more.

After a slight pause there was an enormous BOOM! and an enormous blast of sparkling silver fire rose in a fountain well above the roof. Several more in different colors followed in sequence. Yells and whoops sounded up and down the block.

“You got some really excellent fireworks, Alan,” Mr Hebert said with satisfaction. “Best I’ve seen in years.”

“The good stuff should start any time now, those are just the little ones,” Mr Barnes laughed.

He was right. A few more of the fire fountains went up, crackling and whistling, then more rockets launched. These were large enough that you could feel the detonation in your chest when they exploded high above. Vicky grinned widely, Amy beside her shouting in glee and both Taylor and Emma gazing up on the other side with enormous smiles. Eric was laughing and thoroughly enjoying himself, which seemed to be the same thing everyone else was.

Then the big ones went off. Three loud thumps sounded, and three orange glowing embers spiraled almost lazily into the sky for a handful of seconds, before they erupted into huge flowers of light in many colors, fading from brilliant white through greens and blues to reds and yellows, then darkness. Immense bangs came down to them as the lights disappeared.

“Jesus, that was impressive,” Mr Hebert said, sounding stunned.

Another three thumps, and two whooshes, and more shells rose and burst, the rockets going off well above them. And again, and once more. Then there was a pause just long enough to make everyone wonder if that was it, before a long sustained burst of smaller but still loud bangs came, each one heralding the appearance of a brilliant crackling fireball two hundred feet up. Dozens of them fired in about ten seconds, sweeping from side to side. Just as this finished, a whole series of
a dozen rockets launched one after the other second apart, massive colorful explosions raining sparking fire down from the heavens.

Vicky thought it was one of the most amazing things she’d ever seen.

“Nearly done now, just the finale to go,” she vaguely heard over the explosions as more fire fountains erupted. As they did, six oddly quiet booms went off almost as one, the half dozen almost invisible glowing traces of the rising shells going a remarkably long way up.

Then they went off.

The entire neighborhood lit up like daylight, in every color of the rainbow, as a sheet of rippling fire spread out from the six detonations, fading and brightening for a couple of seconds as it went. There was a gasp from the crowd, which turned into a mass yelp as a six-part chorus of the loudest bangs any of them had ever heard rolled over them like thunder, echoes dying away into the distance. Vicky thought she could hear it coming back from the bay seconds later. She wiggled a finger in her ear and winced.

That had worked even better than Taylor had said it would…

“Fuck me!” Mr Hebert said under his breath, sounding mightily impressed. “Where the hell did you get those fireworks from, Alan?”

The answer was drowned out as two final rockets launched simultaneously, an enormous roar preceding two columns of sparkling silver fire with swiftly moving projectiles on top. Everyone watched as they went up, and up, and up, far higher than seemed possible.

The left hand one went off first, causing an effect like a hollow sphere of green fire that cast a shadow on the ground as it expanded rapidly, reaching a size that was ridiculous. It faded out, just as the second one exploded.

This one produced a brilliant blue-white line of fire that stretched across the sky in a spectacle that seemed to last for far longer than was likely, although she realized a moment later that was only an illusion. The sound of the first rocket reached them as the second one blew, a massive thump that rattled windows up and down the street. As the echoes died away, the second explosion sounded, this one more of a roar than a bang.

Then silence fell, broken only by a car alarm some distance away, and some barking dogs a few houses down.

No one said a word for about ten seconds. All of them were still staring at the sky in amazement.

Then someone started clapping.

Almost instantly everyone else joined in, including Vicky and her friends and sister, all of them whooping their appreciation of the display. Mr Barnes, who was still staring up with an incredulous expression, seemed to shake himself a little before he looked around and grinned, then bowed.

“You can do my fireworks any time,” Mr Hebert said, clapping his friend on the back. “That was amazing. I hope you made a note of the names of those things!”
Vicky looked at Amy, then the pair of them turned to Taylor, Emma, and Eric.

All five felt like things had worked out very nicely indeed.

It was fitting welcome home for Mrs Hebert, and a really good way to end the day, in Vicky’s opinion.

And best of all, she mused as they all trooped back around the house into a faint cloud of smoke from the fireworks, there was still plenty of food left.

A successful mission and lots to eat… What more could you want?
Captain Rosenberg closed the door to his temporary office, locked it, made sure the blinds were down, then pulled a small device out of his pocket and turned it on, putting it on the desk which he then sat behind.

“Bug jammer,” he said when Leroy looked at the thing them him. “Borrowed it from someone I know in the private security industry. Guaranteed to handle anything short of the best Tinker Tech.”

Leroy nodded, glancing at Alex Hackett, who was sitting with his chair tipped back on the rear legs, his feet up on the small table near the desk. The SWAT lieutenant peered interestedly at the widget, which had a couple of blinking lights on it and a small display, then shrugged.

“So.” Rosenberg examined both of them for a moment, then looked at the door yet again before returning his attention to the two men. “I assume everything on your respective ends has been handled?”

“Yeah,” Hackett said with a nod. “No one in SWAT knows anything. Neither does anyone in IA. The medical examiner has signed off on a body that was shot dead during a robbery, unfortunately not before the bastard got Ray, who bled out at the scene. All the records are up to date.”

“The body?”

“Cremated. Guy had no next of kin, no reason to keep it around for an open and shut case like that.”

The captain nodded slightly. “And the witness?”

“He didn’t see anything. He doesn’t want to have seen anything.” Hackett shrugged again, smirking a little. “For some reason he seemed a little worried. No idea why.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Leroy sighed, but under his breath.

“Did the ME say anything?”

“Only that his niece ended up dead because of the fucking Merchants last year and he’d like to buy whoever helped wipe them out a lifetime supply of beer.”

Rosenberg shook his head wearily. “Too much of that sort of story around this damn place.”

“Makes it easier sometimes, but you’re right.” Hackett made a resigned gesture. “At least that particular problem isn’t a problem any more.”

“What about the accomplice?”

“We had a conversation. He’s not telling anyone anything. And I didn’t even have to insist,” Hackett looked darkly amused. “Guy seems to think that prison is safer than being out where our
friend might run into him again..."

Captain Rosenberg’s mouth twitched a little. “Good.” Then he turned to Leroy. “The paperwork?”

“No one is going to find anything,” Leroy said quietly. “It’s… misfiled. A lot.”

“No video?”

“Nothing. All the recordings were badly corrupted due to power spikes during the attack on the station. We lost the entire day’s data.”

“And the audio tapes?”

“Someone seems to have accidentally recorded over them. Must have got them mixed up with the blanks.”

“What a tragedy,” Alex chuckled. “That was careless.”

Rosenberg let out a breath, leaning back in his chair. “Good work, both of you.”

“What about the FBI, sir? And the PRT for that matter?” Leroy asked after a few seconds of silence, unable to prevent himself.

The captain looked at him, then Hackett. “The PRT, from the information I have, have decided that it’s not worth pursuing at the moment since they’re not sure it was a Parahuman in the first place and they have more immediate concerns. I suspect Director Piggot is pushing back against her superiors to some degree as well. She bears no love for the Chief Director if what I’ve heard is accurate. And the reverse is true, of course. Ellisburg didn’t make her friends in that fucking organization.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Hackett quipped.

“Especially not if it’s done by disobeying a direct, and bone-stupid, order,” the captain replied with a small grimace. “They can’t punish her, or at least they can’t be seen to punish her. The public would have their heads. So they promote her sideways into a position where either she sinks or swims. And if she sinks, it’s her fault...”

“And if she swims, it’s because they put the right person in the right place,” Hackett said with disgust, getting a nod. “Fucking politics.”

“Costa-Brown is a politician as much as anything,” Rosenberg noted. “That sort is always aware of PR and spin. Director Piggot is a soldier, and has no time for politics from what I’ve seen of her. Probably be quite good at it if she cared about it, but that’s not her main interest.” He shook his head a little. “I’m favorably impressed so far, I have to admit, but time will tell. After that shit Calvert, the PRT are going to have to get their house in order before anyone is going to trust them very far. And be seen to do that.”

“This bullshit didn’t help with public opinion on that front,” Leroy muttered.

“Not really, no. Neither did that appallingly badly-timed and worded press release.” the captain scowled. “I have a sneaking suspicion that whoever was screwing around with their communications was behind that too, but I don’t have any proof. Whatever the truth of it, that’s her
problem.” He paused, then went on, “According to the Commissioner, the FBI stuck at it for longer, but they’ve also decided that there isn’t enough evidence to even be sure it was something they should be investigating. The attack itself is much more important, since both them and the ATF are extremely irritated about all the military weapons those fuckers somehow got their hands on.”

“I heard that the ATF discovered about three crates of M72 LAW rockets in the Merchant’s main base when they raided it on Friday,” Hackett commented, frowning.

“So I hear,” Rosenberg nodded. “Heads are going to roll over that. There’s some talk that they might have got them from the Empire, which is going to make a lot of official attention go in that direction. And that’s going to make the PRT have to get involved too.” He shook his head. “It’s a complete mess.”

“So the PRT dropped it, the FBI dropped it, we don’t have any evidence either...” Hackett glanced at Leroy, then back at his superior. “That’s the end of the matter?”

“Yes. For various reasons, no one is going to be looking too hard for our friend. This time, anyway. If it happens again...” He spread his hands on the desk. “I don’t know. But for now, we forget about terrifying weapon skills and get on with rebuilding the BBPD. The Commissioner is fine with it, City Hall seems perfectly happy to go along with him, and even that FBI friend of his didn’t seem all that fussed about it. Grabbing Squealer seems to have given them something they wanted, so I don’t think anything more will come of it.”

“Fine by me.” Hackett smiled a little. “Saved our asses, which deserves a little quid pro quo in my opinion. Never know, it might help one day.”

“Hopefully not soon,” Leroy said with some asperity. “Once was enough for me. I could easily go my entire life without starring in a war movie again.”

“Agreed.” Rosenberg nodded. “We lost too many friends that night. But the Merchants are gone for good, so it’s not all bad. And we know that there’s at least one person out there on our side.” He picked up the jammer and weighed it in his hand, looking thoughtful.

“Hey, Leroy, where’s Maggie?” Hackett asked.

“She said she’d prefer not to think about what happened, didn’t want to be reminded of it, was still on leave, and if I called her again before the end of the week she’d shoot me in the foot,” Leroy replied, causing his colleague to snigger. “I think she’s still sort of in a bad mood.”

“Ah, she’ll get over it sooner or later,” the SWAT lieutenant chuckled. “Hey, did you see all the fireworks yesterday? There were some fucking incredible ones over on the west side. Tinker stuff, maybe, I’ve heard there’s a lot of that around at the moment.”

Turning off the jammer, Captain Rosenberg dropped it into his desk drawer then closed it. “I heard some god-awful loud explosions,” he smiled. “I thought it must be you guys, Alex. We all remember ‘03 when someone decided that C4 would be interesting to add to a big rocket.”

Hackett looked mildly embarrassed, but grinned. “It was interesting, you can’t deny that.”

“In one sense of the word, yes,” the captain sighed. “In the sense of people complaining about the broken windows, no.”
“Meh, no sense of adventure, some people,” the lieutenant said dismissively. He looked at his watch. “Anything else? We’re still moving all the equipment that survived out of storage and setting it up, and I’d like to get back to that.”

“No, I think we’re done here.” Rising, the captain moved to unlock his door. “The latest word is that the station won’t be rebuilt until at least November, even with the emergency budget the Mayor’s office is providing. So we’re going to have to get used to being cramped for now.”

“We’ll survive,” Leroy remarked as he also stood, following Hackett out of the office. “We have so far.”

“Yeah, if the Merchants couldn't take us out, tight quarters won’t do anything,” the other man added. Both of them nodded to their Captain, then headed back into the very full temporary police station. Leroy heard the door to the office close again behind him.

Deciding that dwelling on recent events was pointless, he went about his business.
The bay is pretty in the morning...

August 4th, 2005

Taylor leaned on the railing at the end of the wharf, looking out into the bay. The tide was high and the day was calm and hot, the water mirror-still and reflecting the early-morning sun onto the various buildings near the shoreline. The underside of several of the huge gray metallic forms of loading cranes, their cables gently creaking high above whenever a slight breeze blew across them, were brightly illuminated. The sound of seagulls squawking and fussing came from above, and off to one side where a trawler was slowly puttering past, birds following it in a cloud of feathery hunger.

All in all it was a very pretty sight, she thought to herself. The Protectorate base in the middle of the bay, a few miles away, added to it in a strange way, since the force field bubble that surrounded it made the sunlight look really strange and beautiful when it shone through, like the enormous structure was wrapped in a soap bubble.

‘One shot with a 25 centimeter hellbore would bring that down instantly,’ she mused to herself with a slight sensation of sneaky guilt. ‘It’s not bad but it’s only good for a few hundred megajoules per second.’

Kenny had taught her a lot about things like the technology behind force screens. And weapons. Even in this early stage of her training, she probably knew more about those fields of study than anyone locally. He’d said the technology in use was loosely, and inefficiently, based on something very similar to that which one of the client races of the Melconians had used a thousand or so years before his time. She found it amusing that he seemed more aggravated by the inefficiency than the low tech...

“It’s certainly a nice day, isn’t it?” her father said from beside her. She nodded with a smile, looking up at him.

“It’s really nice. Thanks for letting me come, Dad.”

“It was my pleasure, Taylor.” He smiled down at her. “Now remember, this is a dangerous place, so don’t go wandering off. I don’t want you getting run over by a truck.”

“I don’t want to get run over either,” she laughed. Looking over her shoulder, she added, “Mom’s coming.”

He followed her gaze, smiling again. Her mother walked up and slipped her arm around his waist, looking pleased. “Did you find Lacey?”

“Yes, dear, she wasn’t hard to find. I just had to follow the shouting.”

Taylor’s father snickered. “She does have something of a distinctive voice when she’s annoyed...”

“You could put it that way.” Her mother looked back over her shoulder, then shook her head. “And a good pair of lungs. Anyway, she was happy to get the dishes back.”

“Great.” Looking down at Taylor, who was carefully scouring the local area for small stones and
tossing them into the water while listening to the deep *ploongk!* sounds they made with amusement, he went on, “We’re going to have to go soon, Taylor.”

“OK, Dad.” She tossed another rock, this one about the size of a baseball, carefully *not* using her full strength. He seemed impressed at how far it went even so. “Hey, can I go and look over that side? I’ll be right back, I just wanted to see if I can see the bottom. There were some huge crabs there last time.”

“All right, but only another ten minutes, OK? I need to get back to work and your mother still needs to do the shopping.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she smiled, turning and dashing over to the opposite side of the wharf, about fifty feet away. This was lower than where she’d been, that particular area being arranged as a loading dock for boats and having a flight of four low steps down to it, with a ramp to one side. Mounted at the edge of the wharf was a swinging crane, the jib currently cantilevered out over the water with the hook dangling down a few feet. Jumping down the steps in one leap, she slid across the slippery wood and fetched up against the railing with a thump, grinning to herself.

“Be *careful*, Taylor!” her mother’s somewhat exasperated voice came from behind. She waved without looking, engaged as she was in staring down into the water fifteen feet below. On this side of the wharf the sun was shining directly into the depths, clearly showing the bottom, rocks and weed giving way in places to clear patches of mud and sand. There was a surprising amount of life down there, crabs wandering around on the bottom while schools of silvery fish swam above them, and she could make out colorful sea anemones, some quite large, waving tentacles in the water. A few jellyfish pulsated past, glinting in the light.

Considering that she was always hearing how polluted the bay was, she wondered for a moment what it would be like if it was cleaner. Even like this, it looked impressive when you really paid attention.

She could hear her parents talking back where she’d left them, chatting about various things. Glancing back after a minute or so, she made sure they weren’t paying much attention to her. In fact both of them were looking at the Rig, her father pointing at it and her mother nodding thoughtfully.

Taylor returned her attention to the water, bending down to pick up a large rusty bolt that had apparently snapped off some item of machinery and was just lying there, then flipping it into the water. It splashed down in a small cloud of bubbles, then sank to the bottom, where it was immediately investigated by a crab.

She checked again. Both her parents were still looking the other way. Glancing about, she satisfied herself that no one was close enough to really see her, and none of the dock workers seemed to be paying attention anyway. Then she put her hand in her pocket.

“I’m ready,” she sub-vocalized.

A moment later she pulled a small tube out of her pocket, one that hadn’t been there a second before. It was apparently made of some heavy plastic, although she knew it was actually a highly advanced ceramic polymer, and was virtually indestructible. The color was odd, the surface seeming to reflect the light in an entirely wrong manner, making it weirdly difficult to focus on.

The girl didn’t pay any attention to that, since it was something she was completely accustomed to
at this point. She could even have described exactly how it was constructed should that have been required, although no one else had the security clearance for her to actually do that. Without any ceremony she idly flipped it into the water in the same manner she’d disposed of the bolt, watching as it splashed down.

Unlike the bolt, a few feet under the surface the sinking cylinder, which was almost invisible unless you’d been carefully watching, suddenly straightened out its slow tumble, leveled off, and zipped away under its own power. Even to her eyes it vanished almost instantly.

Taylor nodded slightly in satisfaction.

She dropped another three probes into the water, each of them arrowing off in a different direction. When she heard her parent’s footsteps coming, she bent down and retrieved another item of junk, this one some broken off piece of outboard motor at a guess, and as her mother appeared at her elbow, tossed it over the side and watched.

“Look at the crab, Mom! He thinks it’s food or something.” She pointed with a smile.

“Stop annoying the poor crabs, Taylor,” her mother giggled. “And you really shouldn’t throw junk into the water like that.”

With a shrug and a smile, Taylor turned to look at her parents. “There’s already so much down there a little more won’t hurt, right?”

“Even so, it’s best not to litter, dear,” her mother chided gently. “Come on, we need to go. Your dad has to get back to the office.”

“OK, Mom.” Taylor nodded. “This was interesting. But I guess I could go for breakfast.”

“You already had breakfast, Taylor,” her father chuckled.

“Oh. Um… second breakfast, then?”

“You are not in fact a hobbit,” he replied with a shake of his head and a good-natured smile.

“I don’t even have hairy feet,” she agreed happily, following as the two adults began walking back along the old wharf towards the DWU buildings. “But it might be fun to live underground. Hey...” She got a thoughtful look that made her parents glance at her, then at each other with an expression of resignation. “Can I make an underground fort in the back yard?”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s a good idea,” her mother said doubtfully. “And it would be very difficult in any case.”

“Kenny says it’s not that hard,” Taylor replied brightly. “We could blast.”

“You are not blowing holes in the back garden, Taylor,” her father sighed, massaging his forehead. “Not again.”

“Aww...”

The small family kept walking, with Taylor chattering on about all the ideas she had for making interesting modifications to the scenery. Behind them in the bay, now some distance away, four
little autonomous probes loaded with nanotech from far in an alternative future moved rapidly and completely undetected to several destinations, including the Rig and an undersea fiber-optic backbone. They would join the others already in place and make the growing sensor network that little bit larger and more capable.

And in a place both very far away and very close, a giant sapient weapons system waited patiently for new data to come in, while he made plans both long and short term to protect his charges from all threats, internal and external.
Michael prepared carefully for this night came but once a year. It was important to have everything in place.

The ritual offerings went into the bowl, the one he’d used for thirty years now, the one that had been seasoned with the blood taken from the Supplicants of His favor. The bowl went, in turn, onto the small table reserved for it and it alone.

Arranging the offerings, he inspected each in turn, ensuring all were perfect. One that didn’t pass muster was destroyed in the fire, arcane gestures accompanying the removal of a stain on the holy procedure. The rest were as required and he stepped back, satisfied.

Moving to the next room, he prostrated himself before the symbol of Him, muttering the correct words to placate the One, before raising his head. “Soon, My Lord, there will be another Winnowing, and another selected for the Great Work. The time is nearly here.”

There was no answer, there never was, but he could tell from the feeling deep inside that He was pleased.

Standing, he bowed deeply, then removed himself from His presence to continue the preparations. It was vital that all was correct and in its place. Candles made from the tallow of rejected offerings were lit. Decorations gleaned from the polished bones of failures were gently arranged just so. The Altar was most assiduously polished, removing all traces of all previous Offerings.

A pleasantly pine-scented air freshener was sprayed around the whole area, while he spoke the ritual of purification to ameliorate the insult to Him from the mundane origins of the product.

He was, above all, merciful and pragmatic. He would allow such things, knowing that it increased the efficiency of the procedure, for was not He far more intelligent than all others? A modern world offered many improvements to the rituals of old, as long as the core of them was left unaltered. Clearly this was the case or He would have made his displeasure apparent long since.

When all was prepared, Michael checked the time, displayed on the special timepiece he had constructed from many carefully acquired special components over the years. It indicated that he was on schedule, and should begin the final aspect of the annual ritual in exactly six minutes.

Returning to the room where he could be in view of Him, he bowed again, then sat in the prescribed position and opened his mind to His power. As always, it was almost overwhelming, but at the same time provoked a feeling of safety and joy in his heart. Reciting the mantras laid out by Him, Michael concentrated.

And around him, the world began to slowly change.
Soon.

Soon, they would come, and enter, and the Ritual would once again begin. By dawn’s light, the Winnowing would be complete and the Supplicant prepared to move the Great Work one step closer to completion.

It was as the Prophecy foretold.

Ever since that terrible dark day thirty years ago when he had finally seen the glory of Him, he had known the truth, and what he would have to do to bring about what must happen.

He was the Chosen One.

Stone rumbled. Wood creaked. Distant voices of creatures that had never evolved on this ball of muck circling a third rate sun gradually became audible, far in the distance.

The distance that was gradually shrinking…

Michael smiled beatifically, basking in the glory of Him.

His eyes opened at the expected sound.

It had begun.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*

“You sure about this, Tay?” Emma looked at the old house that was set back from the road considerably further than normal in their neighborhood. It was in the middle of a very large yard, overgrown and surrounded by tangled trees which screened the large dwelling from sight except for the top story that had a pair of gabled windows peering out into the evening like scowling eyes. “This place looks like somewhere the Addams Family would think was too depressing.”

Taylor grinned, her mask up on top of her head. “Dad said this place was empty for years, but some guy bought it six months ago and fixed it up. He spent a lot of money on it, apparently. Which means he can afford good chocolate.”

“And that means lots of loot,” Vicky said from behind them with a note of satisfaction in her voice. She looked up at the house and shuddered a little. “But Emma’s right, this place is as creepy as heck.”

“He’s probably playing that up,” Amy put in, staring at the weird symbols made of dull ivory-colored plastic that hung on the fence to either side of the gate, obviously meant to look like bone. There was a fake skull on a post a couple of meters inside the fence, and several lanterns made of brass and glass with almost black candles flickering inside them, the flames an odd reddish color. “Looks like he’s really trying to get into the spirit of Halloween.”

“I’ve never seen some of this stuff before,” Eric added, sounding impressed. “It’s really realistic.”

“Maybe he’s some deranged cultist, trying to take over the world,” Taylor hissed, crouching a little and putting her flashlight under her chin to illuminate her face with an eerie glow. “He eats children. He lures them in with the promise of candy. Then… no one ever sees them again!”
There was a long moment of total silence before all five kids burst out laughing madly.


“I practiced in front of the mirror,” Taylor replied proudly, straightening up and grinning widely.

“She really does,” Emma confirmed with a shake of her head. “She’s nuts.”

“Well, everyone knows that,” Vicky giggled. She shook her plastic pumpkin that was half full of candy, looking into it. “I hope he’s got Snickers. I like Snickers.”

“We know, you stole all mine and ate the lot last year,” Amy grumbled. “Then you were sick all over the living room. Mom wasn’t happy.”

“Neither was I,” her sister said cheerfully, poking her in the ribs. “But it was worth it.”

“Stop that.”

“Make me.”

Eric stepped between them and looked sternly at both girls. “Now, there’s no call for insults between sisters,” he intoned with as deep a voice as he could manage.

Amy and Vicky exchanged a look, nodded simultaneously, and said, “Dweeb.”

“Hey!” Eric looked mildly hurt, causing Vicky to giggle and hug him. Taylor noticed that as she did, she neatly stole a Snickers bar from his own candy stash without him seeing and stuck it into her own. She met her friend’s eyes and grinned, getting a wink back.

“We can’t stand around insulting each other all night when there’s free candy to scam… I mean, be given,” Emma said brightly.

“Bet we can,” Amy sighed.

“But we shouldn’t,” Emma insisted, then pointed at the house. “Onward to yon creepy source of all that is sweet and bad for us!”


“Ma’am!” the other four shouted, snapping to attention and saluting crisply, before all laughing and following her up the path, while ignoring the looks from other trick or treaters, none of whom seemed keen on doing the same.

“Guys, hold on, I’m caught on something,” Amy said a moment later. “My tail is trapped.”

They all turned around and watched as she yanked on the stuffed appendage and managed to free it from a pile of branches the others had stepped over. “Got it!”

“I still don’t know why you dressed up as a dinosaur or something,” Eric commented.
“Velociraptor, and I like reptiles, OK?” Amy said as she joined them. “Just like you like… I want to say, Star Trek?”

“Star Wars,” her cousin replied with a long-suffering sigh. “I keep telling you that.”

Amy smirked a little, while Vicky, who was wearing a long black cloak down to her ankles with a set of dark curved horns on her head, giggled. “Got you again, Han.”

“Damn it.” Eric shook his head and stomped off, mumbling under his breath, while both his cousins high-fived each other.

Taylor pulled her mask into place as did the others, making sure it was correctly aligned, adjusted her webbing harness which had several futuristic appearing widgets in pockets on it, then waved the rest of the party to follow. Emma was giggling and met her best friend’s eyes. She fiddled with her own costume, making sure the sword belt and plastic sword was in the right position then fell into formation with the other girls.

“How many skulls did this guy buy?” Eric commented when they caught up with him a few meters further on. He’d paused to inspect another one that was mounted on a pillar, a small candle inside it producing a faint cloud of smoke through a hole in the top, and making the eyes light up in an eerie manner that all five of them approved of.

“All of them?” Vicky suggested, looking around. “It’s pretty amazing. Maybe he’s some sort of special effects guy or something.”

“If Mom saw this she’d get all funny about it,” Amy pointed out with a smile.

“Probably better not tell her, right?” her sister said with a grin. She nodded.

“Are we nearly there yet?” Emma said plaintively, before giggling.

“Our long arduous trek is nearly at an end, my dear compatriots,” Taylor responded grandly, waving at the house in front of them. “We shall brave the dread portal, subdue the protector of the goodies, and make our escape replete with empty calories.”

Emma drew her sword and held it aloft. “By The Power Of Snacks!” she shouted.

The other three looked at each other. “Tay’s contagious, I think,” Eric whispered loudly.

Giggling, Taylor marched up to the door, which wasn’t quite a Dread Portal, but definitely qualified as Somewhat Unnerving Door, nodded to the skull nailed to it, and poked the doorbell, before stepping back and waiting.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*


Standing up, he went to meet those who would complete the Ritual once again. Around him, the shadows moved and whispered, praising their Lord.

=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*=*
“Press it again,” Amy urged. “Maybe he didn’t hear it.”

Raising a hand to do exactly that, Taylor stopped as there was a sound from the door. Several metallic clicks came and went, then a solid sounding thunk, before it creaked open.


“Yep.” Taylor was impressed.

All of them were impressed when the door opened all the way to reveal a tall skinny figure, dressed in dark red robes with silver filigree picking out weird symbols. He had a hat on his head that was sort of mushroom shaped, black, and with a golden symbol in the middle of the front that none of them could identify. Under the hat was a face that smiled broadly at them, the eyes twinkling behind round glasses.

“It’s Dumbledore,” Vicky whispered very quietly, causing Amy to kick her in the ankle. “Ow.”

“Welcome, my glorious friends,” the man said joyfully. “You are here for the offerings, yes?”

“Um… Yes.” Emma nodded, looking a little taken aback.

“Excellent!” He stepped aside and waved to the elaborately decorated ceramic bowl that sat on a similarly adorned carved wood table that looked like it was purpose made a few feet into the entrance foyer of the house. All of them could see it was piled high with candy of various types, all the bright colored wrappers illuminated by some sort of spotlight in the ceiling.

This guy really took Halloween seriously, they thought as they exchanged glances.

“Enter and partake of His bounty,” the man said with great enthusiasm and a pretty good creepy vibe.

“Sweet! Snickers!” Eric said with glee, darting between the girls.

“Hey, Eric!” Vicky sighed and followed, despite their mother’s instructions not to go inside the houses they called at. Taylor and the other two went after her.

“It has begun,” the man said from behind them in a strange voice, then there was the sound of a door slamming shut, which made Amy yip in shock and whirl around.

“Um, guys?”

“Weird freak,” Vicky muttered, having also jumped. She followed her sister’s eyes. “Hey. Where’d the door go?”

“Uh oh,” Eric whispered.

Sure enough, there was only a blank wall where they’d come in.

“I’m more interested in where that guy went,” Taylor remarked, looking around suspiciously. “And why the walls are sort of...”

“Moving?” Emma said in a high pitched voice.
“Yeah. That.”

They looked at each other, then at the bowl of candy that was still sitting there innocently, the sweet goodness tempting silently. “Suddenly I don’t want any of that,” Eric said slowly.

The others all looked at Taylor. “Now what?”

The eleven-year old girl walked over to the place the door had been and prodded it experimentally, then felt it carefully. “Stone, maybe? Not wood, like the door was. Are we still in the same place, or did we move? Or is this just some sort of illusion?” she muttered as she ran her hands over it. “No seams, no sign of visual distortion…”

Stepping back she made a fist and punched the wall as hard as she could. There was an explosion of dust and fragments and a shallow crater formed. “Definitely real,” she added, shaking her hand. “Ow.”

“Sounds thick,” Emma observed.

“At least thirty centimeters. The echos aren’t right either, that’s not where the door was,” Taylor nodded.

“Hold on.” Vicky had gone over to one of the skulls on the wall that had an open jaw showing another candle flame and was staring at it closely. After a few seconds, she ran her hand over the top of it, before recoiling. “Holy… I think this is a real skull!”

The others gathered around it and Taylor pulled one of the high tech devices from her ‘costume,’ running it over the skull before looking at it. “Yep. Human. Dead about… four years.”

“Oh, crap.” Amy stared at the thing, then around at the others, on the walls of the small room they were in. “We must have seen about… thirty or so of them so far? Are they all real?” Her voice was small and worried.

Taylor slowly nodded. “I think they probably are.”

“You know you joked about him being a child eating monster?” Eric said carefully. “I really wish you hadn’t said that…”

All of them looked around. “Is it my imagination or is this place… changing?” Vicky remarked uneasily.

“It’s bigger than it was,” Emma agreed. “And that door over there wasn’t there before.”

“Shaker power?” Amy suggested, looking around, then up. “It’s still changing.” She pulled out her phone and looked at it. “No signal.”

They once again exchanged looks. “This is bad. He must be killing people for some reason,” Vicky said after a moment. “And hiding in plain sight, doing it on Halloween. I bet he moves after this happens or something. He must have been doing it for years to get that many skulls.”

“Call for extraction?” Eric commented. “We could tell the PRT once we’re outside.”
They all looked at Taylor. After a moment, she slowly shook her head. “No. New plan. This is now a field exercise. Hostile Parahuman, territory presumed compromised.” Taylor’s voice had gone hard. “Remember your training. Subject is known to use lethal force, type unknown. Rules of engagement are neutralize and capture if possible, terminate if no other choice.”

There was a pause of a couple of seconds, then all of them smiled rather dangerously. “Finally, a real operation,” Vicky said gleefully, reaching under her cloak and retrieving a rifle-shaped weapon that activated with a deep hum when she flicked a switch. “I was getting tired of the sims.”

Taylor and her other friends each equipped their own weapons. There was no obvious sign of where they’d come from. “Comm check,” Taylor said.

“Comms are good, weapons hot. Biosignature tracker active,” Emma replied, looking at the display of a small device she was holding in the hand not occupied with a surprisingly large hand gun of a type that would have made the average Tinker look very puzzled indeed. And very worried.

As would the expression on her face.

“He’s that way,” she added, waving the gun at the doorway that had appeared in front of them. “About four hundred and twelve meters.”

“Got a lot of spatial distortions going on,” Vicky added, checking an instrument of her own. “This place is getting weirder.”

Taylor flicked a control on her own weapon, making it beep twice and shift slightly into a different configuration. “Scenario Alpha Four Niner slash Xray Two, then, I think. Let’s go. Kenny says good hunting.”

All five children headed for the door and vanished into the dark. It wasn’t long before the shooting started.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

Michael ran.

Panting for breath, calling for aid from Him.

Nothing helped. Behind him, he heard the sounds of weapons, weapons he didn’t recognize, firing. Occasionally there was a gargling scream as one of the guardians of this place, the world He imposed on the mundanity of normal life through the medium of Michael, expired.

He couldn’t understand what had happened. The candidates had entered into His domain, as was foreordained, and with a minor outflow of power, the Way was sealed. Every previous time, the Winnowing had begun, and either a Supplicant was chosen, or all were found wanting and the Way opened again for another selection to enter.

This time…

This time, everything was wrong.

None of the candidates had met their fate at the hands of the Guardians, or through the effects of
His domain. It was unheard of, unnatural, and terrifying. Even though they had the appearance of mere children, they hunted the Guardians, and they slaughtered the Guardians.

And they smiled.

He had watched in horror as the tallest of them had directed her companions with the swift efficiency of a practiced military squad, all of them armed to the teeth, and they took down the first challenge with appalling ease. The next fell, and the next. More and more he drew upon His power to put obstacles in their way while he fell back through the endless rooms of His domain, attempting to find some way to stop the things that pretended to be human children. Further and further into the world beyond the Way he went, penetrating far further than he had ever dared before lest he bring down the wrath of Him in his wanderings.

The surroundings were beyond bizarre at this point. Walls met floors at angles that couldn’t be, and ascended far out of sight into the gloom above, lit only by distant stars that matched nothing he had ever seen. He could feel something, many somethings, watching him as he ran, the sensation eerie and unlike that of His glorious gaze. Even the gravity appeared to vary from step to step, causing him to stumble and bounce off the walls at times. Sounds he couldn’t identify came from inside the walls. Voices of prior Supplicants, he was sure of that, but mixed with… something else. Something horrible.

Something wrong.

And above all of it, whining sounds, explosions, vibrations that traveled through the ground to him, and occasional soft waves of air that hinted of some enormous blast in the distance.

Michael ran.

=Tango on your six, fifty meters,” Emma called.

Amy dived for the floor, rolled, and fired. The incoming whatever the hell it was exploded in a shower of flaming fragments of flesh. “Tango down,” she replied over the battlenet.

“Two more at twelve and three,” Taylor reported. “Another incoming at eight high. Eric, suppressing fire, Vicky, take the last one. Emma and I have the other two.”

“Roger,” the boy said, opening up on the diving horror, as his cousin dropped to one knee and waited. Seconds later she pulled the trigger, a quick actinic flash heralding a rain of little bits of cooked monster.

“Ick,” she grumped, wiping goo off her face. “It slimed me.”

“Nice shot.” Eric grinned at her past his cover, which was a large piece of fallen rubble left over from five minutes ago when Taylor blew everything up.

There was another enormous Boom! from a hundred meters away accompanied by a shockwave, a cloud of dust, and a satisfied laugh.

They exchanged a look of understanding, then hopped to their feet and charged after the other
three, weapons scanning the surroundings. “Hey, Tay, leave some for the rest of us!” Eric shouted gleefully.

“This is the best Halloween ever!” Amy sounded very pleased indeed.

There were murmurs of agreement as the next wave of things rolled in, screeching and crying.

Afterwards all of them would agree that a target rich environment was immensely entertaining.

Diving through an opening that had too many angles for the number of sides, holding his side where his ribs were in agony from a fall caused by looking over his shoulder while running, Michael whimpered in fear and existential horror. This couldn’t be happening.

It was against the Prophecy! That was impossible!

But it kept on going. No matter what he did, he was unable to reach Him and ask Him to help. Somehow, he had no idea how, he had failed Him and brought His wrath and judgment down on himself. This was his punishment. There was no other explanation.

It was obvious that these… creatures… were not as they appeared. They were sent as a test and he failed it. The worst part was that he didn’t know how he’d failed.

Had he not performed the ritual ablutions in the life-giving fluid of the failed candidates?

Had he not used their components in the way He required?

Had he not meditated on the manifold ways of Him for the required six hours every single day since he’d seen His glorious light?

Michael racked his brains trying to work out what he’d missed, what part of the required procedures had been performed incorrectly, and couldn’t find a single error. He had done this thirty one times in a row, flawlessly. Thirty one successful Supplicants. Two hundred and eighty four failed Candidates. All for the Great Work, but somehow on the thirty second time, he’d made a mistake. Forgotten some obscure detail, not been sufficiently attentive, something.

But he couldn’t work out what. And that was the worst part. Not knowing what he’d done to raise the ire of Him, not knowing how he’d failed.

He listened. The five hellish terrors were somewhere far behind, but he could still hear them approaching, remorseless and merciless. He had found, or made, warriors that were worthy of Him.

Michael breathed great gasping breaths of foul air, the scent of something unnameable tainting it. Leaning against a wall that under his back seemed to flex and writhe slightly, he tried to calm down and think.

Looking around, he saw he was on top of a hill, which led down some distance to a vast dark pool of water like a mirror in the dim lighting. Above that, a sky that was far too full of brilliantly colors stars burned coldly at him, illuminating scenery that belonged to another world.
He had never dared venture even a fraction as deep into the Way as this. It was oddly beautiful but terrifying at the same time.

Truly, He was capable of anything, to produce such an awe-inspiring vista.

His heartbeat gradually returning to something closer to normal, Michael knelt on the rough ground and closed his eyes. Perhaps, with a little time to work, he could touch His power again and delay or divert what was following him long enough to figure out where he’d gone wrong and fix it.

He concentrated, allowing his mind to empty and fill at the same time. He could feel the power rising again, surrounding him. Far behind, strange sounds echoed, but he tried to ignore those as he attempted to bring sanity to the insane situation he’d landed in through no fault of his own.

Some minutes passed.

Eventually he felt that something was happening. Some vastly powerful and completely alien response to his mental call was approaching.

Tentatively, he opened his eyes, then froze in shock. A moment later his eyes tracked upwards.

The glowing yellow eyes set in a reptilian head enormous beyond reason peered down at him curiously.

“Sorry, wrong turn,” the thing said. The head, on the end of a scaly neck longer than seemed possible, withdrew, the creature disappearing into the lake again with barely a splash.

After a few seconds, Michael leaped to his feet with a wild cry of despair and ran once more.

In the end, it didn’t help.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

“That was anticlimactic,” Taylor said as the five of them looked down at the body of the weird man, which was lying on the ground with its arms outstretched in a sort of beseeching manner towards a complex symbol on the wall in front of it, that appeared to have been drawn in blood. The blood of the man in question, most likely, since his arms bore obviously self-inflicted wounds and he’d expired due to exsanguination as far as they could tell, probably about half an hour earlier.

That was the point where the strangely warped internal geometry of the house had started to gradually return mostly to normal and the attacks had slowed, then eventually stopped, as the creations of this guy’s power had dissipated one by one. It seemed likely he’d been a very powerful Shaker/Master combination, and completely nuts to boot. Kenny was still trying to work out exactly what his power had been, but it would take a while to follow all the possible connections, especially since the man was now defunct.

Amy came into the room from an adjacent one. “You guys need to see this,” she said with an expression of disquiet. All of them followed her, then examined what she’d found.

“That’s horrible,” Emma said after a long moment of silence.
“How many do you think there are?” Eric asked quietly.

“How many?” Vicky shook her head. “At least.” The five children looked around at the walls which were covered in what was clearly human skin, specifically faces removed from bodies and dried. Horrible trophies, each one lovingly preserved and pinned to the walls.

“I can’t say I’m sorry he’s dead,” Amy commented with a sick look.

“If he wasn’t, I’d shoot him in the head myself,” Taylor said in tight tones. They looked at each other, then turned and left. Passing the room with the corpse in it without another look, they went through the now-returned front door and stepped outside into the night. “How long were we in there?” Eric asked as they watched trick or treating children and a number of accompanying adults pass on the street at the end of the long path. “It felt like hours, but look at all the people still out.”

“I think there was some weird temporal distortion going on as well as the spatial one,” Emma said thoughtfully. “I guess that’s good, our parents shouldn’t have noticed we were missing.”

“Convenient.” Vicky smiled. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We can still get some more candy if we hurry.”

Taylor looked down at herself, covered in slime and dust and rubble, then her friends who were the same. She shook her head. “Our costumes are a bit icky now.”

“Adds to the realism,” Amy chuckled. “We might get even more candy as a result.”

“True.” They headed for the street.

“What do we do about that place?” Eric asked, hooking his thumb over his shoulder at the house of horror behind them.

“Kenny is arranging to get the PRT involved,” Taylor replied. “They’ll sort it out. Bet that guy left a trail, so I’d imagine they’ll be interested.”

“Yeah.” The boy shook his head. “Weird night.”

“Good training, though.” Emma smiled at him. “But I don’t think we should mention it to our parents until we clean up.”

“Probably not a good idea, no,” Amy agreed, Vicky and Taylor nodding.

“Good training session,” Taylor commented as they joined the other children their age who were running around shouting and laughing. She hefted her bucket of candy. All of them had found these right where they’d left them inside the front door of the strange house full of bizarreness, apparently untouched, when the door had reappeared. They’d ignored the bowl which was still there too, though, out of an abundance of caution. “Let’s see if we can fill these.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The group of friends headed down the sidewalk to the next house.
A few people asked for the followup to the previous omake, which I hadn't intended to do, but then I couldn't sleep so I knocked it out quickly just for fun.

“Six months. I’ve been in this job for six months and already we’ve just found out that one of the most prolific serial killers in US history was lurking in the city since the middle of the summer.” Emily Piggot, recently installed Director of the PRT ENE, glared around indiscriminately at everyone in the briefing room. “No one had a clue he was here, until some anonymous and untraceable tip provoked an investigation. And what does that investigation find?”

The question was rhetorical, of course, and even Armsmaster recognized that and kept his mouth firmly shut.

“Someone else got him first. Or he snapped and killed himself. Or both. We seem to have a distinct lack of sensible evidence on the one hand and far, far more evidence than I’m even slightly comfortable with on the other.” She picked up a sheaf of documents and flicked through it. “Three hundred and fifteen trophies consisting of the skinned faces of children, covering more than twenty-five years based on the ones we’ve identified so far. DNA and other trace evidence to back all that up. Over a hundred different skulls, candles made from human body fat, ritualistic paraphernalia that would make Stephen King lose his lunch, and god knows what else. This sick bastard has been doing this for nearly as long as I’ve been alive, and no one even suspected him!”

She tossed the paperwork onto the desk in disgust. “And now it’s landed in my lap. What a fucking joy that is, on top of the crazy gangs, more independent villains than I can believe, random heroes who are mostly more trouble than they’re worth, and a city administration and police force that would cheerfully shovel dirt into our graves thanks to our utterly incompetent and very much not missed former Director Calvert, who left me with a problem that’s going to take a decade to fix. If it even can be fixed.”

Glaring around again at the mix of Protectorate and PRT staff, she made it very obvious that she was not, in any way at all, happy.

“So. I want answers. Who was he, how did he stay under the radar, who got him, did anyone get him, who are the victims, and anything else that comes up. I know the preliminary autopsy proves he was a Parahuman so it’s our problem. What else do we know?”

Captain Mills, the current head of the PRT investigative unit, cleared his throat. She turned to him, as did everyone else. “Michael Francis Dalton was born in nineteen fifty five, in San Diego. His family was particularly religious, being members of a fringe offshoot of Catholicism, and he was brought up in that environment until the age of nineteen, when based on the information we so far have, he had a massive falling out with his father. We don’t know exactly why but later information suggests it was probably due to him deciding that he was something of a prophet and his father flatly denying this.”

“So he was a religious nutcase,” Emily sighed.

“Essentially, yes. We’ve so far traced his early life throughout California until around seventy-
eight, where he seems to have dropped off the radar. He self-published a number of religious tracts that seem to have slowly evolved his own personal religion, which revolved around the veneration of… something outside our world. He never names it, only referring to it as Him. Emphasized. There are also a lot of bizarre calculations and references to a large number of cults of the past, fringe beliefs, astrology, and so on. The man was warped, that much is evident, and he seems to have been steadily slipping into some form of psychosis on top of that.”

“When did he Trigger, and what were his powers?” Miss Militia asked, looking disturbed.

“We’re not sure yet, on either count. With the benefit of hindsight, he probably found his first victims while he was wandering around building his belief system, in about seventy five. There are a number of missing persons reports from areas we can trace him to, but he wasn’t stupid and covered his tracks well. We’ve identified three of the missing people in his… trophy room. It’s likely that there are more.” Mills shook his head with an expression of disgust. “We’ll be working on identifying all the remains for weeks at least. Probably months.”

He checked his notes, then looked up again and continued, “His trail goes cold for about three years in nineteen eighty, we have no idea where he was during that time, but in late eighty three he appears to have been committed to an asylum for observation in San Francisco following a very public breakdown in the middle of a church service, where he was screaming about how everyone was wrong and only he knew the truth of the Great Work. It took four cops to hold him down. There’s no record of what set him off, but he was in the hospital for two and a half months. About four weeks after he was committed, there was a fire started by another patient which killed nine people, and very nearly got him as well. Our best guess is that he Triggered at that point.”

“Plausible,” Armsmaster nodded. “A near miss from immolation would be a prime Trigger event candidate.”

“Yeah, it fits. Apparently he was found unconscious in his room, supposedly from smoke inhalation, but it could well have been the aftereffects of a Trigger, or added to by that. He woke up three days later and was apparently smiling pretty much constantly until they decided he wasn’t a threat to anyone and kicked him out. Then he basically disappears again as far as official records go. Moved around all over the country after that. We don’t know where he got the money, but there are records of him buying properties in Reno, Chicago, El Paso, Los Angeles, Jacksonville, Duluth, and at least a dozen or so other places. And here, of course. We think he probably moved every year, but he wasn’t obvious about it. He’d buy up a property, then another one, then another, and move into one he’d owned for a couple of years at least. Usually bought large properties that were in bad repair, got them cheap, then paid local contractors to fix them up and maintain them.”

“And then on every Halloween he killed kids,” Emily growled.

“Pretty much, yes, ma’am.” Mills nodded soberly. “Somehow he’d get them inside, probably by offering candy since on Halloween they’d walk right into his trap, then he did whatever it was he did to them. Based on missing persons reports from the cities we know he was in, it varied from two at the low end to nearly a dozen at the high end. In each case one in particular seems to have been treated differently than all the others but we have no idea why. All of them ended up dead regardless. And somehow no one seemed to notice. Oh, they noticed the kids were missing, yes, but nobody put two and two together and worked out he was four. We can’t find a single record of him even being asked if he’d seen any of the missing children.”

He shrugged a little. “Most likely it was part of his power. Some sort of Master or Stranger ability that he used to divert attention. Then, about a month later, he’d move on, buy up another house or
two halfway across the country, and end up living in a completely different one he’d picked up years earlier. And the cycle would repeat. He was already a serial killer, but his power made him a much, much more dangerous one.”

“Jesus,” Emily said with a sick sensation in her stomach. “And if whatever happened last night hadn’t happened, he could have kept going.”

“Probably, yes. We’ve checked and he had another three properties around the country all ready for him to move to.”

There was silence in the room for a few seconds as everyone absorbed the information.

“Parahuman serial killers are fucking terrifying,” she finally said. Turning to Armsmaster, she asked, “Ideas on his powers? Master or Stranger seems a given, but what else, if anything?”

The Tinker thought for a moment. “Tests at the incident site show a considerable level of residual spatial distortion, which is slowly reverting to normal. It seems very likely that he had an exceptionally powerful Shaker ability of some form. There is evidence that the space inside the house was, during the event, far larger than it should have been, and certain traces imply that there may even have been an interdimensional nature to the whole situation. We have recovered biological material which is completely alien, not matching anything on record, and appears to be the partial remains of a number of life forms that were violently killed. There is also a possibility that there was a matching temporal distortion which could have decoupled the flow of time inside the building from the outside reference frame to some degree.”

He looked around at the expressions of his audience, then added, “Time flowed more rapidly inside the house.”

Several people nodded understandingly.

“I also found a significant amount of trace evidence suggesting either high energy weapons fire, or a very potent Blaster power, or both. Neither is anything I recognize, nor are they in the Protectorate or PRT databases. My inference is that this was the result of a Parahuman with significant Blaster capabilities on a par with Purity, although of somewhat different type, or possibly due to some weapons system created by a Tinker specializing in energy weapons.”

He paused, then added, “There were several different types of discharge employed as far as I can determine, so it could have been a group of up to four to six individuals.”

“Or one with a really impressive weapons loadout,” Miss Militia commented. “Or, possibly a power like mine?”

He looked at her. “I considered that, but the evidence seems to suggest that’s less likely.”

“And of course we have no idea who these people were, or how they found him,” Emily grumbled.

“Unfortunately not, Director. There was no physical evidence I could find to determine an identity of anyone involved.” Armsmaster seemed apologetic, or as much that way as he ever got. “There were also no reports of anyone hearing or seeing anything out of the ordinary, until our tipoff. This may be due to lingering effects from Dalton’s powers, or just good operational security. My best guess is that whoever it was knew exactly what they were going up against and equipped and trained themselves for the exact scenario he presented. It has all the hallmarks of a carefully
targeted, possibly military, operation.”

“Fucking hell.” Emily rubbed her forehead in annoyance. “What a mess. The Chief Director is going to be very difficult about this. Again.”

“On the up side, someone who’s responsible for a huge death toll is shut down permanently,” Mills commented.

“There’s that, yes,” she admitted unhappily. “I would much prefer it to have been done via normal methods, but… Considering what we know about the whole thing, someone probably did us a favor. That doesn’t make me like it any more, though.”

“Could it have been a military action?” Miss Militia mused out loud. “I agree with Armsmaster, it does somewhat fit that idea. But who would be behind it, and why would they do it without contacting the local PRT?”

“There’s no reason it has to be our military,” Deputy Director Renick pointed out, speaking for the first time and not looking entirely pleased about his own words.

They all looked at him.

“Oh, wouldn’t that just be perfect,” Emily sighed. “Wonderful.”

He shrugged. “Just a thought.”

“One that makes about as much sense as any of this does,” she grumbled. “Fine. We’re sure none of the local ‘heroes’ was involved?”

“It doesn’t match the normal procedures of New Wave, neither does the evidence match their known abilities, and there are no other current non-villain Parahumans resident in the city who do fit either case.” Armsmaster shook his head. “And while, possibly, Purity could have done some of the damage I found, most of it isn’t something I would be able to say she could be responsible for. And of course there’s probably no reason why a villain would do whatever it was that happened.”

“Even villains have kids,” Mills suggested, causing the Tinker to look at him, then nod slowly.

“A valid point. Even so, there are no known villains whose powers correlate to the evidence other than loosely currently in the city or surrounding area.”

“So, basically, we have no idea at all who it was that was involved,” Emily finally said with considerable irritation.

“No.” Armsmaster shook his head, as did Mills.

“What actually killed Dalton?”

“Blood loss, apparently self induced, but quite likely accidental even so,” Mills replied immediately. “Looks like he was using his own blood to draw some highly unpleasant mystical symbols all over the place and basically ran out. His expression showed he was terrified at the time, and there were apparently a lot of physiological markers in his body that prove he was physically exhausted, like something or someone was chasing him for hours.”
“To be honest, that probably serves the bastard right.” Emily tapped a finger on the desk, thinking. “God, this is messed up on so many levels. All right, continue with the investigation, just on the off chance we find something useful. My bet is that we won’t. I suspect that whoever it was is too good and cleaned up after themselves long before we ever heard about the incident. They could be in Canada or something by now. It might even have been the Guild, thinking about it.”

“I can make inquiries of some contacts I have,” Miss Militia offered. “If it was a covert military team, it’s barely possibly I could get at least an acknowledgment of that.”

“Go ahead, but I would be surprised if you get anything other than ‘No Comment’” Emily replied. She checked the time. “And now I get to explain this to the Mayor, and after that, I have a very uncomfortable conversation with the Chief Director to look forward to.” Closing her notebook on the several pages of notes she’d made, she stood up. “Let me know if anything relevant comes to light.”

“Ma’am,” Mills nodded.

She left the room, thinking dire thoughts about how fucked up this city was.

But at least a prolific serial killer was finally stopped, even if they didn’t know how, and might never find out.

Which was the most irritating part of the whole thing.

She wondered rather fatally what the next bizarre event aimed firmly at her would be. The only thing she was sure of was that there would be one...
“Got another one for you, Doc.” The cheery call made Doctor West, Brockton Bay’s senior forensic pathologist, look up from the clipboard he was studying and peer over his glasses at the large man who had just pushed a gurney with a body bag on it through the double doors at the end of the lab. Putting the clipboard down, with the pen he’d been using to fill out a form on top of it, he walked over to meet Yusef next to one of the examination tables. “Deceased was shot in the commission of a robbery at the gas station on Atlantic and Bayshore this morning. Caught a bullet right between the eyes, dropped him in his tracks on the spot.”

Both of them heaved the body bag off the gurney onto the table, then Yusef unzipped the top part. Doctor West leaned in to examine the corpse with professional interest, long practice meaning that the waxy appearance of dead flesh and the faint smell of decomposition that was already starting was ignored. The face of the dead man was locked in an expression he’d have put down as surprise more than anything else. Exactly centered between the eyes was a neat hole he could tell immediately was from a 9mm round.

“Good shot,” he commented absently, pulling on a set of disposable gloves, then experimentally poking the wound. “Clean through and through,” he added, feeling the back of the head, which had a considerably larger piece missing. “Death was probably instantaneous, I agree. Who shot him?”

He was only curious as it didn’t make much difference to his job, but the accuracy of the shot was intriguing.

Yusef chuckled. “You’re not going to believe this,” he said. West glanced sidelong at him. “It was a twelve year old kid. This guy and his friend robbed the gas station and fired off a few rounds. Hit an off-duty cop, killed him, and got the girl’s mother too. The girl got the cop’s piece, got the drop on the idiots, and apparently when this one tried to use his shotgun on her, she plugged him without a second thought.” He shook his head in respect. “Fucking amazing job. Got the other one on the floor with the threat of killing him too, shot half his ear off to make a point, had the clerk disarm him, then talked him through patching her mom up enough to keep her going until the ambulance turned up. Saved her life, and probably her own and the clerk’s as well.”

“Interesting,” West commented, straightening up and looking at Yusef. “Who was the officer who was killed?”

“Ray Ellison.” The other man’s face fell for a moment. West bowed his head a little.

“Damn. I liked him.”

“Yeah, he was a good man,” Yusef agreed quietly. “At least the girl got his murderer, so there’s that.”

“True.” West shook his head. “That’s not a good thing for such a young woman to go through though.”

“No, it’s pretty horrible,” his colleague said. “Hope they go easy on her. From what I heard it was pure self defense.”
“I expect it will be handled properly, if only out of respect for Ray,” West remarked, turning back to study the body. “Who’s got the case?”

“Thorpe and Vanover, I think.”

“Ah. Yes, the young woman is in good hands, then. All right, if you’d give me a hand with getting our friend here out of the bag, I can begin immediately. Unusually there’s a hole in my schedule at the moment.”

“Gangs not killing as many people as usual?”

West gave the other man a severe look over his glasses. “Not entirely amusing,” he said sternly, making Yusef smirk. “Although in this case, sadly, fairly accurate. I suspect it won’t last, it never does.”

Between them they soon had the corpse laid out on the examination table and the body bag and gurney moved away. Yusef handed Doctor West the documentation, which he flipped through, signed, and returned the relevant parts of. “I’ll leave you to it, Doc,” the other man said with a wave as he headed towards the exit. “See you soon.”

“Most likely,” West muttered, flicking a wave over his shoulder without looking away from the dead man in front of him. “Now, let’s see what else there is about you that’s interesting, my friend,” he went on, more to himself than the corpse, as they generally weren’t good conversationalists. “Aside from having the distinction of being gunned down by a prepubescent girl, of course. Which I do rather feel was something of a shock...”

Smiling grimly at his own joke, he got to work, pulling the microphone for the recording system down into place and pressing the on button. Shortly he was making audible notes while carefully disassembling the body with great expertise.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-"

Several hours later Doctor West finished typing, saved the document, and shut his computer down. Looking over the large pathology lab, now quiet until the night shift came in as everyone else on his shift had left, he pondered life in Brockton Bay and how many people he’d seen go through here. Including several he’d counted as friends, like Ray Ellison whose remains were currently in cold storage having turned up too late for him to work on today. He’d made sure he was the one who would do that job in the morning, as he owed it to the man to do right by him.

He glanced at one table in the middle, the one he never used any more, and closed his eyes in remembered pain for a second. Opening that bag had nearly killed him.

Doctor West didn’t like the Merchants. Or narcotic use.

Shaking his head, he put the stack of paperwork he’d finished into the out tray, stood up, picked up his coat, and left, intending to stop off at a small diner he liked for a late meal before heading home. It had been another long day.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-"

“What the hell...” West blinked at the ceiling, wondering what had awoken him, then heard an explosion in the distance. It echoed around the city, distant but clear, and had obviously been fairly
substantial. Worried and curious, he fumbled for his glasses on the table beside the bed, while next
to him his wife Jacqui mumbled something and rolled over. Sliding out of bed, careful not to jostle
her, he went over to one of the bedroom windows and unlatched it, then swung it open and leaned
out a little. The sound of gunfire was now audible, and a moment later another explosion rumbled
in the distance. He tried to work out how far away it was and where, assuming it was yet another
cape fight or something of that nature.

He could make out a number of automatic weapons firing, probably AK-47 variants by the sound
of it, as they were very distinctive and it was an unfortunate effect of living in a city like Brockton
Bay that most people could identify a surprisingly large number of firearms by ear. A much louder
and deeper one started up, producing long bursts as a continuous roar, and he winced. It sounded
like something along the lines of a fifty caliber machine gun or something of that size, which was
terrifying if true.

The sounds of distant intense battle rose and fell for nearly ten more minutes, with sirens joining in
fairly shortly after he opened the window. Flashes of light lit the horizon, along with deep booms
from what were obviously grenades, and at least two much bigger ones he couldn’t place. All of
this was somewhere in the center of the city, three or so miles from his house, the still night air
making the sounds easily audible even if faint. Eventually there were a few closely spaced grenade
detonations and the shooting began dying down, flared up briefly, then sputtered to a halt. All he
could hear then were dozens of sirens converging on the area from all over the city, the distinctive
notes of the police, the fire department, and the PRT all evident.

Sighing, he listened for a little longer, then pulled the window closed and made sure it was locked.
Shaking his head he got back into bed and made himself comfortable, taking his glasses off and
folding them then putting them on the table.

“wha’ ws tha’?” his wife mumbled sleepily. He put his arm over her and held her close.

“The sound of a lot of future clients, I’m afraid, dear,” he replied very quietly. A few minutes later
he was asleep, dreading what he was going to find on his tables in the morning, since it was
obvious he was going to be called in even on a Saturday.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

**June 30th, 2007**

“How many more are coming, Yusef?” West asked, signing the paperwork after quickly inspecting
the half dozen body bags laid out in the mortuary.

“At least a dozen, Doc.” The other man shook his head, scowling. “Fucking Merchants went
*insane* last night. At least eight or nine cops are dead from what I’ve heard, and god knows how
many of the fuckers themselves. This is just the first batch.”

West pondered the bags as he handed back the relevant parts of the documentation. “Merchants?”
he echoed. “I see. I wonder why?”

Yusef shrugged. “Fucked if I know. They’re Merchants. Who knows why they do *anything*?
Probably so high they couldn’t even see the ground, most of them.” He looked at the bags too, his
face grim. “Only good thing is that they’re basically extinct now. Skidmark’s dead...”

West snapped his head around and fixed the man with a hard look. “Dead? You’re certain?”
“Yeah. Seen him myself. Dead as mutton with a hole right here,” he replied, tapping himself between the eyes, which made West’s eyes widen fractionally, then narrow a little. “SWAT must have got him. Praise Allah for that. And Squealer’s in custody, pretty banged up after they blew up her tank, plus they got Mush yesterday morning too. And from what I heard cleaned out pretty much their entire stock of drugs and cash.”

“Did they now?” West was thoughtfully looking at Yusef, who spread his hands. “Fascinating.”

“Yes. PRT and the Protectorate are all over the cop station, which is blown to hell, and they’ve got Skidmark’s body so I doubt you’ll see it. Armsmaster was stomping around pointing his beard at everyone and looking like someone ate his puppy too. The PRT really dropped the ball on this one. You should have heard the Commissioner complaining about it right in front of them, it was… impressive.” He looked mildly amused as West snorted. “Man is not happy. The cops are pretty jumpy too, and are watching the PRT like they’re wondering if they’re going to need to defend themselves or something.”

“The relationship between the authorities in this city is unfortunate,” West noted quietly.

“It’s completely broken, Doc. Mostly Calvert’s fault, of course, but at least that idiot’s gone. No idea if the new one can fix it, but she’s pretty much got to be an improvement over him.”

“It’s difficult to see how she could be less effective, I have to admit,” West noted with a wry smile. Yusef nodded, looking momentarily annoyed.

“Yeah, tell me about it. I lost a cousin because that asshole was grandstanding a couple of years ago…” He sighed as West watched him understandingly. “Brockton Bay. It’s a hell of a place.”

“I can’t argue with that, my friend,” West nodded.

“Better get back to it, then,” the other man said, putting the papers in his hand into a folder that was under his arm and turning around. He raised a hand in a wave. “See you soon, Doc.”

“Later, Yusef,” Doctor West called as he moved to unzip the first body bag, while waving over a couple of assistants who had been wiping down the other tables. Kneeling down next to the bag he examined the face of the body inside it. Very obviously a drug addict, he noted to himself, seeing signs he recognized all too well. Probably about twenty two, although he could have passed for an unwell forty, very underweight, with bad teeth.

And with a nice neat hole exactly centered between his eyes...

West sucked air thoughtfully through his teeth, then stood up again, watching while his people moved the bodies to the tables, avoiding one particular one as they all knew the history involved.

He was thinking hard, even as he got to work.

=-=-=-=-=-=

**July 2nd, 2007**

Doctor West pushed the microphone away having clicked it off, then stood studying the body in front of him for a few seconds before he turned and walked off, removing his gloves carefully as
he moved. Dropping them into a biohazard receptacle as he passed it, he sat at his desk and wiggled the mouse a little, then examined the documents on screen when it woke up.

“Fascinating,” he murmured to himself, leaning closer and reading his own notes with interest.

After a while, he glanced over at the far wall, which consisted of a large number of stainless steel refrigerated drawers, each large enough to contain a body, which most of them did. One in particular drew his attention. Scanning the room he saw that his staff were all out at the moment, two of them for lunch, one retrieving some equipment, and the other pair doing a physical paperwork search in the archives. He got up and headed over to the drawer, unlatching it and pulling it open, then bending down to unzip the bag inside it.

He looked down at the face of a robbery suspect who had bitten off far more than he could chew, before turning to look in the direction of the table he’d been working at. Then he pulled a tape measure out of his pocket and made a few measurements, before closing the bag and the drawer again, going over to the table, and repeating those measurements.

“Absolutely fascinating,” he said under his breath, stepping back and regarding the corpse with interest. Absently putting the tape measure away he returned to his desk and sat down once more. Following some minutes of thought, he leaned forward, pulled the keyboard closer to himself, and made a few edits to several files, before saving them.

Then he went for lunch, still thinking carefully, giving one table a glance as he left and sighing quietly.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

July 3rd, 2007

“Lieutenant Hackett, what an unexpected pleasure,” Doctor West said with a small smile as he turned to inspect the man who’d just come into his lab. He noticed that the timing was remarkably convenient, all the other people who worked there currently out for lunch. He himself often ate at his desk, so could usually be found here even during the lunch break. “My condolences on the loss of so many of your colleagues.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” the SWAT officer said heavily, looking tired. “It was pretty horrible.”

“I can imagine. I heard it at home, and of course I’ve seen the end result come through here over the last few days.” He motioned at the four tables that still had bodies on them, all currently covered. “Just these and another six in the storage area to do now, though. It’s been rather busy as you can imagine.”

“Yeah. I can,” Hackett nodded, looking around. “PRT been through yet?”

“We did have the pleasure of a number of PRT personnel asking some fairly detailed questions,” West smiled. “And even were graced by the presence of Armsmaster himself, who was quite interested in some of the bodies. He seemed to be somewhat annoyed.”

“He usually is in my experience,” Hackett smirked. “Man’s too tense. Probably needs to get laid.”

West suppressed a chuckle, although the officer seemed to notice. “I couldn’t say. It’s hardly my area of expertise.”
“I dunno, Doc, you deal with stiffs all the time,” Hackett said with a grin. West shook his head, amused.

“One way to put it, certainly, although possibly not the most politic. So, what can I do for you? I imagine you’re as busy as I am.”

Hackett looked around again, glancing behind himself at the door, then motioned to West’s desk on the other side of the room. Both of them walked over, West sitting down in his chair and Hackett leaning on the wall next to the desk. “Got a little problem you could help with,” Hackett began.

West, who was leaning back in his chair facing the man, his hands folded on his leg, watched with neutral interest.

“A problem?” he repeated calmly.

“Yeah.” Hackett seemed to be trying to work out how to explain himself.

“Would it have to do with some unnervingly precise shooting that stretches the bounds of probability, perhaps?” West asked, not looking away.

There was a pause, then Hackett nodded slightly.

“I see.” West regarded him closely. “Oddly enough Armsmaster was interested in the same thing. I found it intriguing too.”

“Did you?”

“Oh, yes.” West nodded. “The placement of the shots was extraordinary. Not only was it precisely in the correct place to sever the medulla and cause nearly instantaneous death, each shot was within one millimeter of any of the others. Truly incredible shooting. I wouldn’t have thought it was possible, but then it’s not my field of expertise. My compliments on the training your SWAT people undergo.”

Hackett looked a little uncomfortable, making West almost smile.

“The remarkable thing is, though, that I have recently seen a case that mirrors that particular shot placement to a level that is… impressive.”

Now Hackett looked worried, although he was hiding it well.

“However, I can’t actually show you the body, unfortunately, as I expect you’d have found it interesting. The deceased had no next of kin and as we have had an unprecedented case load over the last few days, I arranged to have an expedited cremation carried out on the body, and several others that were in a similar position. A pity in a sense, it was almost art in a somewhat morbid fashion, but needs must.” He shrugged a little.

Hackett at this point was looking both relieved and impressed. And slightly amused.

“I’ve updated the records with all the relevant details,” he went on, tapping his mouse to make the monitor stop displaying the screensaver, then clicking a few times. “As you can see. Incidentally,
please pass on my condolences for the loss of Ray Ellison, he was a decent man and didn’t deserve that fate. I’m glad he managed to take down his attacker even if it cost him his life.”

There was a pause of a few seconds as the SWAT officer read the screen, then he nodded. West closed the document again.

“Thanks, Herbert.”

“It was my pleasure, Alex,” West replied quietly. “Did I tell you about my niece Jennifer?”

The other man shook his head. West looked over at that table. “Nearly a year ago. Worst shock I ever had in my life when I opened that bag and...” He stopped, exhaling almost silently. Hackett said nothing, simply waiting silently. “It was very hard. My sister has still not recovered. You’ll understand when I say I do not like the Merchants, and find it difficult to mourn the loss of so many lives even though it’s a tragedy.”

“Yeah. I know exactly what you mean.”

They shared a glance for a second. Then West stood up, as both heard someone coming down the corridor outside the forensics room. “A great pity Ray didn’t make it,” West noted as he accompanied the other man to the exit. “I’d have liked to buy the person who did the city a favor a case of beer or something of that nature. But such is life.”

“True enough,” Hackett nodded, before holding out his hand. West shook it. “See you around. And thanks again.”

He turned and pushed the door open, holding it for one of the assistants who was pulling a trolley covered in medical supplies. She smiled at him as she passed. West watched the door close, then went back to his desk and finished his coffee, before getting back to work.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!