

*“Miss Militia, disabled, Aegis, deceased, Kid Win, deceased.”* Dragon continues to speak.

“You know her smell, go go,” I say to Loona whose already made a whine, “We can just grab her, bring that one back. Good juju.”

Loona points, “That way, uh, half mile maybe.” She points at the coast, and then realizes she’s let go of the wheel, stares at it, and grabs it again, “*shit*” before continuing to drive.

*Thank God for auto-correct*, I think as I watch the wheel jerk out of the way of a car and then back on track. I’m still focusing for the teleporting guy. It hits me, he might not be coming. *Ugh*, I could have saved him if he was smarter.

*“Browbeat, disabled,”* Dragon’s tone is very...repetitive, as if she’s just reading off this list and not particularly worried about it. Maybe she’s crazy and just doesn’t care anymore.

Loona has to ford some water in a cratered street before I spot Militia, she’s currently *impaled* on a chunk of rebar, intentionally through the lower back, as if she was lowered onto it by something.

*Floods, I didn’t consider floods*, I think as I see her and then hop out. I try to make my hand razor sharp, it doesn’t quite work, I think about jaw strength, and that doesn’t really hit either. I’m *not strong enough*. I didn’t prepare enough.

Finally, I decide to just heal her while I lift her off the spear. “Come on douchebag, no-one gets to kill you but me.” I am *frustrated* that all my cool moments are getting stolen, and that the one person I’m saving already knows I’m violent cannibal. It’s *just not fair*, I swear to God, I have to be the unluckiest woman in the universe.

I accidentally drop her, and hear a sickening crack as her skull smashes the pavement. *Whoops*. Though that can be fixed too as I drag her stupid ass back to the RV.

She proves to still be conscious as she growls out,  
“*He’s...using...me...bait.*”

“Well. Fuck.” I say simply, with a small sigh. “I think this is the bad end of this branch then.”

There’s a whisper quiet crunch of concrete as three eyes almost *cheekily* lean around a building, if the thing had a face, it’d be smiling down at me. The tail whips dangerously around, smashing through rubble, and water roils around it. It’s *trying* to be scary. Well, not trying. Succeeding.

“Can you make a Patriot Missile? I could maybe whip up a launcher.” I say quickly, starting to just *rip* wires out of the fucking walls. Fucking with pneumatics.

“W..were not w-w-ho it w-wants.” She chokes out, staring up at the sky.

“Yeah, but he tricked me. Fuck that guy.” I growl angrily as I start to smooch things together. Tinkertech is fucking *wild* and I realize looking down, there’s simply no way any of this is real. I lost it, I lost it months ago when I thought I killed that Nazi in the diner.

Leviathan makes a whip of water slam into me, and I *skid* like a ragdoll into the RV, *banished* from whatever trap he’s laying like a particularly unruly child. Bones crack and heal as I land.

*Wait, I didn’t get her in the RV?* I realize there’s a far *easier* way to unfuck this trap. I look at Leviathan with a wild grin as I feel my lungs fill with blood. The M1 Garand, the most *reliable rifle since World War Two*.

I let out a full automatic burst towards Militia’s skull. I giggle and Loona peels the fuck out. *Fuck your stupid trap*.

The ground *shatters* as Leviathan goes from *standing* to *a blur*, twenty feet of colossal creature breaking the sound barrier making a primordial fear build in anything that observes it, the rounds impact its hand, chipping at its thick carapace like ceramic plates, Militia gasps out while a shockwave hits her.

I fiddle with the arm band, and see if I can *reverse* this fucking thing, “Miss Militia is booby trapped, he’s just standing here. Let him.”

A mechanical *dragon* comes out of nowhere, diving down at him, breathing a wall of what, after a second, I identify as plasma atop Leviathan. It tackles him with its superior weight and shoves him away from Militia, an internal core starting to heat and pulse with overload.

“Or just be fucking stupid, yeah, do whatever you want.” I mutter, though I’m not entirely aware if I’ve turned the thing off. Loona backs up so that I can grab her at least. I’m not getting *out of here* without something to show for it. “No, no, the whole city should die because some Israeli chick got speared by the squid monster.” I mutter as I hop out.

“You’re all geniuses Super Heroes of the world!” I mutter as I start *sprinting* trying to adjust to this constant cluster fuck, “No it’s great, don’t listen to the purple bitch with a fucking Masters. Better to just slam my cock into every goddamn sit—”

As I slide into the RV with the woman, the Dragonsuit *goes off* like a fucking *atom bomb*, or, well, not that big, I’m still alive even if the RV gets *lifted onto its front tires* for a second. Leviathan *stumbles* out of the detonation, freshly flensed and with actual blood coming out of him in thick black strands, almost a gel rather than a fluid.

“Yo, Leviathan can bleed.” I say with a small laugh, “Anything that bleeds can die.” I don’t actually know if I’m transmitting, in fact the commentary is solely for Loona’s benefit, “You think he tastes like Calamari, or like a person? Some weird in-between?”

“I think he’s more of a dolphin taste.” Loona admits, wheeling the car around.

“Oh my God, Dolphin was *so good*. I think because you’re not supposed to have them.” I say as the RV starts to pick up speed. I’m bouncing my leg as I heal the woman. “Hey Miss Militia, I think the trap worked.”

There’s a triple boom of force as a black shape nears and *clotheslines* Leviathan, stopping him from the chase I *felt* in my bones he was about to give.

Militia coughs out blood and pulls her armband off, accessing a holographic display on it to show what’s happening at the site.

“I was sexy right? Admit it you want my weird girl cock.” I say quietly as I start thinking about what *we’re even supposed to do*.

She *completely* ignores me as she grits her teeth, watching Alexandria, a muscular woman with dark skin where it can be seen *slug it out* with the Kaiju like its a boxing match, massive impacts that shatter glass and send more black blood spraying on the surroundings.

Finally, I just start going through the shit I raided from the pharmacies around town. “You want some oxycodone?”

*That* gets her attention, turning away from the screen, Militia nods, “Yes, please.” Unfailingly polite at least.

“Never say please to me again,” I say quickly as I toss her one bottle of... God, we’re monsters, I couldn’t tell you how much medication we stole. We didn’t even sort it, I’ve got some bitch’s inhaler in here.

She pulls her bandana down, revealing-*jesus fucking christ*,-the fullest lips, highest cheekbones and most pleasantly beautiful blood-spackled face imaginable, tan, dusky skin lit up by the blood she’s been coughing into her bandana. She downs three pills, swallows, and breathes out before putting the mask back on.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t see that.” I admit shaking my head, “Too much. It’s too much. I can’t handle it right now.” I’m mostly going through shit and rubbing my eyes. Getting more tech to build... Something, I haven’t figured it out yet.

“That’s what an Endbringer fight is like.” Militia grimaces as she moves to sitting instead of laying down. My heart has been racing, I just notice, adrenaline’s been pounding through me, a sense of danger really, one that I can’t actually place the origin of. The holographic stream of Leviathan shows him *grab* Alexandria by the head, stopping the woman limp in its hand and *slamming* her into a building hard enough to drag her through the concrete.

I shout back to Loona, “Are you wet right now? This fucks right?” What the fuck am I ma— It’s a *receiver* for my weird fleshwarp powers. I hand the rifle to Militia, “You don’t, but trust me, get that onto Alexandria, I’ll start pumping her full of calories to get her back up and running.”

“She’s *invulnerable*,” Militia grimaces, “I’ve seen her bounce a thousand pound bomb. A bullet’s gonna ricochet.” Even Leviathan seems to realize this, as the impacts stop.

I growl, as I pull out the weird calorie concoction, it’s some sort of gel. I’m not entirely what it is really, some sort of psychic stem cells in a gelatin sheathe.

Instead, on the hologram, the monster *shoves* the woman *under the water* and starts holding her there as titanic struggles echo through the swirling current.

“Yeah, I *know* just goo her God *damn*.” I swear, “I’m not a good shot.”

“She’s underwater!” Militia snaps, watching the video with an intense grit of her teeth past the bloodied bandana.

“*Shielder, disabled, Lady Photon, Disabled.*” Dragon keeps talking.

I swear at her as I climb out of the sun roof. I don’t have the powers for this. I can just... Wait I used my M1 for this. *Aw, man*. Whatever, shots...

Well it's not lined up, but it's math. There's an elbow, I know how long the forearm and claws are, I've got a few shots.

The shots ring out, and Leviathan glares at me as they impact his *free* arm when it snaps off Alexandria and onto the ground in front of where he's forming an orb of water to choke her. The moment she's not got *both arms* on her, she *breaks off a finger* with a roar that shatters glass in its volume, and flies *up* and far away coughing.

*Alright, let's... See what you're made of.* I try to adjust, I'm fucking *stupid*. I know I'm stupid, this is probably where I die, but also I'm just... Fascinated, I can feel him, some alien biology, and *oh God he's so fast*.

He catches up with the RV in *seconds*. His body is *wholly* unintelligibly alien. Its not even organs, its not even bones really, its..its..its all one piece, one, solid, contiguous piece of layers that get denser and thicker and stronger all the way down.

There's layers, maybe... Cancer? He's not bleeding. Maybe I can make him itchy, just be real unpleasant while we die. I can't do much more but laugh as he's on top of me, pinning me to the moving RV by weight, the wheels.

"You really should have just fucking killed me." I giggle maniacly, "Even if you do it now, I still *fucked you*." *Oh God, there goes my ribs. Yup, those are cracked. I'm fucked.* Ah, that beautiful sensation of a heart popping. It's not really like anything else, you fill with blood in places you're not supposed to have it. Every sensor in your body just says, "This is wrong. You are wrong right now. Please stop being wrong." It's pain, but it's also just a sense of... *Awful uneasy*.

The creature pressed down its weight, and its playing with me, I can tell, its not intending to kill me, at least, not quickly. It could have ripped water through me, it could have torn me apart, claws sharp enough to sink into the armoured steel of my RV. Instead, its just glaring down with four eyes.

I glare back, using most of my healing to keep myself *conscious* and talking, “That’s right, take your time with it. I’ve got a cock you can suck if you let me fuck a mouth in you.”

My arm comes off in a ragged *rip* of force and a painful shiver that tears down my back. Its like its playing with meat, taking strips off while the RV groans to a halt, unable to move with its weight.

Mmmmm... Nope, I didn’t want to feel that anymore, and I try to focus on turning the pain receptors off at the brain. “You’re a loser, admit it.” I say, I don’t even know if it understands me, but it just feels good to yell out my frustration, “All you can do is flail pathetically at my body. That’s all you have *left* because you’re a failure in *every sense of the word*.” I’m... I’m going to die. Loona’s going to die, I’m trying not to cry but there’s not really enough calories or even sense to figure that out.

I’m going to lose Loona. I’m *going* to find something that’ll stick in this things head, something they’ll think about for the rest of their insignificant life. It’s gotta be good, real good.

“You know it too, or else you’d have just fought Alexandria. You used a trap because you know you’re weak, and it failed because you *are stupid*.” I think I’m actually talking to myself a bit, I don’t even know if it understands me. “Who slams an invincible woman into shit?!”

The thing gives maybe *some* sign of understanding, maybe, or just cruelty in its glimmering toxic eyes as it raises a hand in a fist, intentionally blunt and less efficient than just clawing straight through me, and *bring it down* on my chest. The feeling of all the bones in my torso flattening is odd without the pain, uncomfortable in a unique way as I stop being able to breathe.

That has to be intentional, even breathlessly, I’m giggling because it *had to shut me up*. It knew my words hurt it, and it couldn’t bear anymore. Could it see it in my eyes? Does it know *I know*?! Ah right, every part of my body is dying. It’s so much damage.

Still, surprisingly, not enough to kill me as regeneration sets in, but, the next fist is aimed higher up, and I watch the fist every so slowly lower, press against my nose, and give the grim image of a green, scaly hydraulic press bearing down against me.

I mean *he is flesh*, could I just... Painlessly push that apart? We're in a fucking cartoon, maybe I can just make a silhouette— No, no, the minute I try to fuck with it's biology my entire body becomes *blinded* with searing pain I tried to turn off. Not doing that again.

Just as I feel the bones in my skull start to give way, luck is apparently on my side as a *familiar-ish* roar of an engine screams through the nearby street and a *shadow* passes over me. A blue-grey motorcycle *impacts* the creature in the side of the head and forces it off me, letting my lungs heal enough that a blessed *breath* can be drawn.

One last word, I gotta think of one last thing, they're fighting, but I can be just a *little* bit more irritating. "Hope it was worth taking your time!" I shout out as I drop through the sunroof and *collapse*. I look at Miss Militia as my eyes flicker and parts of me start to peel back together. "Told you... You'd have died."

Militia is leaning against a wall, staring at the *dented inwards* roof with rain falling through cracks, "You...huh." She comments unintelligibly before starting to *go outside again*, "*Damnit Colin.*" Murmuring a name in anger.

"Why?" I whisper as she leaves, "Can't I just have this win?"

Militia gets tazed in the neck by a beautiful, very well designed, gorgeous micro-prod that I have an urge to take apart, she falls into the RV and the man in *blue armour* standing in front of a fucking *Kaiju* shouts at me, "Get her out of here, *now!* I'll *fight him.*"

*Oh you fucking think dick head, you think we were driving away for a Sunday stroll*, Still, this one *doesn't* know I'm a fucking monster, so I just say, "We've got her!" Though I don't get up off the floor as Loona peels off.



He stares at Leviathan with a grit of his teeth, black beard underneath a helmet slick with water, I can hear it with enhanced senses, "I can *see* what you're going to do, *monster*." He's *fucking monologuing* as Leviathan stares at him in what *must* be confusion. Still, not my problem as Loona pushes the RV at max speed, about thirty miles per hour with the damage Leviathan's *weight* did to it.

*Limiter's fucked, auto correct has to be busted all the sensors in the roller cages, yeah those are gone, I think as I lie back on the floor with my eyes closed, Suspension's blown out, roofs dented, tore out the electrical system for the dishwasher AND the stove AND parts of the freezer. Ruined the fucking juicer.*

"D-do you think he's gonna win?" Loona asks, shaking in a small panic.

"Of course," I lie as I crawl over, I don't have the ability to do it at range, and suck out some more cortisol into myself. It's because I can't really poof it away anymore, it's mostly the receiver gel I had that's doing the lifting. "Of course, we're uh... We're God's chosen people. Look at how awesome things have been for us until now."

"You got *pancaked* by a lizard!" Loona exclaims, staring at the road as Dragon's voice comes out, "*Armsmaster, disabled.*"

I nod, looking at Loona and say, "Yeah, yeah but I was talking about wanting that earlier. That's why you have to be careful with prayers."

"*Armsmaster, deceased.*" Dragon continues coolly.

I close my eyes, *mhmm. Yeah, that sounds right. Pretty sure that was the weirdo I just saw. Shame, crying shame. At least he got to fuck Miss Militia.*

Loona drives *towards* the inner city, moving far, far away from the coast in a small, well, very large panic she's concealing well with my help.

I probably should focus on regenerating, getting off the floor. Reattaching nerves. That's not what I do, because chat, I'm a moron. I hold on tight to Loona and continue to suck away Cortisol. It's great, I

feel like shit, a full blown anxiety attack as a thing with *thrice* the hormones as me traumadumps into my endocrine.

“*Armsmaster, revived.*” Dragon hums into the communications grid as Miss Militia wakes up with a shout.

“*Motherfucker, idiot, bastard, goddamnit!*” Militia shouting and cursing is pretty hot at least, she completely falls into a rolling, guttural accent and slams her hand against the ground.

I start to slather peanut butter into my mouth. “Don’t look at me, I’m being a pig.” I continue doing so reaching for another jar of Skippy Extra Chunky.

She brings up the Hologram on Armsmaster, ignoring me, and sees him *divested* of his right arm and leg, with a Leviathan in front of him that...wow, he actually fucked Leviathan up. A half dozen three foot deep cuts in its torso. Three eyes missing, a finger cut off, a wrist barely hanging on and a leg limping on as its internals were cut apart. Still, Leviathan is currently preparing to stomp down on him by raising the injured leg slowly.

It seems last second saves are common here, as just before the clawed foot lands on him, a man in a *green* body suit and cloak with a hood on it makes everything twist, and carves apart space and relations between objects until Leviathan is *in the air*, unable to get traction and spinning wildly.

“Well,” Loona is *not looking* at the road, a dangerous habit of hers, “That’s clever.”

I’m not *well* but I’m ambulatory after about three jars of Peanut butter that were absorbed by the freakish tongue, and grabbed with the prehensile tail.

I pull myself up into the fetal position as the *entirety* of my limits of Cortisol has now been absorbed from Loona. I can’t hold it, I can’t take anymore without replacing blood. Any stress after this is entirely on her. It’s so awful, I know this is what I do to people, but it’s really their fault.

Not mine, I don't do anything wrong. I say in a quiet shudder, "Ye-yeah? Wha-what's clever? Please look forward." It's almost a whisper as I've gone completely fetal. *Why was she so stressed?!*

Loona looks forwards, "Uh, the, uh, lift the monster up trick, no traction, no moving." She mumbles, still stressing before suddenly, her stress *tanks* to nothing. "*oh my god.*"

"Hmmm." I say quietly, shuddering and holding my legs.

A *golden* figure, literally *deific* in appearance is in front of the RV, and I can see it because it *phases through*, letting it pass through him instead of stopping or moving around it. Its golden eyes glare into me and I feel like it *knows everything*.

"*Oh no. Oh no. No no no no no no.*" I say as he looks, "I saved Alexandria! I saved Alexandria!" I shout quickly.

Evidently, I'm the smaller fish to fry as he vanishes out the back of the RV.

"Loona. Uh," I took all her stress, and now I can't think straight, because the dumb bitch can't control her emotions, and I think about crying. I just sit there. I whisper, "Fuck it."

"*Okay?*" Loona's confused but keeps driving.

"He phased through the RV." I say simply, "All the way through. To the back."

"*Oh.*" Loona stiffens, "Okay." And keeps driving as a *golden flare* behind us marks some grand and incredible assault being wrought on the Endbringer.

I mutter very quietly as I overload the marble in the dungeon. I stop, no that's stupid. They'll *definitely* break out, it's fucking them up that makes them so strong. God knows how strong they are. I'd need to make... I might need to just go to prison.

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At some point, I'm not sure when, I nod off. Its a sudden rest, like being beaten to unconsciousness. Some part of me realizes it's due to incredible metabolic stress.

Two vast things interlock, crystal gardens wrought over and over atop mountains of flesh and bone and blood. They see me, but do not care. They see all, and do not care.

They fragment, mountains flensing, their power seeking minds, punching through the barriers between them and living minds with wires of raw energy that defy belief. They connect.

They dance. They die, they live again.

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I wake up with a start *far* outside Brockton Bay. Loona apparently decided that possibly mined highways is a better choice than *Leviathan*. Which, to be fair, she's not entirely wrong.

"We... Could have just left." I muttered with a small laugh, "Of course we could have."

"...I mean...I think the tires are done for." Loona says, and its very obvious that she *did not* use the highways. Or any roads, judging from the pine tree half-stuck to the frame. I close my eyes again.

"Mmm." I say, that means we're not moving. That's fine, I guess. I'm screwed. "Can you tell me what's going on." I keep my eyes closed. Get filled in. I don't want to face the world. I'm not ready for it yet.

"We won, I think. Uh, he sunk like, a chunk of the city. Uh." Loona says nervously, "Protectorate's moved on, uh, Kaisers dead."

"We going to the Birdcage?" I ask simply keeping my eyes closed.

"Uh, Scion's saving a cat in Belize right now." Loona says, as *if that makes sense*. "He doesn't stick around. I guess he doesn't care?"

I ask her, “Where’s Miss Militia?” It might be time to face it, yeah we’re about there. I let them flick open, and I survey my surroundings.

“She’s out cold. Uh.” Loona points at Miss Militia, out cold on the bed that’s been pulled out, shivering with *some* sort of dream.

“*We need to get rid of the Cats.*” I say when I realize we’re alone, “They *know* but they can’t possibly know *specifics.*”

“What? No, they’re ours!” Loona stomps her foot in anger, denting the floor.

I look at her and my face falls, I don’t actually have the energy to fight, and I’ve never *tried* sadness before, “Loona, please.”

“We can just make them say they wanna be there!” She justifies with another stomp.

I whisper at her, “No, hon, we can’t make people say things. I don’t have mind control powers.”

“Why not!? You know how to do brain stuff! Just...brain them!” Loona’s understanding of complex neurology is about as lacking as mine is.

“Loona, I can’t, I would if I could.” I’m still whispering, so quiet, and I’m so tired, “Right now it’s *bad*. It’ll be *so much worse* if people find out. Understand, truly, understand that literally, saving Alexandria is *not enough* for people to forgive forced necrophiliac incest.”

Loona is *angry*, and is getting *angrier*, I can see it in the grit of her fangs and the clenching of her hands on the wheel.

I ask her softly, “Loona, do I ever tell you what to do? Please.”

“...” Loona stays quiet, growling lowly as she stares through the windshield at the forest ahead. Still not answering me.

I can’t, I’ll just deal with whatever consequences there are. It’s just... There will be consequences. I stand up, and reach into the people

freezer, and pull out some raw flank. It's good, well marbled. I nosh on it while I try to think.

"Okay, you're just tired." Loona starts justifying to herself, "You'll be thinking straight after...you get some food and have Nessa use her mouth." She nods.

I close my eyes as I eat, "I *always* tell you you're smart. I always tell you you're capable. That you're a good thinker, a good learner." I stop for another bite, slowly consuming it. "The minute I ask for something you don't want to hear, you can't give me the same courtesy."

Loona *snarls*, "The *fuck* does that mean!?" Her mood tumbles over to anger near-instantly.

"It means you hurt my feelings," I say back. I continue eating, and thinking.

"How! You're saying we get rid of the best thing we've ever made!" Loona snaps again, kicking the flooring, "They're getting close to perfect! Come on!" She shouts. "Imagine when they *want* it from us!"

"Honey, we're the best thing we've ever made." I say to her, "I will never consider anything better than what you and I have with each other. If we let them off *now*, they'll just realize that they're finally given a chance at freedom. People will come for them."

"Lets...can we...just give it a couple days?" Loona *controls* her anger, an impressive show of growth as she untightens her grip on the wheel. "Just...let you rest, let Miss whatever leave, and then think."

I need to reward her for controlling herself, it's a big risk, but I'm a gambler. If it pans out, that she's right and we get away with this, then she'll... Be more in control. The good behavior will be rewarded, reinforced. I rub my eyes. "Here's the deal. I'll rig a failsafe, I should have done it, I never did because I'd just blow the room."

I take a bite more of meat, and then down the raw flank whole. It takes me a few minutes of chewing to get it down. Freezer's dead, so we need to toss it or make jerky. "As long as the..."

I think to Leviathan, and him *slowly* crushing my skull. Waiting, prolonging it, making *everything* too slow which costed him victory. Literally, all we had to do was slow him down. *Everything* is last minute here. "Loona, why did Leviathan lose?"

"Kept...uh...messaging around I guess? Didn't really just *go for it*." Loona states, having noticed *that* as well as I did.

"He was having *too much fun*, and he lost everything." I say too her, wondering if she gets my point. "He had opportunities, he lost them. Over and over and over. Nearly three or four just by our count. I *don't like wasting opportunities*. We are isolated, off the beaten track, and it's literally, the perfect time for it. We can get *new ones*, if they put us both in an all female prison we can... Just get new ones there."

"Yeah...but then...like, we're in *prison*. We can't go out, we can't *do* things except *prison things*, I'll get bored! In a month! Tops!" Loona states.

"Yeah, that sounds awful." I say too her, seeing an in, maybe, "So, we kidnapped two Nazis and killed them. That's *bad* but we saved Alexandria, Hell, Miss Militia was *already* willing to forgive that. What do you think happens, if instead the story is, We kidnapped two Nazis, and kept them in an endless cycle of *sexual*/torture with the explicit purpose of breaking their mind."

"What if we just *don't let the story get out*! Scion doesn't talk!" Loona gives new information that was *wholly* unknown.

"What." I say to her and sit down, "What." I try to figure out what she's saying, like, to make it make sense, "Like... Doesn't talk, or doesn't *communicate*."

"Yeah he just goes from like, crisis to crisis and doesn't talk to anyone at all." She waves her arms wildly as if this is common knowledge, "Use the *internet jeez*."

“Oh.” I wouldn’t believe it, if anyone else had told me that, I would assume they were lying. That it was just a really stupid lie. Loona *never* lies, I’m sure she’s capable of it, but she never does it. Not to me especially. “Okay, yeah we’re good then. He’s the only one who knows.”

I rub my eyes and look back to Miss Militia to make sure she’s still sleeping. I probably should have been watching her. The woman is still fitfully asleep, shivering in bed with probably bad dreams. Loona grumbles, “I *wanna do things to heeeeeeeer.*”

“I know, and honestly I’m impressed with how well you do with all of this. You have way less time than I did to figure it all out, and you pick it up faster than I can.” I say walking over and hugging her, making sure to compliment, but not be patronizing, “You’re amazing.”

Loona grumbles and looks away, though her tail wags, “...Like...can we do stuff to her? Like...what if she’s just missing in the after battle.”

“Oh, no it’s so boring.” I say, though I realize she means *keeping* her. I stop.

“I mean other than the gun tricks she’s just a person. We can like...I mean, people are easy to restrain.” The wolf is excitedly bouncing her legs.

“We don’t know how those work though,” I point out, “And we don’t know her limits, and we need a shield.”

“...Ugh...” Loona thinks. “What...what if we like, flirt with her, lure her in, and then convince her to go for it.” She says as if that’s an original concept to her. Doing it the *normal* way.

“Loona... That’s how you normally do it.” I let it slip, it’s maybe because I’m tired, it might be because I’m developing actual feelings beyond the physical for Loona. It might just be bravery and stupidity.

“We can just ask people to fuck us. A lot of people will say yes.” I say to her with concern.



“Oh.” Loona is *confused* by the concept. “So...you don’t gotta like...fight?”

I sit down in the passenger seat with my temples in my hands, I take a deep breath, and then move my hands towards my face. “Loona, the first time we had sex, there was no fighting. The fighting didn’t come until I nibbled your ear and you pinned me down. We *don’t* when I ask, ‘Are you happy with this?’ I’m referring to the fighting before hand. The *alternative* is not fighting before hand, and just going straight too it.”

It’s an opportunity for an out, I can keep her, and it can just be a misunderstanding. I want *her* more than I want... The Meat Wagon.

“Oh, uh, I guess, huh. I mean, its *fun*, a little tiring.” Loona is beginning to consider the entire *thing* from a new angle, “I guess we don’t gotta do it every time, unless like its your thing.”

“Sometimes I’m just like, you know.” She shrugs. “I’d rather just fight and not have sex?”

*It is my thing, but I can’t just say that*, I look at her, and I rub my eyes, “So... Sometimes you just want violence, without sexual violence. Sometimes you want sexual violence, and sometimes you just want sex. Okay.”

Okay, I thought I understood it, and that meant developing a system. “If I got the trackers upgraded to let us share thoughts and feelings better, then I’d know what you wanted in the moment.”

It also meant more honesty between us, it was scary, she’d see the weird shit, the active manipulative parts of my psyche. It’d also mean I wouldn’t have to hide from her, and we’d be able to go *deeper* if we were aligned.

“Yeah, sure? I can mostly smell that on you anyways.” Loona admits her senses to me without a worry, “Every feelings got a scent. Like, you’re a little nervous right now, lots of worry, smells, uh, burnt. Like a burnt wire.”

“Why do you think this worries me?” I ask as I pull out the gel from the M1, and then literally, I can feel it. It’s so much stronger I just... Push the tracker out, split a small line of cells and heal them. It’s out in seconds.

“I’ve been reading a *lotta* fanfic, this might not be the best source of social interaction.” Loona explains with a grin.

She’s been reading a lot of fan fiction. Not psychology books, but even that gets the point across I supposed. “No, no, it’s pretty selfish on my part.” I admit, there’s something with the gel, and the tracker. Needs... The tinkertech is starting to border on magic at this point, I barely understand it. I’m mirroring neuron patterns back and forth, using DID as a template. Trying to create specific *spots* for the pathways.

Like two voices both at the front of the mind. I know it’ll work, somehow. I think it will, but with that confidence that is so *self assured*. That has to be... Stupid super hero magic. I put my tracker in, and I can hear it *slightly*, in my head. I know it’s picking up just the dead signal from Loona’s.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask as I walk over, and just... Wave my hand, the tracker comes out and I bring it to the counter top.

“Talk about...what? Tracker?” Loona slides out of the drivers seat, and moves nearer to me in the kitchen.

I shake my head as I am nearly done with the modifications, it’s easier the second time. It’s always easier the second time. “About it being an *unhealthy social interaction*.”

I don’t even need the injector, I wave my hands, the tracker sinks deep, so deep it’s intertwined with her nervous system. There’s a *zzt* a full sensation, but in the head, and there it is. She can hear my internal monologue. She can hear *this*.

I try to focus on her, almost immediately wanting to invade her privacy, to know if she’s... Scared? Tired of me? Knows more about our situation than we let on?

The connection is odd, adapting to a different mindset almost...too uncomfortable to be comfortable before I make the leap and finally make *sense* of what's going on in her head. There's a little fear of reprisal that I put in her head, of going to *prison*. There's lust, so much *anger* and beyond that, a curiosity that's nine-tenths of why she's so bright, a desire to learn that's near-insatiable.

I can feel it, as I say out loud, "You can, and *should* explore this, and *everything* about me you can." I nod as I keep my eyes closed. I'm, I'm scared, more scared of this than anything else. There's fear of prison, but not really, just fear of something happening to Loona that'd make the amount of fun we have stop.

I look at her, and I wonder what it's like, to see yourself reflected in someone else. The way I appreciate her every move, the way her voice makes my heart sing. The way we share interests. The way the violence excites me, the way that *parallels* with the way her laughter excites me. How wholly, utterly, head over heels in love I am.

It's vulnerable, she now *knows*, she now knows the absolute *depths* of what I'd do.

Loona's a little stiff at the realization, and I can feel her anxiety shiver through me interestingly, like a second hand titillation at the idea of this powerful an obsession. She swallows, and I can *feel* something similar beneath, an answered mirror to it in her own unique way. Love, I think, is different for everyone, and in her case, its far more about what she *wouldn't* do to me. How far she'd go to keep me safe from herself. Errant thoughts constantly crushed before the dark in them can be considered properly.

"Uh. This is new."

I'm giggling and I run forward to hug her, "Oh, *God that's so much better* than what I was expecting. You're not using me." I whisper into her neck. "You're not frightened of me."

Sharing the feeling is good, but emotion and mental thought is like sugar water, versus the crystallized matrix that is stated words. It also builds as the structure forms. Saying a little helps connect, which lets you say more. It's maybe obvious, but to see the way it can feedback, to see yourself, then react to the perception of someone else's sight of you, it *needs* words to refine.

"*Duh*, why would I be scared of you?" Loona says as she returns the hug with heavy, muscular furred arms, "I just let you win sometimes, so you feel good about yourself." She chuckles, rubbing her muzzle into me.

*Jesus Christ, we both let each other win*, I giggle, as it hits me *that's* why it's different, why neither of us really care when we lose. I rub my eye with my palm. Though her intrusive thoughts sometimes hit me like a brick wall, when she looks at Miss Militia it's a *barrage* of predatory sense and images.

It's not as animalistic as I expect, or maybe these instincts are more universal. It boils down to need of control, and a lust that matches my own. Waking up almost dead was *terrifying*, a brutality inflicted on her with no recourse, and needed to be avoided. No-one could hurt her if she was stronger. She could ward off attacks if she attacked first.

"I *still* wanna make Miss Militia airtight with you." She admits, staring at the woman on the bed. "*god*, she's *so pretty*."

"I could just... Look like her, like one to one." I say pretty quick.

"*No*, I wanna do her *with you*, you're not optional!" Loona huffs.

I can't help but smile, and I lean into her. "Sometimes, when you're charming enough, it happens. Though we *definitely* put a hamper on that by trying to assault her."

She can see how careful I am with my words versus my thoughts, that I'm quietly educating out loud, but at the same time really feeling and going through the *actual* chances. Which were absolutely nil, you can't just try to rape someone and then go back to having sex with them, unless they were broken.

“Step one.” Miss Militia sighs out, “To a positive relationship with another human being after making them feel unsafe.” She rolls out of bed, looking at me and Loona hugging with the bottle-glass green eyes, fatigues and a cut down sleeveless tee with a hole in the abdomen.

“Is, *I’m gonna guess*, not hovering over them sleeping quietly muttering ‘damn I wanna fuck that meat.’ Just throwing the guess out there.” I say with a small wave.

“One point to...what did you pick?” Militia cracks her neck, standing up with tone, wiry muscle visible under her clothes.

“I... Fuck, there was like, Nether and Fang I think? Twilight and Howl?” I don’t think we did, we kind of just laughed at the whole idea. “Wait, if Brimstone died I can take their name can’t I? Then we could be Brimstone and Howl, really keep that *demon* anti-hero energy. We’re morally gray types.”

No, morally we are *sludge*, pitch black.

“Brimstone’s a villain out in New York. A teleporter, leaves a stench behind.” Militia waves her hand dismissively, “No one’s gonna care. And you two are going to...*ugh*.” She rubs the side of her head.

“Be *swimming* in trim, I know. It’s a terrifying thought.” I said with a smile.

“Going to take a walk down to the Rig with me.” Miss Militia states, “And conveniently *lose* the last ten feet of your RV along the way, yeah?” She grumbles, annoyed and *definitely* having heard everything.

“I thought you were asleep.” I said touching my lips.

“I sleep once a year. I was unconscious. There’s a difference.” Militia shrugs as she stands up.

“Holy shit, that boat has sailed so far into the horizon it’s off the planet and in another solar system.” I say definitively.

Loona stomps, “*Damnit! I liked my fucktoys!*” Making Militia *sigh* again. She’s a very tired woman. An *extraordinarily* tired woman.

“Hey, whoa!” I say quickly as I feel Loona’s senses of Miss Militia, “You’re also very patient. Yes, we’ll handle it, and I appreciate you not mag dumping me when you woke up.” *Because seriously, she had every right too holy shit.*

“Yeah, upper *command* wants you. *California Headquarters.*” Militia grumbles again.

“Uh... *Blue* California, or Normal California?” I ask looking at her a bit concerned.

“PRT and Protectorate California. Where Alexandria flies.” Milita is now walking around and stretching her lower back.

I try to make a joke, “That does not tell me their opinions on Cancel Culture *or* Joe Rogan.”

“Wh-No. Get to the Rig. *Before* Alexandria comes to you.” Miss Militia warns while Loona moves around the room just to get energy out.

“I will!” I say as I think about how to handle the back, and then it’s so easy, I realize it’d be so simple. I could just... Compress the back, with gravity. I *really* think I might understand gravity quite a bit as I go to try and No, no I don’t. I’m thinking of a video game.

“You’re... Going to want to leave.” I say sadly to Miss Militia, “We’re...”

“Don’t care, never asked, say nothing, goodbye.” Militia cuts me off, and starts walking out of the RV and into the woods, finding her way back.

“I’ll fill you in on the details later,” I say with a wink and a swish of my tail.

As soon as Miss Militia is a few minutes away, Loona complains, “I don’t *waaannnnaaaaaa!* Ugh. FIne, *damnit!* Screw the Protectorate!” She responds to my responses before I even say them.

It's weird, she can feel me, I can wrestle with her feelings and help her. She can bolster mine. It's fucking *weird*, we're symbiotic now, and codependency has hit new levels of Unhealthy. It's in a way that's very exciting however.

"Can we at least like. You know? Before? Or after. Both?" Loona asks with some hope.

"Oh yeah, absolutely." I say immediately, "That's why I pretty much announced what we were going to do, and she gave us a time limit. We need to *move*."

"Do you wanna like practice on them? Like how normal people would do it? Or do we not have the time? I dunno how that works." Loona asks with a scratch at her muzzle.

"Oh, uh no, you get one or the other, not both without a few months prep." I say as we pop open the back door, and the airlock.

"uuuuuugh." Loona follows in to spot the two.

I look at Jessica and Nessa and decide to *try* it, "Hey girls," I whisper to them quietly, "How are you doing today?"

Jessica's taken to it better than Nessa. Probably not being quite as stubborn as a whole, answering, "I'm o-okay ma'am." While looking down. Nessa's not been touched today, so she's still got a hint of stubbornness that lets her stay quiet.

I know what Loona wants, the "delicate" way, so it's a bit dark, but I go for it, "You've both been great, so we're at the point where we can start rebuilding now. The breaking down is pretty much done." I say with a smile, as I undo Jessica's chains, and then Nessa's.

"So, no-one's dying, getting beat, getting waterboarded. No torture, we're just going to try and see if we can all be in the same room, gentle. Nice. Do you feel like trying that? With a bed?" It's very quiet, but I can feel something inside.

Its there, my power, three lights remain, orbiting around eachother as the thing starts to *strain*, showing me something new, the *stress* of leviathan having given me so many lights that I didn't even notice using them. All three wink out, and something changes.

Then I just... Find the right words to say, I take a step back. I look at Loona, and we meet eyes, while the women are looking at us I hug her, softly. I lean in, and I *show them* what they could have, if they want it. There's a way, maybe, to have my cake and eat it too. I'm getting a little greedy, but they don't *look* like Nessa and Jessica anymore, I've completely their faces to something pretty yes, but *different*. I simply hold Loona in front of them.

If they hit us, it's back to rape city, but I think they *know* that. I think they know with new faces they can't just *go back*, and then I put the icing on the cake. I say to Loona, "I can't believe we saved Brockton *and* Alexandria today." I pretend it's almost instinctual, that I'm just entirely unafraid of these two now.

It's also a subtle hint that, *No* two random shape-changers *are very inconvenient* right now. They don't have to be, however, that's entirely up to them. That if we just *killed them*, we'd get away with it fully. That we were now protected.

They're already unlocked, it's entirely up to them. Again, I never *make* anyone do anything.

Jessica looks around scared, shivering and intimidated while Nessa's bottom lip is trembling at the idea, almost unconsciously given to her, that this is *known* by the PRT's. They...they stay still, they don't move, they don't say anything, they just *stay*.

"Miss..." I look at Loona, and she squeezes me to give me strength, "Miss Militia wants us to kill you. It's... That bad, because of the whole hearts and mind things. Leviathan's killed Kaiser, Cricket's dead too. They could believe you're dead. We could change your faces, you *could* stay. If we just left you out in the woods..." I wince at the idea, it's *tragic* what might happen.



"You'd be loose ends, the PRT would *never* allow it. Hell, I think you know Miss Militia hates killing, how much it probably hurts her to force us to do this." It's an out, the first out they've been given, but it's also a *huge* step. We're skipping a *lot* of the process, and I'm relying on something I don't really understand for it.

I'm also relying on Loona, she can *smell* emotions, I don't have to read their minds, I know Loona knows, I can trust her. It's not *really* their replies I'm entirely waiting for, it's Loona I need to know if they're buying it, or if they're just waiting for a chance to escape.

Loona doesn't say anything, and her thoughts are mostly bouncing between the fear they have and some sort of *hope*, happiness, dopamine really that's beginning to bloom in them. Jessica looks up at the two of us and murmurs nervously, "C-can...we-uhm-, can we g-go outside, please, ma'am?" As Nessa looks down, having been trained to *not* hiss when her sister says something stupid.

"You'll need clean clothes, something nice." I say with a smile, I'm wondering if Loona's entirely picked up on why *not* fucking them right now will mean *so so much more fun* later. I'm also getting *very* overconfident even as I said I wouldn't. "Would you like to pick it out?" I open the door, and in fact just... Leave, leave it unlocked. The bed's made, the rest of the RV is just... Open, they could even bolt for the RV door if they *really* wanted too.

I realize I could be *entirely* convincing. I can't control *them* but I can control how I seem, and as I leave I gently start to kiss Loona, while both our ears are trained on them, but I just seem so *distracted* they could bolt. Right now. They could run right now and escape, or they could have the nice clothes, structure, and a PRT salary.

Nessa considers it, staring at the door with a dry mouth and a *slight* up-tick of her heart-rate to Loona's ears. Jessica keeps her eyes firmly on the ground however, much too shaky to even *think* of something like that. "Uh, that. Uhm. Yes ma'am." Jessica is now the mouth piece of the two.

"Okay," I look away from Loona, remembering that they're there. "Let's have you pick out something nice we can go walk outdoors, and see the sun." I beckon them to the bedroom we're in to pick out among my things clothing for themselves.

They take a second, not having *exactly walked* without something inside them in a week or so, and look at a space that isn't their ten by six prison for the past what seems to be *forever*. The bedroom must seem like an amazing space to them, and Jessica starts breathing a little faster while Nessa looks at the bed with some greed in her eyes, imagining laying down on something that isn't floor.

"You can lay down, that was *never* going to be forever. It *can* be over, if you want." I say gently as I pat the bed.

Nessa stares, feeling that it might be a game, or a trick. That Loona's going to be right behind her any moment, that this'll turn into something *violent*, but she *needs* a luxury, something now. She lived in a *mansion* before this. She takes trepidacious steps towards it, and sits on the corner nervously, ever the brave one. Jessica looks terrified and is already hugging herself.

I tap Loona on the knee, she's *feral* inside at this prey behaviour. Rabid even. I'm trying to soothe it, and somewhat interact with it, but I can't do anything to *impress* upon her mind. I can just argue with the feelings one by one. It's not *easy* to do and focus, and I'm not a hundred percent sure it's helping.

I try not to think about the look on Miss Militia's face, I *feel* like she's either going to be relieved I didn't kill someone, or *enraged* that I broke these two people.

"Sh-she-ma'am s-said lay down!" Jessica *warns* her sister, terrified of reprisal. Nessa's eyes snap open wide.

"You're fine," I say quietly to both of them, "It's *about free time* right now. You've both been *awesome* when things are going well, we don't

need to resort to punishment. When *things are going well*, life goes well. Now, I'm trusting you to behave."

Nessa nods stiffly, "Okay." Still not using the *ma'am* that was requested by Loona a few days ago. She's very stubborn on that, probably one of the last pillars of independence she has.

"Hey," I whisper to Nessa really quietly, as if sharing a secret, "Can you help me out here, we're going out on a limb to not just fuck you to death and leave you dead. Leviathan left *hundreds of thousands* of corpses in Brockton Bay." Not a threat, *really*, just pointing out a stressor, that also carries an implication, "Can you show Loona you're willing to listen to her?"

Loona's at least a *little* pleased at the stiffening fear in Nessa, who shakes a little at the *constant* memory of what *fucked to death* looks like, "S-sorry ma'am." She lets out the breath just after the words, feeling something crumble inside.

I look at Jessica, and I *really* let this one set in, "You two have been chained up with no real way to comfort each other. That can stop if you want, do you want us to back up a bit so you two can hug?" I ask them, as I'm already moving. She *did* the thing, the positive reinforcement comes from the relief of contact with a loved one that *isn't forced violation*.

Jessica shivers and slowly moves towards Nessa who's looking at her more than a little panicked. The younger woman says quietly, "I-I think ma'am's b-being honest." To her sister, making Loona smile, something only a *little* threatening by nature of being on her as she shifts weight from one leg to another.

"The letting prisoners go, and then chasing them down thing? That was a *Nazi* thing." I see them both flinch at the word, and try not to jizz, "No-one in this room is a Nazi, we're *all* better than that." It's the keyword, *better* they are *better* now.

Jessica slowly moves again, and wraps her arms around Nessa, the hug is *fragile*, and both women start choking up at the touch, the *kind* touch. Falling into the hold and crying over each other in a shivering mess. Applied mascara running almost immediately, another one of Loona's 'Obedience' measures. She's...rather fond of her toys.

I don't *break them up* necessarily, and definitely not immediately, but they need to be reminded this happened because of us. That it would have been impossible without us. Reinforcing that we're all friends, which *also* helps with Loona's request of doing things *the soft* way. Though she'll need to be with Nessa, since Loona's soft, and Nessa's soft are less distant than her soft and Jessica's. Which is all to say, Nessa is extremely stubborn and Loona is a *great* tool to wave.

I don't ask either, it's the *gentlest* possible touch on Jessica's hip that causes a sharp electric jolt of fear. I absorb that a bit, lower the cortisol, this isn't a *stressful* moment. This is a pleasant one, and I can make that happen. I am *not* going to hurt her, because she's being good. There's no reason to *get hurt* right now. Though I make sure Loona's aware if we want to have fun later, and we will need to, to maintain this, we can just find a reason.

I let my lips touch Jessica's neck, and I whisper, "We're family, you're part of our pack now."

The memory of Loona and I's dominance play in front of them had normalized everything, a little bit. It made it seem like it was a normal part of life, at least for us.

It was *actually* a part of our normal life. Something that Loona and I were doing *to each other*. For wholly opposite reasons of course, I was doing it to try and force Loona to love me. Loona was doing it because she couldn't resist her own urges.

Another light kiss on the neck, I don't *pull* her away so much as gently guide her and see if she goes with me.

Jessica shivers as she's pulled away by the light guidance, sinking towards me like a whirlpool is pulling her away from Nessa, whose eyes widen in fear at the change. "M-ma'am?" Jessica whispers in confused worry.

"No-one's getting hurt, you haven't really gotten to see the softer side of us." I whisper into her ear, "This is going to be *fine* you won't be hurt, it's going to feel good." I use words that I avoided during the punishments, these are *new* words, to trigger with positive reinforcement. Things they did *right*, are *good*, they are *fine*. Nothing about the punishments were right, or good, or fine. It was about establishing expectations, a system to function in.

My fingers are like silk, and I give her a gentle touch between the legs, she's better behaved than Nessa, I want Nessa to see that better behaviour gets time with *me* not Loona. "You've been the *best*, so I'm going to show you my soft side. Nessa is going to see that Loona can be soft too." It's a scary thing, but soft is *not* a word they've heard from before. From Loona either, it's a new thing.

"Y-yes ma'am. T-t-t-t-thank you m-ma'am." Jessica shivers as my fingers brush against something achingly sensitive, courtesy of some minor alterations to nerve density. Nessa stares ahead in some terror as Loona sits next to her heavily, likely unintentionally, the woman is well over three hundred pounds.

"*I got one.*" She huskily promises to Nessa, briefly short-circuiting the curly blonde with a *gentle* side hug. The woman freezes as Loona's long tongue softly brushes against her neck, leaving a trail of saliva and sensation as it passes.

I *giggle* it's very light and airy, and to be honest, fake. It's a noise that is fully just to signal that things are fine. Laughter is the body's way of telling you danger is over, it's the stress release, the safety valve keeping you safe. It's extremely useful in the right situations, to have a believable, if fake, laugh. I keep the rubbing very soft, and as I do so I heal her much more fully than normal.

She, until this moment, had *thousands* of micro fractures, cuts, and aches. The pure amount of abuse had seen to it that she was *ravaged* and in recovery almost every waking hour. It's a risky push, because it comes with some clear headedness, but I risk it because I can keep a sharp tap on the stress hormones. Without stress, there *shouldn't* be much dissonance. Though, human neurology is complicated, and I acted mostly out of instinct.

I continue the gentle touches, and I notice she's *soaking*, that wet is pooling underneath her.

Loona lets her tongue drag down Nessa, making the woman shiver naked, scars and cuts and bruises all over making the sensation intermix with soft pains and sharp pleasures, leaving trails of saliva everywhere it passes that smells sweet. It eventually terminates at her peaks, making Nessa gasp while Loona teases her, murmuring between breaths and lowering pace, "*I'll take care of you, if you listen,*" Its more of a growled *promise* than a soft affirmation, but its to her character, and unfailingly honest.

I tell Jessica what I'm doing before I do it, I know she's *excited* but surprises could be frightening right now, "I'm going to go inside." It sounds *very awkward*, I can't really think of a way to make such a warning *not* awkward, but in some ways it's *alright* because this isn't entirely about having a passionate time of romance. I then slip in gently, and slip is the keyword, because there's *no* resistance with this much slick. I really don't remember doing any biological work here, but I must have. I probe once, twice, on the third stroke I find the tiniest spongy pile of nerves, a texture that's a little rougher, and I push it like a button in a very slow, sensuous motion.

Jessica takes a sharp intake of breath while watching Nessa, directly in front of her, make a similar intake as Nessa has Loona's tongue enter her, filling her softly by comparison to what she's used too and probing in and out with a teasing, pleasing and constant pace. Both sisters are breathing fast, chests heaving as they are played with by their once-torturers.

"We're a family now okay?" I whisper as I feel her squeeze down on me, "This shows, after everything, we still love each other." It's pertinent, it needs to be said during a pleasurable moment, and it needs to re-define what they think family is, re-define it so it *includes* Loona and I.

Jessica repeats almost thoughtlessly, "Y-yes ma'am, y-y-y-yess ma-ma-ma'am!" As she shivers while Nessa barely gets herself to speak, some jumble of words coming out as Loona lets her tongue fill her. It's a hedonistic sight, utterly discordant from normality, sparking a dozen memories of something like this, yet a thousand times more violent.

I *desperately* want to rut. I know I can't, not right now because we're going to have to go down to the Rig, and I'm going to have to take these two, and establish that they are *with us* and *our family* to a bunch of Thinkers and PRT that will be fully aware they are just people we didn't kill. I'm hoping that the weird hang up most people have about offing people will continue to let it happen. That the PRT will let it slide because it's *not* something bad, it's such a clean up of reality, it makes us look like heroes from a casual glance at least.

Loona's thinking *nowhere* near that far, as she leans up and *kisses* Nessa, pushing her slowly down to the bed while saying, asking really, "*Can...I feel good too?*" Terrifyingly quick study at this whole manipulation thing as she disconnects from the kiss and gently presses her body against Nessa's, pushing together their chests and letting her warmth slip into the slighter, smaller woman.

I'm not as confident, but I'm far more cautious and *honestly* one of us being more consistent than the other, safer even, is probably good. Jessica shocks me by cumming into my hand, and I look down a little surprised, I'm caught off guard. I'm not sure how to recover, or where to go next from that.

Without much left, I just drop the line that we *need* to make this work with the PRT, "I'm so happy that we saved you from Brockton Bay." That's... *It* really. We saved them, they're shell shocked. They'll pass a medical check-up fine, at least physically. As long as they say they want to stay with us, *that should be fine*. I don't actually know, it's almost

entirely reliant on the idea that no-one wants to peek into the tanning vat.

I also have no idea what to do with Jessica as Loona begins her acts. I'm *kind of* stuck with her, though maybe she'll ask me? That seems unlikely, so instead, I just pull her close to cuddle and we watch Loona and her sister while in a gentle embrace.

Loona isn't gentle on a good day, but she's made a real effort here, pressing in slowly but inexorably and at *no point* fucking the life out of Nessa despite the urge to do so being forefront in her mind. It's not exactly *pure* pleasure, owing to the *size* of one half of the equation, but Nessa's well used to pain at this point, and pleasures preferable to focus on

I realise that this is a good, no *great* time to drive a *tiiniy* wedge between the two. Make them focused more on competing, than with cooperation or examining the situation now that it's pleasant. I whisper, loud enough so they both can hear, "I'm really proud of you Jessica. I know Loona's a bit bigger, I couldn't think of a better way to reward you for doing *so much bet—*" I stop myself, as if I've made a mistake to call Jessica better than Nessa, "So well."

Jessica shivers at the compliment, and looks at the ground, though still peeking at the sight in front of her when she thinks no-one's looking, intensely ashamed and yet wanting to see it nonetheless. Denormalizing by the second. "*th-thank you m-ma'am.*" She whispers, naked on my lap, the desire to *rut* growing with every twitch of nerves she gives.

I gently scritch her back with my *finger nails*, she definitely remembered me having talons. Yet how could that be? I had *finger nails*, like a person, she could feel them, they weren't talons. They were *inside of her*, not talons. I whisper to her, "Sometimes my favorite thing is just sitting and watching. Next time, if it's you with me next time I mean, we could just watch."

A few more seeds of division, just enough that she wants to push Nessa down. I hope.



Jessica swallows, its a loud noise even in the slick and wet impacts that fill the room as she shivers, thinking, “C-c.” The word dies in her throat as she looks around, “C-can I s-s-stand up ma’am?”

I’m *tense* inside, but not on the outside. It’s outside of expectations, but that’s not necessarily bad. It also allows her to test boundaries and find the *hard* wall if she pushes too far. “Yeah, go ahead, I trust you.” It’s pretty much the lifeline, but also the rope to hang herself with.

She slinks up, slick on her thighs from our previous *play* glistening in the lighting of the bedroom as she swallows again, moving towards the *two* in front of her. Loona is *pressing* in and out of Nessa at a constant pace, and Jessica lays down next to them, and starts stroking her sisters face, “Hey, its okay, it...it’ll stop hurting, okay?” She whispers, the words and the contact visibly relaxing and untensing Nessa, making Loona’s push and pull smoother, more enjoyable. “You just gotta be g-g-good, it’ll b-be like t-this for-forever, o-okay?” Jessica’s got a *slightly* unhinged tone to her, as if she’s choking up inside, shaking like a leaf verbally.

Loona is *excited* by the submission, and tears open the mattress with her claws to avoid *pounding* into Nessa. Jessica keeps talking, “Y-you’re doing great, okay?” As she touches her sister on the face and neck with one hand, trying to be comforting.

*What?* I think to myself watching, I rub my eyes for a moment. I’m *shocked*, I don’t think I’m that good. I also don’t need to touch Nessa to heal her, not when I’m at my full strength. I give her the same treatment. I’m not *entirely* sure what else to do. I think this is about as good as it’s going to get.

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Whos this bitch??

Alexandria’s scary. She’s tall, six foot something and *floats* everywhere. Including at the table of this sparse interrogation room that’s been barely dressed up to be *human* in a sense. The *charcoal* black body-suit

covering honed and toned muscle. She still had chunks of Leviathan on her fists.

"So, you're invulnerable? Does that mean you wouldn't have gotten all, like, retarded from being drowned?" I ask the terrifying woman. I'm testing boundaries almost immediately, but also wanting to come off as stupid, over confident, and non-threatening.

"Don't play games with me Talia." She *growls* out, immediately making it clear she *is not* an easily bullied hero.

*Fuck*, I sit up straight immediately, there's something in the tone that makes me realise I'm *not* getting lee way for saving her life. At least not as much as I thought. The boundaries were tested, *I'm not* pushing further.

"You are joining the Protectorate, *today*. This is final. We are discussing your *possibly afforded* luxuries." She grabs the steel table, tears it out of the ground and throws it aside, letting her sit without something in the way.

"That was the plan." I said with two thumbs up, "Um, did I... *Not* save you?"

"You're filth. Rapist, cannibalistic, violent filth. You contribute nothing to yourself, the world, or the future. You are *worthless*. Understand?" Alexandria continues to growl out her *disdain* for me.

"So, if you had your way, I'd be dead." I said carefully.

"No. Because you have a spark of potential. There's *use* in you, there's *ambition* in you, something that could be grown and shaped and *be incredible*." Her tone, *doesn't* change, even a compliment sounds like a death threat, she's definitely a three-pack-a-day. "But you've squandered it. So you're not getting a choice in that matter anymore."

I *try* to see if I can be a *little* endearing, and pull out a pack of cloves, "Can... I smoke? Do you want one? I was *going*, you probably don't believe this, but I was *going* to going the PRT. I had an appointment

with Emily like, the day after Leviathan showed up, Militia will vouch for that."

"That's *fine*. You will be working under me instead." Alexandria states, crossing her arms, generous muscle making the fabric, or polymer, on her arms strain.

I take one out, and then put it in my mouth, flicking the light with my tail, I offer her one and say, "I've only been in society a few months, I'm figuring it out as I go, ma'am."

"I can tell when you lie." Alexandria states, "I think fast enough to move, twist and punch faster than the speed of sound. I can see your face twitch, I can hear your heartrate shift, I can taste the chemicals in the air. You'll be honest, anything else is wasted energy." I *can't* tell if she's lying, but I can't tell if she's telling the truth either.

"Alright, tell me the truth about myself." I say still offering the pack out while I puff.

"You're not from this Earth. Too many casual references to things that don't exist." She's not wrong, I've been fairly liberal with those. "You're a traveller, or a dumped individual from somewhere else's parahuman population. Maybe yours are more secretive." The ur-*Brick* states matter-o-factly, waiting for my response. There's little to see past the mask, and the admittedly *luscious* lips underneath the half-cover don't betray anything.

"That doesn't sound like *telling when I'm lying*, ma'am," I say not dropping my arm, still trying to be friendly, "That's a logical deduction. Come on, I'm trying here, give me something to work with."

"Sure. Your Case 53's what you have to work with." Alexandria states, "She's completely unsuited to society. PRT psychological assessment has her down for isolation from civilian population."

"Wait seriously? Why?! She's *fine*!" I say suddenly, I actually drop the cloves, and the facade, I'm *pissed*.

"She is a violent-" Alexandria catches the box, "self-indulgent psychopath with sexually aggressive tendencies."

My jaw clenches, "She doesn't *have* anything else. That's not her fault, you don't throw people away because they're *inconvenient*."

"Yes. We do. All the time." Alexandria denies it immediately.

I narrow my eyes, I never thought *this* was going to bug me so much. "She *is fine*, she is better than she was months ago. She gets better every day. She is *honestly* perfect for most places. Just because her stress responses are a little off doesn't mean she's a problem. *She's also not my Case 53*." I've stood up to get loud I don't know where this is coming from. "She's a goddamn person. She's more of a person than *most* of the people in Brockton Bay, and twice the person *in its waters*."

"She's your responsibility. That's final, else the courts wouldn't let her *anywhere*." Alexandria gives a sharp strike of iron to her tone in that sentence, culminating with a glare through the reflective helmet. "Other than that, welcome to the Protectorate. I hope you aren't fond of bright colours. I don't like them."

"I'm bright purple because my wife loves it, I have no preferences." I say with a nod, "Now, you said luxuries. Can I get a yacht?" I can't help but see dollar signs in my future. "Or maybe... Oh, a penthouse? What's my salary? What's Loona's salary? Do Pretty and Kitty get a salary?"

"*Lunars* salary will be approximate to yours. *Giantess* and *Invincible* will be moved as a unit to a distant part of the country so they don't have the reputation drain of being immediately recognizable. You may follow them, depending on *my* schedule. You will *not* be in Brockton Bay." She says that last bit as a threatening demand, but really...who wants to live here?

"Did you think... I had something going on there?" I ask her with a look, "This whole 'I know you're true self' thing's falling apart. That's all fine, *I'd like* to follow them, we're a familial unit, and how would they be reco—" Oh, *oh shit*. "How would they be recog— Nah fuck that, truth, uh

How would they be recognized face, hair, skin tone, even slight proportions are all different."

"Parahuman powers are unique." Alexandria states firmly. "*Utterly* unique."

"Oh, *oh shit*, wait so no-one can do the flesh stuff I can do?" I ask her as I make my skin peel off my bones, into a knot, then back on my bones.

"You are *not* a biokinetic. You will not *identify* as a biokinetic, you will make no mention of being possibly a biokinetic. This is for your safety. Standing orders on biokinetics are incineration." Alexandria explains, her tone's not gotten easier, but its definitely got nuances I can *barely* detect. At the edge of hearing.

"What the fuck?" I ask as I *very quickly* put the flesh away, "Oh uh is Biokinet— What's healing called? That's cool right? Chick cures cancer on TV constantly."

"Panacea is a parahuman that can repair biological damage, with an inability to affect the human brain." She states.

"That explains the incinerate on sight part, yeah." I say picking up rather quickly. Bouncing my leg, "Holy shit, I didn't know." I rub my chin thinking, I've been *dicking* around quite a bit. The only thing that's saved me is that I kill everyone I meet.

"That's why I'm here." Alexandria answers my unasked question.

I lock in, realising that it's *actually* time to be serious. I hate it, I hate it so much, but I'm fully aware now that I was detestable for a half dozen more reasons than I thought. My leg's still bouncing, "What else *aren't* I?"

"You, Talia, are a *Tinker* with an extremely broad, powerful specialization. You will never confirm what this specialization is." Alexandria states, "Any biotechnology you create will be non-reproductive and macro-biological. *No* microbiological invention. No bacteria, no misfolded proteins, no viruses."

"Secondly, your technology. Do you *understand it* at all?" She asks me, making the *desire* to furrow my brows come up, though something about my new form of knowledge about how to react keeps that from happening.

"I could *probably* explain up to the language models, a lot of the mobile home-base." I think as I speak quickly, "Everything at the WalMart I knew logically. When I start... Making tech that's biological, it gets a bit hazy. I could probably explain a *lot* about the mind-link between me and Lunar, but I couldn't tell you how the rifle that transmits, I guess I shouldn't even admit that exists."

"But I couldn't really understand it, anyways. You'd start inventing terms to describe effects that we've no idea existed, we'd need months, years just to catch up to the mathematics involved, wouldn't we." Alexandria nods, a little annoyed but expecting this.

"Uh? The Models? No, it's a pretty solved maths equation, I could probably teach it to *you* if you give me a month of your time." I say as I look at her.

"Try it now." Alexandria requests, I'm learning the subtle tone-language of hers, the way she expresses feelings in micro-ululations of voice rather than body language.

"Alright, so you've got a vector. It's a line, how long, and—" I am cut off.

"I have a masters in Computer Science. Skip the baby steps." Alexandria waves a hand annoyed, "It's fifteen years old, if that helps."

"Oh, uh a language model is a type of neural network architecture, right? It's used for unsupervised learning of natural language. You're trying to learn a distributed representation of words and their contexts. You use them downstream for text classification. The core idea, is to predict a masked word, based on it's surrounding context. It's trained on large corpora's of text. Where, a certain amount of words are masked, and we try to get them to guess in between. That's the logic." I say

quickly, and as I speak, I'm making a white board out of my flesh, and equations show up on it.

"So, you start with input representation, each word in the input is represented as a one-hot vector size, we'll call that  $V$  (Your vocabulary.)" I start writing the first part of the equation on the board, "Then those are transformed into dense word embeddings, these use a matrix  $E$  for embedding, of  $V \times D$ , where  $D$  is the embedding dimension." More maths on the board now. "The actual neural network to capture contextual information is only a few thousand lines of code, you don't *need* advanced work. Once it's figured out, anyone can do it. You don't even need to understand *how* to do it, to do it. There's a few different architectures, but I find Transformer layers the easiest to work with. So now, back to the hidden states."

I go back from the flesh-white board to the original parts of the maths, "We get outputs of steps in a sequence of hidden states. So  $H = [h_1, h_2, \dots, h_n]$  where  $N$  is the sequence length. Then you Mask, you select a random percentage of the input tokens for masking."

I make the board a little bit bigger, "We have a mask token for that, and then, for each masked position  $i$ , the corresponding hidden state  $h_i$ , is used to predict the original masked word. We then convert the hidden state, that's this equation and code here," I say pointing at the white board that's now larger, "to convert the hidden state into a probability over the vocabulary:  $p(w_i | \text{context}) = \text{softmax}(W \times h_i + b)$   $W$  is a weight matrix of size,  $V \times D$ , and  $b$  is a bias vector of size  $V$ ."

"Token. That's new. What's that." Alexandria interrupts to ask, "We don't use that term."

"Words are cut up into patterns." I say quickly, "And assigned a number, a possible answer. That's the tokenization layer. That's literally just finding the smallest amount of parts needed to make every word in your corpra. Which is an algorithm, those different parts are assigned numbers, and those numbers are the solutions to the maths equation." I then return to the original model.

"So, new word, cross-entropy loss function, it's used for classification, and measure the dissimilarity between the predicted probability distribution, and the true distribution. We use that to quantify the difference between the predicted word, and the actual probabilities in the masked position, that's  $L_i = -\log p(w_i | \text{context})$   $w_i$  is the true word at the masked position  $i$ , and the other part is the predicted probability. If you need that expanded, it's actually,  $L_i = -\log (\exp(z_i) / \sum_j \exp(z_j))$  First is the raw output for the true word position, and the second is the sum of for all words in the vocabulary. We penalize training, when it fucks up."

I then point out something more as an interesting aside, "Outside of this, in order to make good language models, you need to know what the *most likely* words are to get your results. You need to be able to look at data before hand and see if it's correct for more specialized tasks. Good data in, good data out. I'm great at managing my family, in part, because I know the most likely words to get the result I want. Back on topic now. Honestly, I'm just going to mark down the equations and explanations next to them, but they're *not complicated*."

Then I continue, going I'm so closed to finish, "That's the basis, now you just optimize it, and you already know all the variables, we use gradient descent algorithms, which were invented by Augustin-Louis Cauchy, in 1847, to compute back propagation through the network. Once you've got your base model, you just repeat the process *again* for the fine tuned task with more specialized focuses. Once you've *got the code*? You just need to input text files unless you're trying to improve on it."

"To recap, embedding layer, contextual encoding neural network, then you softmax, and then study for cross-entropy loss function." I look back at her, "Any... Questions?"

"Several, unimportant for now. You can explain things up to a limit. That's...*good*. Very good, excellent." Alexandria sighs out in relief.

"What *limit*?!" I say looking at the maths and code.



"How do you interlace with neurons to transmit thought between individuals without a visible carrier wave." Alexandria stares.

"Oh, I thought we were talking about the AI." I said quickly, now diving into the other piece of media, "Shit, uh that? I use a sensor on the brainstem that mirrors thought in localized areas. I map it pretty much one to one across the barrier. I localize them however, to functions you can find on MRIs of people with DID. So you can pull up any swiss cheese'd brain, and see it's compartementalized, you just make the sensor bibbity to the... Bobbitty. The fuck?"

"Bippidity bobbitty is not a scientific expression." Alexandria says.

"No you," I grit my teeth, focusing hard, "You... *You mirror...* The stimuli over the brain stem. I can feel when Loona's punched in the gut, or hit. It's a phantom sensation because it's far weaker. It creates dissonance."

"Up to a limit, its alright Talia, this is expected. Its normally this way. The fact that you can manage so *much* explanation is impressive." She offers some comfort, in her cold, clinical way.

I'm frustrated, and it's really bothering me for some reason, and I've largely started to ignore her to check my work. Why can't I explain it!? I know it's a fugue state, but I *keep missing shit*. "I..." I rub my eyes, and the flesh returns mostly to the right side of my body, as I had to unspool *a lot* to get it done. "Just in case, can I send my maths to... Someone." I say, irritated.

"Dragon, the leading expert in computing on planet Earth. And several adjacent Earths." Alexandria says with a sigh.

"Does it ever stop getting *frustrating* that I can't explain everything?" I mutter angrily.

"No, not really." She answers the quiet question, standing up finally. "I'll be in Brockton for the next while. You *will* be the new Tinker for Brockton Bay for a time."

"Oh, what's my name?" I ask, since she named Loona, "Wait, what?! You're sending my pe- family away!?"

"You'll survive a few weeks. There's work to be done." Alexandria growls at me.

"The *fuck!?*" I growl back, "I have cooperated, *every. Step. of the way.* I didn't fucking *run from Leviathan* but we both know I could have because the RV survived the trip just fine. I *didn't* have to face off with it, didn't have to save Militia, didn't have to try to do *shit* to stop you from getting brain damage. I want *my goddamn family.*"

"And *good deeds* are not rewarded in the real world." Alexandria *says* angrily.

"And people don't work for free either." I say back.

"You can work for pay for a few weeks, or you can work under threat. Either way, we'll have you working." Alexandria isn't soft, or heroic as it turns out.

"Mmmmm, alright," I say nodding my head, there's a slight whistle as I suck my teeth, and I say, "Yeah, no you know better. Threatening people gets higher quality work, especially when what they're asking for is fucking *insubstantial.*"

"You'll see things my way." Alexandria is sure of this, its audible in her vocal fray and tiny undulations of chords. "Given time, everyone does."

"Well, they let you think that, yeah." I say with a dismissive wave and a growl. "I should have just let you get the brain damage. I know better now."

"You'll be recruiting someone. How are you with teenagers?" Alexandria asks, ignoring the question.

"I'm— Where is my fucking rifle." I growl, looking around as if they'd let me have my M1, "How do you respond to .700 nitro express rounds."

"Bored." She gives an icy stare.

"I am *not* talking to teenagers."

"A teenage supervillain with a body count that needs reform."  
Alexandria continues.

"Oh *nooooo*, put two in it's head and drop it in the bay!" I say angrily,  
"Why in *god's name* do you think I'd work with kids."

"Is that what we should do with you then?" Alexandria tilts her head curiously.

I look at her, and say, "Has this kid done, like, a shitton of work to save the city, and invent entire new fields of science?!"

"She recovered Armsmaster, jumped on Leviathan's back with a knife, and survived the experience." Alexandria crosses her arms.

I'm shouting at her now, "*Oh well*, she brought back one cape and ineffectually stabbed a guy. I guess you should send the *rapist cannibal* to talk to the fucking teenager!"

"She has problems with authority. You are not authority, I *am* authority." Alexandria makes a point.

"This is authority." I say, gesturing up and down, "You threaten people, and have no give. You're shit at this because, literally, even the tiniest bit of give would get me on your side. Authority implies that you know how to use people. You're just kind of *too strong* to be ignored, and not much else."

"You've figured out why I don't run the Protectorate. Congratulations, now do what I say." Alexandria ignores the logic.

"*Give me a reason.*" I say back firmly.

"Your future." She stares at me.

I glare *daggers*, even though it's completely ineffectual, "That's not a sign of good faith. Do you *really* want me divesting large portions of my

time to figure out the base line of irritating I can be towards you? Because you can't be hurt, but *holy shit* can I be annoying."

"Do what you want, I'm giving you a sign of good faith, that's not how this goes. I'm giving you demands, if you don't meet them, things get complicated." Alexandria states, "Imagine all of this, like a planet sized *Meat Wagon*." She growls out the last two words with significant aggravation. I'm getting the feeling she doesn't like me.

I nod, "Alright, that's a good point, I'll treat this like a planet sized Meat Wagon." I say to her defusing, "I was promised a tinker tech budget."

"You'll get it. You'll clear ideas with me first. Afterwards, create them." Alexandria lays out one rule, "I'll have your code of conduct contract read to you."

"Mmm." I say to her. "I'm going to shoot her in the head, then revive her, and then let her know 'This is what dying feels like. Maybe, join the protectorate, so this doesn't happen to you.'" I say with a yawn.

"She'll fill your throat with wasps." Alexandria warns easily.

I look at her, "I'm going to use a fifty cal from a mile away."

"You'd be in range. Be polite, be efficient, stop being childish. You're a grown woman." Alexandria crosses her arms.

"Is she ugly? Maybe plastic surgery. No fuck you, I don't know why you think I'm right for this. How even old is this chick?" I say dismissing her *immediately*.

"Fifteen." She states with a stare.

I look at Alexandria, and say, "Fuck. You. I don't fuck with kids. Pretty hard rule."

"You don't; you'll talk to her." Alexandria sighs.

"Jesus Christ, I thought when you said teenager, you meant like \*eight-teen \*nine-\*teen. Twenty!" I say actually balking at the concept.

"That's an adult. A teenager is between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. You'll manage." Alexandria starts to flex and unflex her forearms to pass the time.

"No, a teenager is anyone under twenty-five. Anyone under eighteen is a child, and anyone under sixteen is a *baby*." Though I've already figured out how I'm going to use my Tinkertech budget, "I just want a server farm, I don't care what it is, fill it with as many video cards as you can. It *can't* be a million dollars."

"You will not build an AI of significant intelligent." Alexandria grumbles.

"Oh, no, not of intelligence, I'm not *that* good." *I am however, going to dump the web with deepfake porn of you. I'm going to make fake social media accounts that talk shit about you constantly, and I'm going to clog the PRT's phones for every goddamn second of every goddamn day.*

"You'll do whatever you do, knowing there'll be *consequences* if you overstep." Alexandria doesn't threaten, but it's a rough statement.

"I can't wait to see where that line is between us." I say with a winning smile, "Because there will be consequences for separating me from my family."

Alexandria pauses, and briefly, for a second, I can see something resembling an inkling of the beginnings of an evolutionary distant relative of empathy in her lower jaws twitch. "Hmm, you're right, pick."

"Loonar." I say almost immediately, "Loonar."

"No, not that. Pick if they stay in the city with you, or are moved out. There's a reason we were sending them away." Alexandria impresses importance on that.

"I just... Want my wife." I say quietly, looking downwards.

"Is risking her life worth having her here." Alexandria bluntly demands an answer, not so much probing as oil drilling for information.

I finally ask, "Can I know why?"

"The Slaughterhouse Nine crossed the suburban barrier for Brockton Bay twenty nine minutes ago. Lunar fits the target profile for a Siberian victim." Alexandria informs.

"She's... Difficult." I say finally with a deep *deep* sigh, "I can keep contact across country, but for the love of *god* don't kill her. She can't control herself, she's learning, but she's not there yet."

"If she acts out, we will medically induce a coma until you are available to mediate." Alexandria stares.

"Can't you just *talk to her* with someone who can handle her..." I try to dance around it, "Surely not *everyone* is horrified by her behaviors."

"I am informing you of what her handler will do in the event he is threatened. Talking down will be attempted. The handler will not risk his life nor his limb for her psychological satiety." The legendary hero is getting through this conversation with remarkable repose.

"Oh, he won't lose either." I say very quickly, with a lot of confidence, "Just, like, his starfish."

"English is a limited language sometimes." Alexandria starts monologuing.

"Hey, are you going to start monologuing?" I ask her, "Please, do not."

"It's never enough for any one topic, but it can bounce between them well enough." She gestured for me to follow, twisting and starting to walk, giving me an appreciation for our difference in size. The silent gesture to follow is implied in her pace, slow and languid. "I've found the best sense I've been able to have with someone was in raw binary."

I sigh, and start to follow her with a grin, "You'd have to let me get up in that *perfect* biology to do that. You wanna?"

"You can't. Try if you'd like." Alexandria offers a hand, already ungloved.

I look at her, and then study her. I am *actually* gentle, even though it doesn't matter, I'm trying to peer past them, see what's going on.

Her cells are...frozen. Stopped, caught in time. Some of them are mid division, others, mid death. She's... not alive, not really, she's just stopped.

"*Huh*. You're not invulnerable. You're just not *here*." I say looking at her hand, "You're a ghost."

"Close, it's a temporal loop of barely nine attoseconds." Alexandria states, "I'm locked in time."

I try to follow the stasis to the brain, it's locked in time, but where are the *signals* coming from. There's gotta be electricity somewhere right? I should be able to touch it? Can I what the fuck is wrong with this terrifying freak.

Her body doesn't even really actuate muscles. They can move and shift somehow; her entire body can *move* as if it wasn't frozen, but it's like it's being puppeted.

"What the fuck." I say as I hold onto her hand, "That explains *so much* however. You think that's why you're bad with people?"

"No, I've just been a superhero for twenty years." She says as if that explains everything.

I let go of her hand, I'm not wanting to overstep my bounds there. I'm just *fascinated* suddenly, it's a weird biological puzzle I can't figure out. I don't think, if she ever *got* hurt I could piece her back together. "If you keep the three together, Lunar will behave as she'll be in charge of the other two. Just, you know, whoever watches them should have a strong stomach."

"I'm familiar with the tribalistic pack you've formed. They are briefed." She answers.

"Sick, do..." I touch my lips as my innate curiosity now immediately clashes with my new found respect. "So. Are there any questions that are off limits?"

"No, ask the sex questions, you're not the first." Alexandria grabs me by the arms and lifts me to her side as she rises into the air, I feel rather like a rag doll.

"Thank you, I appreciate it. That's not really what I was going to ask however." I say looking her up and down, "Nine atto-seconds, are you *experiencing* those nine atto-seconds physically? When I touch your hand, do you feel warmth?"

"No." Alexandria answers.

"No, yeah, that actually answers all the sex questions." I say simply, and now I'm a little sad. That's a fucked up life. *Jesus*, I can't help but pity this woman. She's just... Broken. A fucked up little freak of nature. I don't say that, it'd be pretty insulting.

"It's more complicated than that. You're just too cold." She says as we fly above the oil rig.

"Oh, right, you can just feel like, *the overwhelming* sense of pity I suppose." I say suddenly, with a grimace. *Poor freak of nature.*

"You frowned, your lip twitched; your eyes unfocused and then refocused." Alexandria covers the regions that led to her conclusion.

"Yeah, but like... Watch." I say as I try to tap into that little *tiny* part, that new part that gives me those weird instincts. I try to go through three, complicated ones too, greed, grief, confusion. "How realistic was that to you? I'm assuming you're like... Top-tier whoever."

Alexandria looked at me as I asked, and hums, "Good, you can control sweat, heart rate, even your twitches, but the hormonal shifts are still obvious. I'd have to be paying attention." The flight takes us over the ruined city, flood craters and broken buildings.



"I'd ask you if she's a normal fifteen year old girl, or like, a little freak but would you actually be able to tell?" I say as I look over the side.

"She fought someone who fought Leviathan one on one in her first day out." Alexandria offers.

I roll my eyes, that doesn't answer the question, wait, no it does answer the question. She can't tell a neurotypical person from someone with trauma. I rub my eyes, "*Ugh*, you realise I can't do *any* of my bullshit around this person right? Is... Oh, that's why, *fuck you.*" I know it won't hurt her so I strike her arm.

It hurts me though, she doesn't move, the bones in my hand do. The fracture takes a few second to heal, annoyingly.

"No, no don't warn me, it's better if I learn the hard way. Why does your *skin* move when, is it if you *want* it too?" I am rubbing my hand, that's not my target, "No, wait, I care but I'll just send you dozens of emails, text messages, voicemails, and then hit you up on linkedin, facebook, you got a napster? No, you don't have a napster."

"I have no social media. Nor an email hooked to the public internet." Alexandria states as she lowers to a rooftop.

She *really* probably shouldn't have told me that, and I'm going to store that for later. Since, actually, she's moving my family for safety reason, and not just to control me. That... Well, that makes it easy to not be an annoying prick, actually. "She's not going to hump my leg right? I put up with that from Luna because she was a dog."

"No, I won't." A buzzing *swarm* of insects and bugs crawls out of the floor, interlacing and locking over eachother in the millions as they form into a humanoid shape.

"*Jesus Fucking Christ.*" I say as I start swatting at my skin, "*Why?! Not the humping!*"

"It's....*my power.*" The teenager, reed thin and covered in...actually pretty well made armor appears in the fog of insects.

I look at her and I sigh, "Ah, that's... That's rough. Sorry, *Jesus*. Sorry. I don't know how to talk to kids, I'm going to talk to you like an adult. You kill people or some shit, you can probably handle it."

"... *Thanks*." A million insects replicate a human voice in the most disturbing buzzing falsetto imaginable.

"Oh my god, wait I need liquor for this. Or a joint. No god, no, no weed." I say looking at her as I touch my head. Then I realise I'm just being shitty, "Do we... Have to talk on a rooftop? Or can we just *walk*? This is like, this is too much superhero bullshit. There's perfectly good roads. We paid good taxes for them."

"*Not really, they're mostly flooded; or covered in sewer water residue. I'd rather be up here.*" The girl comments more than a little sarcastically as Alexandria just floats up to *watch*.

"Alright, my name is Talia I probably have some super hero name but when you're bright purple with a devil's tail, anonymity isn't really a concern." I say with a sigh.

"*Uh, I'm Skitter.*" She says, "*I robbed a bank, killed some people, and then someone told the city my name.*" She glared up at Alexandria.

"Oh shit, me too," I say quickly drawing attention away from that, "You know that Casino heist? I was driving the pick-up truck that slammed through the wall. Then sucked out like six-hundred kay?"

"*My old team did that, you were in the way?*" Skitter asks.

I shook my head, "No, I'm pretty sure from my recordings, you were all looking very dumb founded as my pick-up truck hoovered up a shitton of cash and drove off."

"*I wasn't involved in that one, before my time. I did the Brockton bank heist; the one where they surrounded the building.*" Skitter explains, "*With the tinker tech energy cannon.*"

"Ah sick, how much did you get? I went after a Casino because it's not, like, a financial institution? I get away with a lot more by being choosy who I fight or don't." I say back to her, keeping conversation, but starting to lube the wheels a little.

*"Not much, it went to the employer."* Skitter sighs.

"Hmmm," I say with a small grimace, "Yeah, that's rough. So do you understand that you're a big fucking deal? Or are you getting treated like a chump?"

*"They keep talking down to me. I fought Lung. I stabbed Leviathan,"* she complains with a sigh and a buzz in her swarm.

"Yeah, you have to understand they're *not* very smart. Like this one behind me? She says 'I'm sending your family away,' I scream at her, for *twenty minutes* when she finally says 'because people are coming to kill them.' Have you considered they might just be stupid?" I say looking at her sitting down, then I say, "Please don't let me sit on a bug I'll gag."

"More than once." Skitter answers with a much quieter, more human voice as the *actual* girl appears out of the swarm.

"So what do you actually want?" I ask her, like a normal human being.

"I can't find my dad. And I don't want him...knowing I'm..." She makes a vague gesture to herself.

I rub my eyes, and say, "So was it your birth name, or just *Skitter* that was announced? Because you can just rebrand."

"I...like Skitter." She admits with a run of her arm.

"Honestly, better than *most* of the names I've heard. You said you fought a dude named *Lung*? Jesus, do you know there's this weird terrorist named *Barracuda*!?" It's a joke, mostly, just being a bit silly to keep the mood light.

"Bakuda; yeah, I strangled her after cutting off her toes." Skitter nods. "Protectorate took the credit when they found her in spider webs."

"Oh shit, we'll get along really well I think. I pretty much just ran around the docks carving up and eating Nazis." I say but then I turn to Alexandria, "H—"

"She...had explosive toe ring things. She'd set off bombs by clicking her toes a certain way." Skitter explains.

"You're fucking with me." I say looking at her, as if she's crazy.

"Had them wired to a nuke, so I cut her toes off with a knife. It takes less effort than I thought, just sorta went for it." She makes a gesture.

"Oh yeah, straight through the knuckle and your clear. Stupid question, could you not have just filled her shoes with bugs?" I ask pointing at the swarm around us.

"She had some sorta tinker sensor up, if a bug showed up, she'd blow a nuclear tinker bomb and flatten the city. My dads here." Skitter says as if that explains everything.

I was gonna laugh, but I'm... Catching onto something. She repeats shit, she talks weird, she's a bit off. "Tell me about your dad." I say simply, I'm trying to see if she'll just go off.

"He's a dockworker, he's nice. After my mom died he took care of me, and he's been missing ever since the attack." She gives sparse details, likely concerned for her identity.

"So, the PRT offered me a million dollar a month Tinkerbudget, to dick around with." I say quickly, "And in America? It's illegal to order your employees not to share their pay. You tell them to match that to go find him."

"I... think I'm too young," Skitter admits.

I look left and right at the destroyed city, then back to her, "They want you to reform, you're the chick who saved the city. You can *bargain*, you can make demands. You can throw your weight around, adults treat you how they think they can treat you. She announces to the world you're

Skitter, yeah? You announce to the world you *stopped a fucking nuke.*" I say weighting the two options in my hands making a scale, "Your Dad, probably yeah, he'd be mad about the whole super villain thing. More worried, about your safety I bet, but fucking, you're an *anti-hero*, that's badass. You still do moral things, you just do it the cool way. You can just sell on the whole 'saving people,' schtick. It's all about presentation." I'm quick on my feet, but she's *shifting*. Weirdly.

She's actually taking notes. On a notepad. With a pen.

Jesus christ, I stop talking just for a second, and then realise that... This means she probably takes direction well. "People are *basically* predictable. You just have to study them. They want you to think that emotions and feelings are unsolvable problems."

"Parahuman aren't. They're complex, issues in additional brain development." Skitter explains.

"Really? I don't know anything about you, but I'm able to sit down and have a chat." I say looking at her.

"Every parahuman has two new loves of their brain. The Corona Gemma and the Corona Pollentia, they both govern interactions with powers. Damage to them has been noted to change or alter powers and their usage." Skitter starts talking.

*Ah fuck, this is the thing she'll go off about. I need to just... Sit and wait, patiently.* I realise my smile doesn't stop, and I nod, sometimes adding little mhmms. I am *really* appreciative for the ability to seem *perfectly* in line.

"You don't care." Skitter then stops with a sigh, and I'm *sure* she didn't see anything on me.

"Why do you say that?" I say quickly.

"No one really cares, they're just making conversation." She says.

"That's, most humans, yeah. That's generally how it goes, but I'm trying to figure out why people are finding it so difficult to just sit down, talk and listen. This seems *pertinent* to what I'm asking about." I say quickly, laying out a logical follow through of why I'd be listening intently. "Does it really make sense for me to get *airdropped in* by a flying..." I gesture dismissively, "Whatever, if I just wanted conversation?"

"She wants to make sure I don't kill you. The last time the...Protectorate tried to have a conversation, they needed Panacea to fix the anaphylactic shock." Skitter says.

I shrug, "Am I in danger?"

"Yes. Not major danger though." Oh, well, at least she's honest.

"Then Alexandria can leave. If you don't want to kill me, what do I have to worry about?" I say simply, "I'm not going to do anything but talk."

"If you're sure about this Talia." Alexandria loudly shouts, turning mid air and *bolting* away into the distance.

"She left fast enough for that to rattle me a bit." I say with some honesty, "She just fuckin' *darted*. Anyways, I'm *legitimately* interested."

"Oh, well, we all have them. Parahuman si mean, they help us control our powers. Like, Uhm, what are you? Like, powers I mean?" She asks, trying to be friendly. "I'm a Master, for bugs."

"Uh. Hmm... Yeah fuck it, I'm gonna assume you're not the type to incinerate on sight." I say as I lift my arm up and make flesh *wiggle* around the bone, making a little bee. Then I make it flow back to normal.

"Oh, well, like right there you're doing a ton of stuff right? You're handling cell activity subconsciously, probably a billion moving parts that you just *do*. That all happens in the Gemma." She says, "So be careful with that part of your brain, if you damage it, you might not be able to fix it, because your powers will be all...broken." Skitter start to explain, making shapes in her bugs.

"So, do I have two gemmas?" I ask looking at her, "Because I do like, tech shit too. I make learning models."

"One Gemma, one Pollentia. They might just be large." She admits, "Eidolons are supposed to be as big as his brain."

I try for a joke, "I liked a big Gemma in highschool, she *was not a fan of me.*" I see how it goes over, double entendre.

"I'm...sixteen." Skitter says, staring at me.

"You're sixteen." I say back touching my face, "I'm talking to you like an adult, I'm... I'm not going to change, less sex jokes for sure though."

"Okay, thanks for not talking down to me. I was going to shove spiders down the throat of the next person to threaten my dad again." Skitter sighs.

"Is... That what they led with?" I asked some what astonished that they thought the only way to manipulate a sixteen year old girl was with *violence*. Sixteen year old girls barely function as it is.

"Armsmaster is *dumb*. He's so *dumb* and *stupid*." Skitter snaps out as the swarm buzzes with her anger, "He nearly ruined everything, I'm glad Leviathan tore him to pieces. *Why did I save him.*"

*Thank god for the micro-whatever skill*, "You still saved him, the same reason even though I did like *heinous, heinous crimes*. I returned to save Militia and Alexandria, and to call Leviathan a rotten cunt." I say quickly, "I wanted to—"

"I jumped on Leviathans back with one of Armsmaster knives, sliced into it, but it doesn't matter. They're like, composed of layers, they double in tensile strength every inch or so I think." She starts to explain.

*God, she's just... Sixteen and Neurodivergent.* "Oh, fuck, yeah, I tried to fleshwarp them and it flashbanged me."

"They double in mass and density every inch, which means by a few feet, the matters incomprehensibly dense and durable, like, degenerate

matter stuff you know?" Skitter is just bouncing from special interest to special interest as she talks.

I rub my face for a second, and say, "If I seem annoyed, it's not at you. Everyone here is a fucking moron, you haven't talked to anyone in a while and all you needed was a fucking conversation. I'm trying not to get super upset about it. It's not really helping."

"It's not been that long, just two weeks." Skitter says, rubbing her arm.

"That's *way too long*." I say *very very quickly*, "That's... God. I—" No, probably don't mention brainwashing, wait, "Cults isolate people for a week just to like... Do *serious* damage to their psyche. Skitter, why are you a super villain? Has anyone even asked?"

"I tried to infiltrate a villain gang on my first night out. They were nicer than I expected, so I tried to get info. To do so I had to play along. It doesn't look fake from the outside.

"So... Just..." I rub my chin, "Is it just you and your Dad here in Brockton?"

"Yeah, uh, I just want him found, I'll do whatever to get that." She nods to me. "I've...uhm...also got a record in my cape identity. Is that fine? Can we make that go away? I assume so."

"Well, they hired me and I'm a serial killer," I say pretty openly, "So I think that whatever you did will probably be fine. If *I'm* not getting a record, you're probably not, since you've done ten-times as me with half as much effort."

"I also-Nevermind you all don't know that." Skitter hums to herself.

"That's *honestly* probably a good idea. Unless it's going to get me killed because I don't know. That'd suck." I admit as I stand up again.

"Also...uh...I...there's the bad part too." *The bad part*. She says.

I look at her, and I'm glad I don't look *so* bemused.



"I was... *technically* the accessory to the kidnapping and...uhm...chemical slavery of an eight year old precognitive. They didn't tell me." Skitter admits.

"Are you going to think less of me if I admit that I've done *far worse*?" I say with a sad smile. "Mostly to Nazis. Entirely to Nazis."

"*No...uh, you, uh well you've probably done worse personally I guess.*" Skitter scratches the side of her head.

"Yeah, you can't really say something that's going to freak me out or go run to Mommy Marble. Uh, Alexandria, it's a joke because she's got a stony exterior." I put my hands on my hips and make a *very* stern expression, in a *very* goofy way, but I tweak the *expression* to a hundred to get the joke across, then I go back to normal, "I realise with everyone having cape names that teasing via alliterative wordplay is going to probably not land as good."

"So, if I give you a way to contact me, and me you, can I look for your dad?" I say with a smile, though my ears are *sharp* for Alexandria who must be listening in. I wonder if she's thinking implantation or a cellphone.

"Yeah, sure, uh, I got a burner phone to give you. Don't try and track it please, I had a tinker make it burn out if it gets signal located at all. They're expensive." Skitter asks me.

"I'm... *A bit* of a freak of nature," I say kindly, as I raise my hand up, make the tiny rice sized sensor pop out, roll it across my fingers, then put it back in. I don't *say* let me implant you, or even really suggest it.

"Oh *that's* what that is. I thought you just had a parasite in you." Skitter mumbles as the tracker starts screaming in radio as *something* starts messing with it, "I guess its invertebrates, not bugs, you know your stuff is partially biotech? Close enough to count? Did you base this off a roach's design? It feels familiar, your heart-rates high."

*That* makes me stop for a minute as I put it away *immediately*, feel it latch on and start to monitor *whatever* the fuck that was. "Well, it normally doesn't scream."

"Sorry, fiddling, its new, can't help it." She apologizes.

"Oh, well let me make you one then." I say quickly, "A pair, and you can give the other one to whoever you want."

"Uh, no, you can still track them. I don't trust you. You're crazy." Her tone is pretty flat.

I nod sadly, she's wise, unfortunately, "Yeah, no I'm fucking insane, I think this is wildly reckless to allow me to talk to other people. Still, I'm *very* friendly, and I think that's got something for it."

"Did you know I could start screaming the sensory input of a million bugs into that? You should fix that. Before someone else does." She warns me, still deadly calm, there's absolutely no treble to her voice.

I wiggle my hand, because the minute that she started fucking with it, i was *pretty* aware that'd be along the lines of horrific, "I wasn't, actually, I'm not *entirely* sure how you're able to interact with it at all. It's frightening in that 'Oh, what happens when I bite the lightbulb?' sort of way you know?"

"Well, I can control bugs. And crabs, and lobsters. So I assume it's invertebrates. This thing doesn't have a spine." Skitter states.

"That..." I clap my hands together, put them in front of my face, and sit my ass back down. "Well. That's nutty, I'm still going to ask the thing I was going to ask however. Since, honestly? I'm dead no matter what, so why super—" I pretend it hits me as I sit there, "Oh god, my wife would be so sad if I died out here. She'd be crushed."

"That's pretty rough for you." Skitter soothes in the most disconnected way imaginable.

I wonder, momentarily, if this is a *little* too overt, "I've got a sensor, you... Can scream into it, maybe don't do so loudly, if you need me I mean!"

"I'm not going to let you prepare for that. Here's a burner phone number." She writes down a number on the pad and then has three wasps fly it over to me.

I look at her and think carefully, she's *very very* paranoid. I take it, and then ask, "Do wasps like being pet? No wait, no yes I want to know."

"They want to eat your eyes. And sit in your mouth for the carbon." Skitter communicates the buzzing desires of the glinting shapes that are the wasps.

"I probably shouldn't have made my eyes so shiny, or my mouth so... Aramid. Yeah." I say with a brief shudder, "Alright, so correct me where I'm wrong, you can kill me at any moment. I'm not *really* a threat. You *probably* won't agree to leave the dad search to me. You won't let me hang around to mostly, like, have a second set of eyes for you. To you, I'm a PRT plant."

"You're in rehab. I think I'm your beta run, if you succeed here, they let you in, forget and forgive. If you don't, I think Alexandria blows straight through you like a freight train." Skitter says, "*god, I have a t-shirt with her on it.*"

I laugh because danger is just kind of... Eh. Honestly? I'm not going to survive any of this, Loona has been dead silent on the tracker and I can't do anything about that either. I've planned for everything, it immediately fails. "Oh yeah, *she wants too*, I kind of just... Engender that feeling in people. It's the easy going smile juxtaposed with the horrific crimes."

"I don't wanna kill you? I just don't trust you. You're a Thinker." Skitter says with a paranoia.

I rub my chin, "I don't think I am? I'm one of those Tinkertech and biokinetic."

"Your body isn't reacting right, it's moving weird, wasps can't feel your heart shift, I have a mosquito on an artery trying to feel your heart rate but it's not moving. You're reacting perfectly." She describes.

"*Hah*, no, that's biokinetics. I *fuck myself hard*." I say with a shrug.

"Other than that, you currently surmised how I'd like to be talked too at a glance, engaged properly, tried to emotionally manipulate me in a way that'd work normally. You're a Thinker, or I guess a really good manipulator." Skitter finishes.

I very quickly run it down, "Uh, how much do you know about psychology, I've got a cluster-b thing."

"I'll look that up later." Skitter answers.

I nod, "Yeah trust but verify, I'm *Anti-social*, I've got a kind of turbo autism that makes me good with people. Like if my special interest was *purely* getting what I want. Makes me all fucked up. Right now, I'm being hyper honest, because you don't trust me, because I'm good at lying. You can't tell *what* I'm lying about, but you can tell it's all too perfect. One of those issues I'm probably not going to run into *often*. Even if I tried to fix it, you'd probably be like 'Oh that pattern repeats every thirty-seconds.'"

"I think you have a lot of bad luck running into people that can see through that. It's happened at least twice. I think Alexandria has a thinker power too. She remembered something I mumbled fifty yards away." Skitter gifts me some information in exchange for...something. It feels transactional.

I nod keeping *that* in my mind, "I got picked out for *this specifically* because of how I made people react to me. I got over-confident and thought that I'd had everything figured out, so I thrust myself into the Leviathan conflict to get a... Social shield for crimes. The idea being, and I'm *right*, that if I'm useful enough I'll get away with doing whatever I want." I'm not only laying this out for me, I'm giving the woman whose great at *a lot*, hopefully, new information. "Now that they're interested, I

need to succeed at the tasks put before me. So, I dunno how much of that you've figured out, but I'm supposed to connect with you to get you too... Turn your back on Super-villainy. That's the line I was fed."

I continue, does she have the pen and paper out, of course she does, "The reality is I'm supposed to try and get you wrapped around my finger, so that they can yank *my* leash, to get me to yank yours. I'm *kind* of annoyed at that. It puts me in a situation, where to even do what they want, I needed to not figure that out in the first place."

I'm kind of laying this out piece by piece, to at least show why *she should not trust me*, but also *exactly what I will and will not do*. "So you *know* all that. I need to find your dad, to get you to feed whatever line to Alexandria that'll get the PRT all frothy. The Sexy Slutters are— The Slaughter Six." I stop, I've honestly forgotten, the name means *so little* it's unimportant. "Dickhead and his merry band of throbbers are coming. I *really* need you to give the PRT that line, or! I *really* need to be allowed like... In your general space to look like I'm doing what I need too."

"So, if I let you put, like, a maggot in my ear with a killswitch, we good?" I say *quite* jovially.

"Oh." She says, still without any real emotion, "That's...that's not good. That means that all the glass in the city, and any silicon is about to explode. You should see if you have any silicon in or around you." As she *tosses* the phone she has off the rooftop.

I grit my teeth, as I look down and *swear*, I pull out three phones. A few electronic grenades, a wireless emp, A rifle that I have to take the electronic scope off of. I open my wallet and take out the tracker in there. Then the listening device I implanted in my neck, and three more redundant GPS around my body. I'm muttering quietly.

I take off my *shoes* which have little roller things I was working on that hadn't really gotten anywhere yet. Groaning as I decide, it's finally time for hooves. Finally, I pull out a long fibrous garrote that has a computer chip in it to electrocute it.

"*Sick*. I didn't like that stuff anyways," I mutter angrily as I tie it all up in the leather jacket I was wearing and dump it. "I hate Brockton sometimes. No, I 1guess it's just... Everywhere." I can't help but imagine two angry snakes singing 'You're playing with the big boys now.'

As I watch acid in the phone melt the bundle, sending Loona an all clear text, I say morosely, "*Anyways* can I kick it with you and help you look for your dad. I've laid out my goals, what I want, and why I'm doing it."

"Sure, I guess. The Protectorate probably won't like that—" And then the entire city *screams* in shattering glass, its a noise louder than anything, louder than a bomb or a gunshot or *anything*.

Once again *constant* preparation counts for nothing as the custom made ear-pro just... Fails. Instantly, frying the inside of my skull. I forgot the ear-pro was *also* silicon, it needed a wafer to function the higher detection algorithms. It's great, I finally know what it's like to have my eardrums fucked. Though, there's the benefit of the drums dying for a split second, then I repair it.

"That's just uncouth." I say finally, I'm looking for Skitter, I assume she didn't wait and is running off somewhere. I'm also assuming that Alexandria dropped me off in the fucking city with no orders to follow this kid. I groan at the lack of sex in my future. *Babysitting*.

She's not hard to catch up with, being an oddly fit teenager and not much else. However, the *city* is fucking destroyed, god, there's *thousands* more corpses now. Cars turned into frag bombs, buildings into charnel houses, skyscrapers into small nukes. Its a *mess*, blood flows into the flooded waterways.

Skitter is in an alley, looking around a corner to cover her motions while bugs follow her in a *three block* maze of insects.

"Hey, Skitter you're not hiding the massive amounts of insects." I say quickly, as I try to play *the floor is hideous flesh eating ants*.

"Not trying to hide them, hiding me in them. You weren't blinded because I let you pass." Skitter buzzes with her swarm in one motion.

I look her up and down, "Would you let me make you weird invertebrates? Like some *really* fucked up shit?"

"Sure. I won't pay you." She warns.

I smile as I look at the corpses around me, I can't help but sway my hips a little as my tail twitches, and I begin to *make* things. There's no real word for them, they are simply abominations of flesh, no spine, just arthropods with masses of chunky hair, fingernails, and the raw material of the bodies around me.

The first I make is eight feet tall, it's a prototype, mostly to experiment with the size and weight limits of the square cube law, and general biology. I know Loona pretty well, and I know *roughly* Nessa and Jessica. It's slick, and long, and bleeds. There's long, razor sharp spines along the back, and the stinger spews venom that breaks down the barriers between cells, sucks the salt out of you so your neurons can't talk to each other. It doesn't need eyes, really, it's got a sensory organ similar to a Beluga Whale pulses that go back and forth. It's almost *entirely* covered in hairs to smell, and there's openings for hearing all over. Where a spine in an optimized creature would be, is instead more chitin, and it moves by trundling at *massive* speeds.

It's got about eight legs, but four are redundant, and it moves *so freakishly*. I wonder what the coup de grace would be.

Then I make another.

Then I pick up a person's arm, and snap it off to eat as I make more. With my mouth full of man-flesh I ask, "How many you want?"

"You could make them a little more efficient. These are slap dash and more for intimidation in a lot of cases. Also they're breathing like smokers. Maybe lungs, or smaller?" She provides input immediately.

That's *perfect*, and I quickly munch as I start tearing these things apart to re-make them, letting the flesh tear asunder, break down, and then get built back up. "If anyone asks, this is Tinkertech." I say firmly.

"I mean, it is. This is a giant bug monster. They don't normally exist, oxygen level was barely high enough for ones the size of dogs millions of years ago." She's *definitely* smart, "You're doing some crazy stuff to *make* them work."

"Thank you, I have an idea for making one into a weird bloody motorcycle, but I'm not there yet. Like a snake, but with less contact points." I'm shifting them back up, they're still sensory beasts, but I give them spiracles via hair follicles, hyper efficient hexagons at the pore level that runs it through an internal bellows. "It's still missing something..." I mutter as I look at it, and have it start *eating* kevlar. I watch the fibers get inlaid, they won't all be able to do it unless...

I keep futzing with it, more efficiency, more transformations in their ability to break, and remake, until finally I unlock a puzzle in the gut. Bacteria can eat *anything* and make it to sugar eventually, there's even bacteria eating *plastic* before I left. It can work in the inverse if I'm right then...

I giggle as my giant Hongler munches on a car with a gaping maw, making a noise like a sausage grinder with something clogged in it. It gets just a *bit* tougher. It doesn't do much, but it *can* do it. "What do you think of the name 'Hongler.'" I say out loud.

"No." She's got a stern spirit at least, doesn't give me an inch.

"*Fine!*" I say quickly as I watch it mill about, "Kevalisk? I don't know, I just don't want to call it our fleshy friend." Then I suggest, "We could call them the Larries."

"No. We can call them...Processors." She says, "They eat things and push out efficient stuff to eat. Right?"

"Great name," I say with a thumbs up, "Yep, the start of something *wicked*. These things can tear down the surroundings and feed... Hmmm... Let's get some *bullshit* going."

I start to spin more corpses, and these ones form into a large mound of tumors, they throb unpleasantly as the hyper metabolism tries it's best



to eat, a pool twists away from it, and it starts spitting out eggs. Those start hatching into giant bugs made of meats, or into processors, and those bugs start to chew and eat and grow.

"You know being a biotinker is dangerous right?" Skitter asks quietly, "Reproductive creatures are on the shortlist for kill orders."

"*That's why they can do this!*" I say and I *clap*, the exoskeletons *explode* into shrapnel as they *instantly* decompose inside, each one turning into a fragmentation grenade.

"You have little sense of consequence, don't you." Skitter says to herself, tapping a foot.

I look at her and I'm giggling, "No, I just measure consequence in a different risk reward system than you do." It's something giddy, and I leap onto the car, and then scramble up a lamppost to get a better look around us, "I *need* to be like this, because their rules make me *itch*. I need to do what I'm not supposed to and then I need to prove why it's useful. Why *I'm better*."

"You should listen to me instead of your head. You'll live longer." Skitter says.

"But will I be happy?" I ask her, "And if not, what am I living for?"

"You'll be alive to enjoy the future. Any happiness now might be less than happiness in the future. You're a biokinetic. You won't die. Ever." Skitter states.

"Assume happiness is a stable variable based on contact with others you enjoy speaking too. The longer you do so, the higher your happiness." Skitter explains.

"What about the hedonistic treadmill?" I ask her back.

"What's that?" She's walking now, probably expecting me to follow.

I'm kind of just *enjoying* myself as I leap from lamp post to lamp post, acting like Night Crawlers hot goth mommy. "It's a psychological

phenomenon. In order for the human to human, they must reach a *baseline* to compare everything too. Whatever happiness you create will eventually become blaise. You *must* have rise and falls, that's why rich people are so miserable and erratic."

"Then this is a fall, and you'll get a rise later when you're safer." Skitter says.

I respond, "Yes, you're getting it, the risk reward is exactly that, I might fuck up *now*, but later I'll have fun."

"But death puts a stop to that. You'll never rise if you die. So stop listening to your head until it starts being more careful." Skitter's logic to her, is unassailable.

"I'm a Biotinker though, like you said, I won't die ever, like you said!" I say quickly.

"Unless someone kills you. Can you survive Alexandria running through you at space shuttle speeds?" She murmurs.

"Yeah, but don't tell her that, she probably thinks I'm just overconfident." I say with *a ton of confidence*.

"She put a regenerator in orbit once. Just, flew up, left them there. Be careful with her. She's got the highest body count of the Triumvirate." Skitter seems to be *very* knowledgeable about capes, it's probably her special interest.

"The world can't exist without maggots, carrion feeders." I say to her as I continue, now trying to go for weird biotruths, but also just... Kind of loving the whole super-villain *thing*, the weird monologues being a little headcase, it's easy to slip into. "I just like being a hyena with my weird pack of jackals. You wipe out the Hyenas, it destabilizes the whole ecosystem."

"Ecological arguments fail in the face of society. We're not part of an *ecosystem*." *Oh, this got on her nerves*. Her voice is even but the *buzz* of millions of insects getting *angry* makes it clear what she's feeling, "We

are a social contract-group. We don't need specific roles so long as everyone follows the contract. Part of the contract is the laws, written and unwritten. If you break them, you strain the contract." Skitter is *going off* on the concept.

"We didn't evolve sapience for you to downgrade humanity to *things* like animals. Engage with the problem using your understanding of people. Not hyenas." Skitter spits.

"So how do you solve the five-hundred person problem." I say almost immediately, wondering if she's heard of it.

"Easy, the same way everyones solved it. Groups on groups on groups. A leader doesn't need to know every person beneath them." Skitter says.

"But the leader is only going to care about his five hundred. Hey how many billionaires are there by the way." I say almost immediately as I move.

"The issues of capitalism are mostly a product of a dissolving world economy. There's six billionaires." Skitter answers.

"Wait." I stop suddenly, floored, "Wait what?"

"Leviathan sinks ships." Skitter states as if the *collapse of the global shipping network* is normal.

"I... I..." I *think* the perfect *whatever* slipped. There were a lot of things I could imagine in a world, *billionaires being an endangered species and everything is still fucked*, was not one of them. It's *actually making* me wonder if humans really are just *so* fucking worthless. How can that be possible without... Lever pullers, whose... Lever pulling.

Everyone is just doing what they always did, so people find a new excuse. "I'm kind of interested if you'll kill me if I argue well enough."

"I don't kill people for being wrong." Skitter says with an air of confidence.

"*Excellent.*" I say with a grin, "So! The destruction of the Social Contract is what's causing the decay of society. That's the thesis yeah?"

"Hypothesis. I don't have an evidence base written out." Skitter clarifies with a wave of her hand.

"*That's unfortunate,*" I say quickly as I think of studies almost immediately, "I've got a *lot* of studies to quote. My thesis is that the hyper-evolution to create a network of sapient mammals would *require* us to figure out how to be so social we stop each other from killing each other! Or worse. And in doing so would so distance us from what we are, as to create a new evolution. Not only that, it won't be done through *pressures* or *efforts* it'll just get there. Cancerization. That's the thing where every hyper-efficient arthropod becomes a crab."

I realise that's a *mouthful*, "Or to put it more succinctly, no amount of effort in any direction is going to speed up evolution."

"But that's disregarding Parahumans. Every single one of us is an evolutionary leap in neural capacity. I can keep track of and communicate with two million, nine hundred thousand, sixty four insects." Skitter says.

"You realise though, that this logic followed to it's conclusion, ends in eugenics and genocide?" I say pretty fast, "You're basically stating that you're an evolutionary ubermensch who *must* out-breed the less evolved. Though, I'm not sure that being parahuman works that way, have they been around enough to know if you pass your powers down?"

"Aren't you a biokinetic? Haven't you looked at people's brains." She asks me, "Everyone has a Corona Pollentia and Gemma. Its just atrophied until you Trigger." Skitter says, though she's got nothing to display for that.

"Right, but you see how that's not even answering my question. You're completely side-stepping it, because it would mean engaging with the fact that you're not passing down, or in fact inducing the society into engaging in the social contract." I say simply as I continue moving, this

time trying to see if the tail it strong enough to catch a street light. It's not, I almost eat it.

"I need to ask if you think every member of society needs to be a willing participant in it first, to clarify what you're thinking and how its different from me." Skitter asks me, not turning her head, probably watching me with a quarter million eyes.

"Every member of society, who is not a willing participant, would need to be dealt with in some way. The damage they cause, if too great, would need to be put down right?" I ask, it's more really say.

"That's why heroes exist. Or cops, or military back in the day." Skitter says, making *another* statement about the world that's wholly new information, "People need to be made to conform sometimes, a serial killer can keep their head straight with threat of imprisonment."

"But... I don't." I say very quickly.

"Because you're not afraid of prison and don't really understand the Birdcage." Skitter makes a guess.

"Maybe? Probably more that, the heroes, cops, and military that have to subjugate the serial killers need to do so in a way that doesn't create a cycle of violence." I say trying to steer back to the carrion feeder thing, "In your perfect world, you get capes who can toe to toe with a serial killer. Can learn about them, and handle them perfectly. How do you do that without mental trauma? How much trauma can you inflict on a good person justly?"

"There's a phenomena called Second Generation Triggers. Glory Girl is a...that's a hero here. She Triggered when someone hit her with a basketball. In practice." Skitter is now climbing into a sewer, still expecting me to follow.

I sigh, we both know I have too, and quickly do something on my nose and tongue to just... Not. No. "Yeah, I think there's something about triggers I'm not thinking about. I'm saying you desensitize yourself to

violence. It becomes easier, and when it becomes easier it seems like the answer more often. You despise Alexandria, yeah?"

"I think she's never had someone punch her in the face properly." Skitter admits, "So she acts like she's invincible."

"You don't need to be aggressed to have empathy," I say to her, I'm not sure if I'm debating, or educating, but it's a personal belief, "We, at our base, don't want to rock the boat too much. Alexandra has been taught, through cause and effect, this is the only way to get what she wants. The more this behaviour is reinforced, the harder it is to convince her otherwise. It then gets hardened and twisted because it's deviations come from experiencing things outside the norm."

I point at Skitter, "You cut off a person's toes, if you see something similar you might think that cutting the toes again is the right answer. That's because evidence backs that up, then, oh no you miss something, because you assumed toe cutting would work, but actually these are... Anti-cut tootsies."

"You make the sharpest, most perfectest knife, it's the best knife ever, the world works on verifiable physics of *course!*" I say then, again I go, "Oh no, my knife got caught, now I'm mince meat."

I point at myself, "I go, hey everyone is pretty easy to manipulate, because your inside thoughts are inside. Oh no, everyone can predict my every move. Now I'm separated from my family. Everyone does it, and the further you deviate from that norm, the weirder you're going to get. Your answers will be more unique, and will twist the world more."

"So in your idea, the problem of people being different is unsolvable. I don't think that's accurate. I think with a government of more than one—" Skitter is cut off, and the swarm *buzzes* in response.

"Oh, no I think it's solvable, but also I've got a—" Oh, fuck, "You don't like being cut off. I'll let you finish."

"Finish your thought please." Skitter asks politely.

I bite my tongue, "Alright, my government from... Where I'm from? It's a government of a few thousand, shit still doesn't work. No parahumans though, Alexandria called me a *traveller*, but the problem of people being different isn't unsolvable, it's just... Not a problem. It's unpleasant, there are no perfect solutions. There's no utopia."

"That's fine. It can still be better than yesterday." Skitter shrugs as we walk through the sewers, putting her shoulder to a wall and pushing it open.

"Ah but will the people next year think that? Or will they just think that shit still doesn't work right? Back to the hedonistic treadmill, people assume, on average, things are slightly shittier than they are, so they can experience more highs." I look at the wall, and think about not going in, "So are you going to have your friends like... Skin me alive or something." I think about it, but I still follow. "There's no way that the secret wall in the sewer doesn't lead to some horrific torture dungeon with five guys in wife-beaters covered in oil." I swear to myself, "Yes I forgot you're sixteen."

"I don't have any friends." Skitter says as we walk into a *barren and spartan* complex of tunnels, rooms and everything else imaginable in semi-ruins, with bullet holes in the walls.

I *hiss* as I look around, "Jesus. Fucking. Christ. You don't have friends, you know what I'd say I think, but I won't. It'd be manipulative." I look around, "But... *fuck*. A sixteen year old girl deserves friends. Man, I thought the things I did to people was bad. At least she had her sister around."

"It's fine. I'll get over it." Skitter sits on a couch and takes a breath, removing her gloves, revealing *sweat* soaked hands.

I look at her and say, "Oh, alright, yeah I'm your friend then." I say quickly, thinking 'I'll get over it' means, 'lie to me.'

"You're like twenty." Skitter scoffs at me.

"I'm... I'm thirty-one." I say looking at myself.

"Ew." She gives an instinctive teenage reaction, not looking at me except for bug eyes.

I laugh, and give her scary fingers, "Yeah, be weary Skitter, it'll happen to *you one day*. Even if you're in biological stasis. You'll learn shit, you'll hate it, you'll change slightly, and then oh no, you're wondering where the eighteen year old girl who made shrines went." I say, though I give her an example with my palm. It's a small horrific thing, that mostly looks like a squirrels bones were removed, polished, and then the tattered skin was *quite tastefully* arranged to display the decay of society.

"I made a thousand page diary about someone. I hate them though." Skitter admits as she looks at the shrine. "I haven't made a shrine like that though, I dunno why I'd do it, squirrels don't deserve that."

I look at it, and then say, "That's the point. No-one deserves that. It's art, it's a joke." I say as I stare at it with a smile, "Cosmic insignificance, a horrifying display left out in the open to remind people that there's worse out there. That *maybe* behaving, being normal, will mean you avoid their attention."

"No-one knows why there's a squirrel-shrine in the girl's locker room, they just know there *might* be a school shooting soon." I say as I make it go away. "That's the art of it, the beauty of the cruelty is a direct representation of the unknown."

"Huh, you sound like-Regent." She stops herself from saying a name, "He's nuts too." Skitter adds. "Like, your brand of crazy."

"I'm not nuts! I have a very consistent ethos!" I say as I look around and realise the only place to sit would be like, *right* next to her, or on the ground covered by bugs. "Can... I make a chair out of your bugs?"

"Sit down wherever, they'll move." Skitter waves her hand at me, several circles of bugs moving out of the way.

"I meant like, to make a leather bean bag or something? It's fine, nevermind." I say as I plop down, and realise how easy it was getting.



"See this has become normal now. New stimuli, I know that if you're not wanting to kill me they won't kill me, I get used to it."

I then think, touching my chin, "You think we can make an internet satellite out of flesh?"

"No, probably not. You'd need metal involved. Maybe you could use carbon instead of silicon for computing." Skitter suggests a possible solution, she's *darned* smart for a teenager. Maybe it's her power, two million bugs worth of brains?

"So like, a semi-conductor out of carbon?" I say thinking, that does make sense, I'd need quite a bit of raw meat.

"A semi-conductor made of carbon'd need good cooling, it probably wouldn't be very mobile. Maybe you need to invent superconductors. Normal tinkers do that pretty often. Figure it out." Skitter suggests, though I'm realizing her suggestions may sound like demands to less socially conscious people.

"Honestly, that's a good idea too. I think I limit myself by my aesthetic. I *want* to use the meat. It's weird," I say as I make my arm turn into a whiteboard to jot down ideas by dropping and moving around blood from veins. Using ligaments, and pus to make the writing. "I mostly just want to watch like, cartoons or something. Do you just sit in here and... Chill with your bugs?"

"I'm too tired to keep going. So I'm resting for four hours, and then going out to check up on people and find my dad." Skitter casually admits to *horrid* exhaustion.

*There's something here, but she's too fucking smart to try something. I want to help, but she's just like... Not that weird. She's got a weird aesthetic, but she's just normal and intense. Like, literally just walking and chatting will probably do it. It doesn't even really matter what.*

"Alright, will I get like, devoured if you fall asleep by the chittering horde?" I gesture to the horrific amount of bugs around us.

"I usually keep my focus on them while I sleep." Skitter admits.

"*Usually*, very reassuring." I say with a sigh, "I'm assuming you're not going to let me prepare you food, or tea, or something."

"I ate an MRE, and wouldn't trust anything you touched in my body. You admitted to trackers the size of a grain." Skitter points.

"Yeah, I did, and you admitted you saw them immediately." I say though I raise my hands, "This is, like, horrific conditions for anyone. I'm not going to baby you, but I'm *going* to say you need to just... Chill. I normally would try sucking the cortisol out, but I'm *intensely* aware this ends in me getting devoured. I'm gonna assume even doing a little eaves-peeping is gonna go sideways."

I wonder if she's recognizing the deliberate choice to say "I assume," as a way to get her to correct me. I never ask for permission to do something, since we both know it'd be futile, instead I'm allowing her opportunities to educate me, and to talk to me. It's never a direct ingress into her heart or mind, it's trying to stand just outside of it and see whether the moisture bleeds through.

"You're trying to manipulate me." Skitter states.

"I can't think of people outside of how I *should* talk to them." I admit it almost fully.

"Learn how to speak as yourself. You'll be more trustworthy that way. Otherwise you're just a mirror." Skitter says with a turn of her head.

"I am myself, I just happen to *also* not be entirely self-defined. I'm not a mirror, I'm a discoball." I say quickly, "It's a reflection of the thing looking back, but it's more defined by the shape, rather than the parts it's sending back at you."

"That's kind of pathetic." Skitter tells me with absolutely no shame.

I know she's watching me, so I just... Look around the empty sewer full of bullet holes, and the sixteen year old girl with no friends that's hiding

out she can't figure out how to do what I do even a little. "You're probably right," I say, though I am quick to add, "There was a joke in there, it was a bit mean."

"I'm not fond of jokes, it's good you didn't say it." She answers back, leaning into the armrest of the couch and starting to relax.

"You could *probably* learn to do what I do," I say as she rests, "Even a little would do a lot."

"I never want to do what you do. It seems miserable." Skitter answers.

"Not eating and killing people," I say rolling my eyes, "I meant making friends and participating in society."

"Doing it how you do it is what I was saying." Skitter clarifies quietly beneath the near-silent hiss of life in the room. "You make yourself what other people want so they like you. Doing that even a little seems bad. I'm what I am, and nothing should be allowed to change that other than me."

"A mirror doesn't change though? It's still a mirror." I said.

"I didn't realize I was made of glass." Skitter sarcastically prods as the swarm quiets, not quite intaking her emotions as much.

I answer back, "I didn't realise I wasn't made of polished steel."

"Good for you. Your lifestyle is alien, it sounds miserable. Judging from how you act, its probably constantly stressful in ways I can't imagine. I'm not mirroring anyone, I'm me. I don't care otherwise." Skitter sighs.

"Oh, shit, no you're using mirroring, but I think you're more talking about masking." I say almost immediately, "You know that putting up that bit of fakeness is exhausting, it's more tiring than for most. You don't want to engage with it, and instead attract people who will engage with you without it."

"I don't see a difference in either." Skitter responds, "Its all the same thing, making yourself more like something or someone else because it'll

let you fit in. No one ever fits in because they act the right way. That's a little lie you and everyone else tells themselves."

"You fit in because you can't be *pushed out*. That's the truth of it. So there's no reason to waste energy doing anything like that." The teenager growls out.

*She's sixteen, don't say it. She's sixteen don't say it. She's sixteen don't say it. She's sixteen don't say it. You can say it in your head, I find that I fit in quite often because I'm not pushed out, yes. That's fine.*

"I'm sixteen." Skitter answers.

"I didn't say it!" I said quickly.

"You stared forwards for five seconds trying not to smirk." Skitter answers again.

I sigh rubbing my eyes, "I find you *intensely* interesting. You are *so confident* of your beliefs, and you don't really listen to much. Yet you're also extremely easy going, it's not a normal combination. Yet you can't imagine other people happy." I say it because it's true, and I wonder if she's slightly insulted, "Or at least not me, because if I'm happy then it fucks with everything. You *have* to dismiss it, if you don't you'd have to accept that there's stuff to study *here*. In the social space."

"Which is intensely uncomfortable if you weren't forced to do it. Or if you were overly forced to do it." I stand, mostly to give my legs something to do, I walk over to one of the bullet holes and stick my finger in it, it looks like a small-ish caliber. Who has a shoot out in a sewer?

"This used to be a maintenance closet, bought by the supervillain. He was the one that kidnapped, addicted to heroin and used the kid with the precog powers." Skitter says.

"Heroin is a tool for the stupid," I say as I keep poking at it, "It's clumsy, it's also dangerous. They don't really love you."

“You could ask her any question, she’d give you a probability for it. He gave her the heroin for the headaches too.” Skitter is at least willing to open up about her experiences.

I stop picking at it, and look at the swarm, she’s watching me and she needs to know I’m paying attention. I look at her, and I ask her, “When did you find out? How long did it take you before you snapped and capped them?”

“Found out about a month before I did it. More an issue of ability than desire. He had a power. Could split timelines. Work through two different ones at the same time. Pick which one was real.” She says, “Had to get him in a no-win, no way out but dead. And make sure it wasn’t something he could skip out on.”

After a few second of quiet, she continues, “So I did a big job for him. The sort that he’d want *solid* and sure. And the day after, I got him. Premeditated murder I guess, but the guy deserved it.”

“Good work,” I say as I pull out a pack of smokes, “You mind if I smoke?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” Skitter doesn’t order, but it’s a real request.

I put it away, because it doesn’t super matter enough to force the issue. “So, would you have killed him if, instead of addicting the girl to heroin, she just... Cared about him?” It’s about the importance of masking, and the importance of my tools in her world view.

“No, because he kidnapped her, and she was nine. There’s an imbalance there naturally, and her parents were fine.” Skitter says, “Kidnappers are pretty bad people. Usually.”

“I think you meant yes, you still would have killed him.” I wonder if she’s fading off a bit, “That’s just it though, how much of that would you have really known if instead of the nine-year old girl being given eight balls, she was just like... ‘This is Dad. He’s great!’ In a believable way, not in the heroin addict way.”

"Maybe. That wasn't the reality though." Skitter answers.

"No, no, it never is." I mutter quietly, I don't know if it's for me or her. I sigh and I sit down. She's so *much* like Alexandria, even down to just... Being invulnerable. It's a different kind, but there's no real way to do much to her without getting obliterated.

"Yup, you can eat though. I have instant ramen. Lots and lots of instant ramen." Skitter states.

"I *can't* let you just eat ramen." I say almost immediately, it just *being too much*. "That's *no* you're— I can't do anything about it. Alright, that'll just be *out there* and I'll just let that drive me insane. That's cool, I'm good." *Please for the love of god let me cook you some goddamned food*. "That's fine."

I change the subject, back to the mirror thing, "So being manipulative is mostly about control." I'm going to let her know how it works, even if she won't do it. "Not just control however, it's about making people feel like the idea is there. They don't like it, because it flies in face of a very *very* scary idea."

I'm now watching the bugs part as I gently drift my hand back and forth, "That we have very similar ideas on very basic patterns. That we are *so* predictable, and the self is not wholly unique. When you don't even *really* lie to someone? You just say things the right way? That drives them *way madder* than when you put a gun in their mouth and demand it, because you've just proven their sense of self is off."

"However, it's all patterns, it's not stressful once you figure it out." They almost squeak, I know it's just the chitin of hundreds of insects rubbing, but they move like water. "It's also very strong. People value their complexity more than anything else. No-one wants to be a solved problem."

"You're pretty sad a lot of the time." Skitter's observation is quiet, she's definitely nodding off.

"I know you don't believe me, but I *really am not*." I say with a laugh, "I *worry* about people."

"I believe you've lived with it long enough that it's not affecting you anymore." Skitter answers with a shrug.

"I think you see me concerned about others, and you find it incongruent with the things I say and, at least said, I do." I say back, as I watch her drift, and note that a cockroach has crawled on my finger. It's *frightening*, but it's there. I look at it, and it's not eating me. "The first step, in being good at doing what I do, is knowing *exactly* what you want. Knowing how much you want it, and what you don't care about."

"Oh, you're nuts." Skitter almost laughs, it's a dry sort of thing, and it strains her throat, *has she been shouting recently?* "You see me as people don't you."

"I do, and if you do some like, big scary thing to try and dissuade me of that idea, I'll find it predictable. If you don't, it'll prove me right." I say as I watch the roach, looking at it intently. I wonder if this is a less intense form of eye contact. "If people weren't people, they'd be far less predictable."

I stare at the thing, and then say, "You want to find your dad. You could get Alexandria to dump massive resources to get her to find your dad. An ungodly amount, by just *quietly* almost defeated, saying 'I... I just want someone to help me find my family...' You do it *wrong* even, and she might acquiesce just because the attempt is proving something is changing. It gives her a lifeline, which she wants."

"No. That's losing. I won't *lose*." Skitter *wakes up* at the suggestion, and the bugs buzz again. "I'm not losing to some *bitch* in spandex."

"Really? The very idea of it has just *ripped* the rest from you." I say still looking at the now *very aggressively* chittering thing.

"I hope you're not speaking carefully right now. Because it's getting on my nerves." Skitter warns me.

"So you *do* kill people for saying things you don't agree with." I say back to her.

"You can spend a day asphyxiating on spider silk. You'll be alive." Skitter says, "Or spiders."

"What does that have to do with what I said? It's just violence to get your way."

"I see a line between violence and killing. You don't. That's fine." Skitter clarifies her position, the buzz slowly calming.

"I legit didn't even tell you to do it. I just pointed it out as an example for the talk that was immediately apparent. I'll use less pertinent information and let you extrapolate." I say, offering to give her *less* digestible knowledge.

"You...don't understand what you said to me. Okay, that makes it better. It sounded as if you said she's already beat me by making me worry and get angry. That's not true, and it's aggravating to even hear." Skitter actually calms in buzzing tone, "It's an excuse for people who don't think ahead to not think ahead. Worrying isn't losing, it's preparing."

"I was more pointing out that you were being given information, and you were threatening violence against it. This in turn *does* lead to a loss, because then people, well other people, will be scared to give you information." I say to the cockroach still. It *hasn't* left, it gets agitated, it jitters around the hand. It emotes. "You're thinking I'm saying she already won. She hasn't, she's in a losing position, I'm saying the fight's gotten so exhausting you're ignoring situation reports and intelligence gathering."

She communicates in violence, science, and tactics. It's the intellectualism and war for her ideas that seems to make her tick. She doesn't want to be *human*, she wants to be their *protector*. She cares more about being... Maybe even above them. It's not entirely clear, but she doesn't *just* believe she's not a person, she desperately needs to believe it.



I'm going to lecture her to sleep, she's a highschool girl, she's probably done it a million times already. I'll avoid Alexandria, at least for now, and talks about my experiences are a bit rough. Something simple, easy, "So people react to stress differently, but they snap in very similar ways. You can pretty much *eventually* break anyone *neurotypical* by a process called identity dissolution and re-construction."

I take a deep breath, and I speak in a very calm voice, "The way it works, largely, is that when a person doesn't understand why they're stressed, it breaks down their world view. When I say, don't understand why they're stressed, I mean the biology. If you constantly, randomly, walk in and berate someone, make them do push-ups, have them carry fifty-pound rucks in the rain eventually they need to figure out how to survive in that environment."

"Any behaviour that is ill fitted melts away, eventually even the good fitting behaviors melt because the stress *doesn't stop*. So obviously, something must be changed." I watch the roach drifting, it's not... It's weird, it's not acting *more* roach like. It's just... Slower. "Eventually, there's nothing for the biology to hold onto. Then you re-build the identity with positive reinforcement. You can just... Be nice, even a little nice. It gets to a point where just basic keeping them alive *in eternal torment*, becomes enough. Even when they understand what's going on."

"For people who are *not* neurotypical however, this will never work exactly right. We, because obviously a serial killer cannibal is *not* the norm, have our own little tricks and triggers. We recognize the dissolution and try to find a way out almost immediately, buck at it. There's ways around it. The way we interact with empathy doesn't really go 'You are caretaker, please come caretake!' It goes, 'How do I get what I want out of you?' Because we're not thinking about them, we're thinking about *us*. For that, you use incentives. Points, gifts, tangible rewards. A compliment, or a hug isn't tangible, it needs to be a thing that's put in their hand they can hold, and see."

"Dissolution is also hard, because we don't have the same social pack-bonds. We're too focused on self-preservation, and will cut *anyone* out

for the self, or object of obsession. We are more aware of our surroundings, and cognitive dissonance makes sense, because people are pattern based. The pattern doesn't make sense, but it's there. Why define it?"

There's a slight snore. Its barely audible, but she sleeps. Its light and quiet.

*Well, maybe tangible is a little looser than that. Rest is very, very, tangible.*

[hr=3]

"You need to leave. I'm going to talk to someone here." Skitter tells me, having made *no sign* of waking up immediately obvious.

"I'm, not going to do that! I will go a little away, but I'm not abandoning a sixteen year old girl to go do super-villain shit." I say with a groan.

"You're treating me like a kid. Leave, *now*." Skitter gets suddenly *angry* at the suggestion.

I immediately switch it up, because I let it slip, "I misspoke, allow me to rephrase? It's hard sometimes to remember the shit you've gone through. I slipped into a manipulation that adults rely on, appeals to authority." It's quick and a dirty hack job, but it's also true, just blunter than I want to be. "I *can't*. My family's safety is reliant on my ability to orbit around you."

"That's untrue. Your family's safety is reliant on your ability to manipulate me." Skitter clarifies her point of view.

I say, "What? Oh, hm."

"Leave, or I can help you leave. Pick." She gives an ultimatum as easy as most people breathe. Alexandria's little curly haired clone.

"I need like, *five seconds* to think. You can count even." Okay, fuck so if I leave then she's bullying me, but it also means trust. I'm showing she can handle herself, but how do I do that without seeming like it's terrified.

“Four. Three. Two.”

Not a display of aggression. Not a display of acquiescence, trust. In her ability to function, how to project that? “*Shit.*” I swear out loud.

“One. Zero.”

“I’m out of time, I couldn’t figure it out. I’ll leave, can I keep a bug in case you need me.” I say quickly, thinking hard.

“Stay within six blocks.” She dismisses me with that statement.

I walk out immediately, and say, “If I’m too close just uh... You’ll figure out a way to let me know.” As I say that bugs crawl on my legs. Okay, *Okay, yeah that’s a fucking way Skitter. That’s great.* Still, I can’t believe that... Worked? I wasn’t giving her the benefit of the doubt, and she clearly doesn’t want me to fuck off necessarily. Just *actually* be out of the room.

She can also see the swarm, I can logic and walk, “I didn’t really even ask who you were meeting. I just assumed it was too dangerous for you. That was so stupid. How can I even seem helpful if I think something is too dangerous for you. Useful means making hard things easy, not impossible things possible.” The bugs leave as I get about... A block into the sewer. I don’t know if I’m allowed closer because of my logic, or because I’ve reached the requisite distance. “I’m announcing that I’m heightening my senses, so it’s not like... Deception?” I wait for a response from the bugs.

They don’t answer, and its likely because a block of sewer’s going to mangle any sound to nothing anyways. Still, when I do, I can hear the bugs in the walls, the thousands upon thousands upon thousands of insectile things roaming the spaces between.

I didn’t say *how* I would improve my senses, exactly. I wonder if it’s a cheap cheat or not. I *desperately* need to peek at these things, I want to see their biology, are they normal bugs? Are they special, does she change them on some level, is there a pheromone that they emit in waves outwards from her.

I stop before I reach out, and swear loudly, "*UGH!* I have no idea how you'd react to peeking into these things. Nevermind. *Fuck.*" I swear as I *stare* at the cockroaches and millipedes, and ants, and spiders, without reaching out. "How do you *work?*" I say at them, as if *that* is how that works. I turn off the *writhing* sounds of trillions of insects, and try to telescope as far into one as I can. I actually kneel, and then I also see if I can just... Listen to one. A single one, instead of thousands, see if maybe there's some *microscopic* scrap of conversation on her connection.

The bugs are utterly implacably nothing. Just...bugs. Balls of chitin and endo-matter and blood that act and think nothing like anything larger than them. They don't even act different normally, having jolts of something hit them and making them move sometimes, like their brainwaves just *change*, like a carrier wave is moving them. I get the feeling that the one little light I have in me is *nowhere* near enough to find that carrier wave with technology, the first clear *no* I've ever gotten from my powers.

I pout, incessantly. I can't believe she just gets to just *no-sell* me. I can't believe that all this shit I'm doing *isn't the cap*. How does a world with these things function?! Though, as I realise what's happening around America, that it doesn't. It's falling apart, maybe *because* of these things.

"*Ugh.*" I continue to pout angrily, "I'm a grown woman, why am I put in timeout!" I stop, and try not to make the parallel because, and I can't stop myself from shouting this as I get into my own head with anger, "The parallel is *apparent, and infuriating.*"

I *hate* being fucking manhandled. I *hate hate hate hate hate* it. So much, it's infuriating in every sense of the word and I'm being fully observed in my little temper tantrum. It's just... Hard to do this shit when no-one is in the room. "*UGH!* Everyone needs back-up!" I hiss, then hiss again. Then after a bit I finally start to calm down.

"*Hargh.*" It's a choked little noise as I get that shit back under wraps. I don't yell about the ramen. I definitely don't yell about the ramen. It's hard, but I manage it.

*Instant ramen is so bad for you. If your Earth has instant ramen, please, for the love of god, don't. It's filler and salt. There's nothing of value there. Please just buy peanut butter and bread, or beans and rice, or just rice with your ramen seasoning packets, so you're not eating deep fried starches as your only meal. It's also not cheaper. Bouillon with salt and MSG is the same thing, it's far cheaper to get the bouillon and then a good quality starch.*

I get the feelings out, in my own way.

It takes about forty minutes. And then a buzz on my thigh alerts me, before the *fat little fly* that was on there flies away, circling to grab my attention before continuing. I follow it, thinking that's what it needs, moving fast. I keep silent, the pads of my hooves quickly shifted to something closer to the pads of a cat, or a dog.

Arriving at the hole in the wall, I see...The teenagers that were at the robbery, about...a month? two? three months back? The blonde in the altogether too revealing spandex, the one with the skull helmet, the teenager with a face mask and a broadly built teen with a bulldog mask on.

They glance over to me, and most of them *doubletake* except the one in purple spandex, who just tilts her head confused.

"So, you call *yourself* Bitch, but am I supposed to say that?" I say quickly, and then laugh, "You were the— You don't know me, Hi I'm Talia." I try a winning smile, mostly because it'll lead to bullying, which is what they're going to go for.

"She's the Protectorates puppy-Sorry, kitty then?" The purple one says, putting a hand on her hip and leaning on it.

"Do I look like cat? I'm a tiefling, clearly." I look down at the tail and everything, it's *clearly* a tiefling.

"I don't play nerd shit, sorry." She shoots back with an easy smirk

I decide to get a *bit* childish, "So how'd you recognize the term?"

"Skitter over here's a huge nerd. I listen." The *absolute gremlin* of a teen immediately throws her team member under the bus, former team member?

"Do you do that a lot?" I ask her quickly, "Listen I mean. You're a bit old for her."

"First off, don't be weird, second off, I turn eighteen in three months, two. No, one and a half." The purple one says.

"Oh, yeah, no announcing to the world how you're spying on that nerd shit you're *totally* not interested. That's normal behaviour, I'm the weird one." I say pretty fucking quick.

"I'm a psychic too, if that makes you any more nervous." She *grins* staring straight at me.

I smile wide as well, and then just... Kind of let my mind wander a bit. Towards what a person takes like, towards me, specifically, ripping a person's arm off yesterday and eating it. The sickening gristly feeling as it slides down my throat.

"*Ew.*" She lets her expression shift, "You're *ew*, the Protectorate lets you exist? Damn, must be desperate, I should see about that signing bonus!" And then is back to joking with a grin.

"It's a, like, million dollar a month tinkerbudget if you're capable. Have you managed anything worthwhile besides eating my scraps at the Casino?" I say very quickly.

"Yeah, we robbed a bank, like, ninety mil. Wicked right? I'm Tattletail by the way." Tattletail sits heavily on the couch, barely letting the bugs have a moment to step away.

I touch my eyes, "You're *Tattletail*." I try not to sound too incredulous, well no, it's very much an affectation for humorous effect. "But yeah, no I'm the anti-social weirdo they bring in."

"And that's Grue, he doesn't do much eating though." She points at the tall one, "That's Regent, he's jailbait." The thin male one waves a hand at me and obviously smirks behind the opera mask. "That's Bitch, don't smile, she doesn't like teeth," The one in the bulldog mask glares at me. "And finally, uh, well, you can't *see* Imp. But she's around. Probably."

I think about how they're *all* way too young to actually fucking know a Zork reference, but I leave it alone, mostly because I think it's funnier to snark via thought. I mean if I'm going to be read, I'll just keep the internal monologue *extra* shitty. Though, probably in part because I need to laser focus on that. The serial killing and cannibalism should probably be placed into the dissociative vault.

For now, at least.

"The teasing is your way of being nice." I say immediately, and then think about the fucking *mindreader* being a gremlin and just sigh. I was far meaner in high-school, oh god that one girl killed herself. I hadn't thought about that in a *while*, full on like, murder-murder-murder-murder-murder-murder-murder-murder-suicide. I don't even remember what we said to her. It was like... A pig thing. I think, I think it was a scene recreation from Carry?

"So is the like, murder-psychopathy powers or did you get out of the EasyBake all spiced up?" Tattletale asks with a chuckle, making Grue groan at the aggression and hostility.

"A mix of both? I think? Like, I was kind of a horrific bully but I didn't really push it until the powers kicked in, then it was, like, why limit yourself?" I walk in, and I can't help but wonder how society gets so fucked that a bunch of *fucking kids* are made to live in the *fucking sewer*.

"I don't see the relevance. Can we move on to *anything* else?" Grue, the tall one, complains. The beginning vestiges of an adulthood in... *if he's eighteen, six more years, six more years* showing.

Quick threat assessment. The Dog one makes those hell hounds, all biological. Mind reading isn't *really* a way to stop having her trachea shut from afar. The darkness one first, maybe. Then the rest would be easy I think? Yeah.

"Let's *all* take a deep breath." Tattletale says with a chuckling smile, "And leave trachea ripping to *someone* who's less friendly than you right? You're *very* friendly, and I'd *hate* for the recording of you doing this to hit station eight news." She spreads her arms wide.

"God." I say as I change my colour to red, "Could you imagine?" Then I shrink, "What would happen then?" I'm now *Tattletale*. Then I'm bright purple, cloven hooved, and my horns are back. Near-two hundred thousand calories, and about thirty pounds of fat, but clever placement of the remainder makes no *obvious* sign of it.

*Oh, well, I should probably not do that a dozen more times or I will be fucked.* How many calories is it to make a flesh blob. It's *liiiiike*. I'm doing the mental maths, and thinking about the mechanics of it. It's *just* making them all big a blob it'd be pretty simple.

Eh? I'm not really here for that, to be honest this is the biggest group of Parahumans I've met. I wonder if I'm going to think this about everyone I meet. Meat? Meet.

"So like is *overwhelming* force the only way to get you to be nice inside? Or are you this bitchy to Alexa too?" Tattletale asks, grinning.

*Do not think about you and Loo— Fuck.*

"*Damn.*" Tattletale furrows her brow in distaste, "You're horny now? Ew."

I say simply, "She's my wife! I love her!"



The little *gremlin* just tsk's at me like a disapproving guardian and looks down.

"Soooooo, before we continue the talk about wives and how to be horny around them." Regent says in an easy, *French*, or at least Canadian accent.

"No, we're not exploring that around anyone." I say quickly.

"I'd *love* to explore that, I'm eighteen!" Regent crosses his arms, and I can hear a lazy grin behind the mask.

"*No you're not.*" Skitter immediately pokes a hole in his lie.

I wonder if she thought the whole threat assessment thing was a threat? No, she's, maybe?

"Come on, I can do *direct* nerve stimulation." The *creature* that'll grow up to be a man in a few years shoots a finger gun at me.

"You can what?" I say as I look at them all, "I am *thirty-one.*"

"Age is just a number, one that'll get the local police on you sure, but a number nonetheless!" Regent laughs, obviously just *pushing* at me.

"To be fair, five-to-ten is also a number I guess. And twenty to thirty. Wait, no what is the number of years for manslaughter?" I raise my hands though, "I'm not actually threatening you."

"As a Parahuman, usually life, and I know, you remind me of my sister, she's a psychopath too." Regent *immediately* clocks me as one.

"I'm not a *psychopath*, I have a personality disorder." I say quickly.

"Its a fun club, I think I'm in the cooler part of it thought," He laughs, shooting me some sort of...*gang sign?* "Antisocial Personality Disorder, uh, criminal spectrum." Regent points at himself, "You?"

"Eh? I got like, halfway through the diagnosis process and then my therapist went missing before anything made it to paper." I said, "Then

later I learned that it didn't like, actually matter much which was kind of..." I actually grimace a bit, *god* poor Caroline. And her husband. And their cats. "Well, everything worked out in the end." I really squashed the problem. The diagnosis was incisive, and a bit cutting. Really sliced through to the matter.

I don't make eye contact with Tattletale, just because we might *both* start laughing and it'll be weird. Other people should *not* see inside of my head.

"Hey is it weird if I call you mom in front of my sister?" Regent asks with a tilt of his head, "Like, its not a sex thing, I just *wanna* make her uncomfortable. Our family relationship is like..." He makes a gesture with his fingers, "Go fuck yourself, bitch, sorta deal."

*Oh thank god, he's french I thought he was going to say Incest.* I sigh.

"The incest is a completely separate thing." He clarifies, making everyone *stare* at him.

I can't believe it took me this long, "You are *also* a mind reader."

"No, I just make that joke \*like-\*Well okay I'm really good at cold reading, but I make that joke every time I meet someone. The incest joke."

"Yeah, if you make it a running gag it helps you normalize the behaviour." I say with an appreciative nod.

"God you get me so well mommy." He chuckles, making everyone continue staring at him.

"I have never actually interacted with other parahumans before, how are light practical jokes normally treated?" I'm asking for permission to do *horrible flesh things*. With tendons. I'll undo them. I imagine *slenderman*, just a face with no eyes or mouth but nostrils and a nose.

"Pshhhhhhhh, only if I can make you jelly." Regent says.

"Wait, are you *also* biokinetic?" I say looking at him. That sounds sick as hell. I've never met another one.

"AAAAAAND were moving on!" Tattletale quickly waves a hand, "Mooooving on, mooooving on, hey, you're Talia, we work together now. I think. Skitter whatdya want her to do?"

Can he *also* shape shift, what's the like, low end of this. The psychic is talking.

"*Jesus christ he's fifteen!*" Tattletale *gags*.

"I *will* not have you call me a pedophile." I *gently* grasp the inside of her throat from here. I don't *pinch* it quite. I just let it feel that I *could* from here.

"Why are you thinking about shapeshifting-!" Tattletale splays her arm, "I've made a mistake and would like to apologize."

"I have *never* met someone like me before, I don't actually know what like, biokinetic looks like at the low end. The first thing I ever did was change my *entire body* into this. Well, not the hooves, I lost my shoes." I admit looking down at my feet. "They had silicon in them. Anyways, working together."

"I have employees. The city's in ruins. The PRT's not responding properly. I need to protect them." Skitter says simply as the room switches to business.

I stop and listen, it'd be stupid as hell to try and assert authority here. I really wish there was more than *one fucking couch*.

"With the scream. Everyone's probably not able to stay in their houses. They might have injuries. I need medicine, or healing. You'll be doing that." She points a finger clad in silk and carapace at me, "Tattletale, Grue, Regent, you'll all be keeping guard and trying to see things coming, Imp too, nearly forgot." *Imp... that's... oh the invisible one*. The memory is hard to cling onto, and that fact makes a new paranoia bloom.

“I’ll be surrounding the block in bugs so no one can get through without disturbing them. We *will* help my people.” Skitter finishes, surprisingly authoritative for her age. Tattletale nods and starts hopping to it with a bounce, moving to the door. “Bitch, you’re occupied with your dogs, keep doing good work there. I’ll call you if I need muscle.” She tells the one in the dog mask, who just makes a *grunt* in response, moving through the doorway, pushing past Regent in the process.

“*you make one doggy joke and they don’t like you anymore!*” He quietly and very amusedly complains as his pace starts back up again.

I don’t get to participate in any violence, and I guess I just have to live with that. That’s... That’s gonna stick in my craw, but I have... “I need a, like, something to bullshit the healing thing. Like a busted phone or something *plastic* that I can just kind of pass off as amazing healing tech.”

“No, you don’t. All cameras in the city are destroyed, as are all phones. The only information that passes is word of mouth.” Skitter waves her hand.

“*Oh.*” I whisper, I’m in a *playgr*— I have a job. I should not be around children. I could sneak off if I find *ooooone E-88* and. And there’s a mind reader.

I close my eyes and walk out, using my sense of the others to continue walking with my eyes closed in actual, well not shame, just not wanting to subject anyone to myself. I wonder what the fuck Alexandria was thinking here.

[hr=3]

The Rig is *on fire* in the distance. That’s worrying. Automated drones are dispensing foam onto the flames which lick off the ocean. No one else seems to care though as they focus on herding hundreds, thousands of injured people into a *mall* that the *Undersiders*, the gang I’m currently running with, has taken as their own.

"*Everyone, move to the center of the mall.*" The buzzing of insects somehow forms into words as Regent spins a sceptre idly, commenting.

"Is it weird that I can imagine her like, putting a cicada in someones va-"  
"He's cut off by a *disgusted* scoff from Tattletale.

"*Regent, we have Protectorate company, stop being a slob.*" She tells him off.

"*Shit,*" I hiss as I look behind me. She's talking about me. I'm Protectorate to them. Instead of just like... What am I even? A social worker? I just walk forward, and try to lock on the locations of the most readily available blood. I can feel the biomass now as it drips across the floor. I start with the dead though I get closer to piece brains and lungs back together. I wonder for the first time if I actually know if I'm putting them back together the same.

Well, there's only a few dead, so the moral issues aren't very long-lasting. Dozens more are healed quickly enough as well, my powers letting me do much when the aim is *just* repair, not change or fix, and only injuries that are *survivable*. Skitter is a monument to these people for some reason, something they circle around and yet avoid, it must be the biblical swarm of bugs in the air around all of them, blackening the horizon with tendrils of insectile creatures, a wave of life-consuming, well, life.

Regent and Tattletale eventually have to dart off to some other point in the place, and I'm left with just Skitter, working like a factory worker between hits of peanut butter. In the back of my head, the idea of making some kind of caloric paste is working up.

I'm trying to keep a pace, so I sing under my breath, "I'm smokin', I'm rollin', I'm smokin', I'm rollin', smoke weed every day." Trying to get the rhythm to a point where it's very smooth rhythmic. They're just... Meat getting stitched back together, I am sure they want to be more than that, but they probably shouldn't have gotten hurt in the first place.

Wait, shit where's the telepath. I look up and around myself, and I remember that Tattletale ran off, I'm back to my work, though I try a different song. "On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair," I look up at Skitter, and gesture at her to sing. With a smile.

"Warm smell of colitas rising up through the air," I continue, I don't stop working however, as that would *most likely* get me killed, hurt, or just that... It's a vibe she has when she's kind of not happy.

I haven't really placed it yet, but I'm getting there.

"You don't sing great." Skitter comments, "You've got too much fray, probably used to shouting or screaming." She's at least engaging after about a minute of listening. The people seem a little more intimidated when she speaks. Probably the dead-body sort of way words just icily slide out of her when she's controlling the insects.

"Singing isn't about sounding good, it's about passing time and expressing yourself, or pacing. There's a reason we do it." I say as I try to remember my spot. I think I was on the second verse? "I don't let not being good at something stop me from doing it."

"Hmm." Skitter doesn't answer in any real way, just making a noise.

I'm pretty sure she's humming as I listen to the bugs, there's a warble, maybe, or a pattern? Maybe. I decide to increase my hearing to try and see if there's *something* there I can pick up on.

There's nothing notable at least to the tune of my music, there's definitely a *pulse* to her swarm though. A way it all communicates or at least exists as one thing.

"I don't think I know that, one." I admit, "I listen to garbage mostly, and then the stuff here is all like, *off* because punk didn't get a revival. There wasn't really a like, proper nine-eleven or a war in the middle east. So Green Day didn't fuck America with American Idiot. Meant their last good album was in Dookie, in 94."

"What's Green Day?" Skitter asks, "Some sorta rock band? I used to listen to Canary, before they put her in the Birdcage."

"My Earth's rock band yeah," I say too her as I scoff at the guy in front of me, "Oh come on, this doesn't even need *stitches*." I roll my eyes as I tap the arm and heal what was *maybe* a four inch gash. "They were kind of shit, but The Offspring was good. Before my time, but nineties music was retro in twenty-twenty. The same way sixties music was retro in the nineties. You liked Canary's music a lot?"

"She was prog rock, mostly. Yeah, I liked it, Anti-Insomnia's my favourite. There's an uncut track where they didn't wipe her power out of the recording. It'll help you sleep. Well, put you to sleep at the end." Skitter says as I strike onto a special interest.

"Oh that's sick as hell," I say, it didn't really hit me that Parahuman stuff could *work* like that. "That's actually fucking punk."

"If you listen to her sing, you're like...a little addled? And then she just says, '*Sleep*' at the end of the track, and you go out like a light if you're laying down, and get really, really drowsy if you're standing." Skitter adds, "There's Ur-Sound, which apparently sounds different to everyone. And Without Whisper, which'll make you confess to someone you love. Never heard that one uncut."

"I... That's so much cooler than music could ever be." I say thinking about the idea of a *love song* that makes you confess your love. "Like, *imagine* getting a mix tape with Without Whisper, and you both listen to it and then like, you both say each other. *Or oh god*, they say it to you, and you're like 'I love Ash Ketchum.' Like a cartoon or something. 'I love my head-kin.' You know? Oh god, imagine the *opposite*. I... Desperately need to find that on the internet I think."

"I dunno if it is. Dragon was ordered to wipe her online presence. You'll have to buy a CD probably." Skitter shrugs, "Usual practice for that sorta stuff when you've been Birdcaged. I dunno why they did it to her, but it was a pretty quick trial...two weeks from start to life sentence?"

"Bad luck, there was an article. Dude she was fucking was listening to her music, and she yelled 'Go Fuck Yourself,' Too close to him. He uh, took the *direct* route. Violently. self mutilation to do so, there's an artery around there, you bleed out fast at least."

"Huh, sounds rough. I—" She's cut off by something, head snapping in a direction as her swarm buzzes, "Someone's coming, smooth, metallic taste, feels like a doll. No scent." Skitter describes quickly, "*Fast*, outrunning dragonflies."

"Alright, time for a processor farm to get running?" I ask, looking at her for orders.

"It's one target, you've got a Brute rating, until proven otherwise, don't overshadow your hand." She advises, well, orders. "Minimum effort, maximum force."

"I hope you respect that I'm *actually* taking orders. Last person who tried to give me orders I called slurs you haven't heard of, because I invented them." I say, then I see the *slightest* twi- No it's just the same pulse. I'm not grabbing it, I'll keep trying, instead just standing where she's looking to mostly just do some fucking violence.

"I..." Her voice *fades*, "*I lost him. Stranger.*" She hisses out as her swarm buzzes instantly, becoming aggravated at someone-*something* sneaking around her. There's no sign of anything, even I can't hear it.

Still, *fuck that*, I reach out and look for something fresh and new. Oh *weird* mushrooms are *efficient*. I never really thought about that they need almost nothing to grow, and grow practically everywhere. White spiderwebs of mycellium strip out, but I make sure to keep them looking *very* web-like as I try to pick something up through the inter-twining network. A defense response, something that *isn't* the bugs.

Its like a ghost just appeared out of nowhere, one second, I'm focusing on mycelium, the next, a nine-foot tall *mannequin*, with an overlong torso, flat head, ball-jointed arms and legs, as well as arms attached by *chains*.



"Hey Sexy." I say as I slam a fist into it's *gut*. Oh god, it was so stupid. It was such a bad idea, there's a sickening, god awful crunch.

The mannequin is evidently not made of plastic, as my hand strikes ceramic hardplate. My knuckles repair a few seconds later, followed by the rest of the hand as the thing tilts its head, raises one long, four jointed finger and waves it side to side, as if to say, "*No, stupid.*"

"Wait, wait, wait." I say quickly, "Do you have a dick?" I try to make the mycellium grow up it, to look for nooks, crannies, *anything* on it.

The thing, the suit is *perfectly* sealed, its like it was made to be, swarms of insects are already trying to get in. This is a Tinker that knew what he was going to fight, small, tiny, crawling life. It continues wiggling its finger at me, then turns its head to Skitter and does the same, before raising an arm to point at her. I'm moving almost immediately, and kick off the concrete just as a panel unfurls and the barrel of a *gun* appears from the inside of it in his palm.

The round screams out and hits my chest, and the horrid viral payload in it is *awful* to even bear. Like a self-replicating horrorshow that takes cells, mutates them into a mockery of themselves and finally kills them.

"Oh, *oh*." I giggle as my body ripples and broils, and I feel like I'm going to have to wrestle this. "Biokinetic Tinker, gun in the palm. *Very tiny pecker.*"

The swarm roils to life, but as it does, he *depresses* and a gas comes out, one that doesn't do anything but irritate my eyes, yet kills the insects in microseconds of contact.

I try to reach through the vents to the thing inside, there's a *man* in there, there must be. I gotta get to the *meat* "Where's your fucking *meat.*" I scream at it.

It turns into a wrestle fast, ball and chain jointed limbs moving around me as we scrabble on the concrete, pushing each other through a plateglass window as his servos and synthetic muscle is obviously plenty strong, but so is mine. The fight turns grizzly when the armour dispenses

blades and saws that dig into my flesh, but blood loss isn't too big of an issue immediately for me.

"You're going to die here." I whisper to it with a smile, letting the blades get in, "Even if you run, I'm gonna chase you down. I'm gonna *fuck you*." I tense my body and I *lift* the thing. Let's see if he has some goddamn jet boots. I'll use it's own weight against it, blades cut and slash and I can feel myself being flensed.

He bends at the lower back like a gymnast, the polymer-ceramic creasing and moving like cloth despite being as hard as steel, and while I'm trying to rip into him, he takes the time to *scrawl* on the floor with a blade, 'You, aren't, prepared.'

Skitter moves in and hits him hard in the chest with a baton, the telescoping expandable kind that whips back as you swing it and makes a fifteen year old girl strike with similar force to a heavy weight boxer when it winds back to impact. It doesn't visibly do much, I hit him roughly thrice as hard, but he does stop emitting the gas as he swings a blade at her and catches in the spidersilk outfit, not penetrating.

I decide to *unfurl* and *rip myself open*, to engulf his body in my own ragged, tattered meats. I'll wear him like a goddamn suit. We'll see what he can do while I rapidly turn every piece of me into muscle and writhing mass leaving bone to simply increase *force* as I try to crush him. Like sticky film I crawl across his body.

The compression pushes *down*, and I damage him, the ball joints mostly, at the shoulders, at the hips, they're vulnerable in a way the rest of him isn't, maybe I can immobilize him.

I shift the weight and mass to push on these new pressure points. I have eschewed a *lot* to do this *disgusting thing*. It's unpleasant, squishy, and I am barely aware of my surroundings as I've dedicated everything to simply becoming a *mass* of muscle.

The thing keeps tapping at my flesh as I manage to push into its left leg, its a pattern, a pattern that starts to make sense once I realize its code.

'N. O. T. P. R. E. P. A. R. E. D.'" Before a vicious *acid* is expelled from the vents that pumped out gas seconds ago, scalding at my flesh and making me start to slide off him.

I try to crawl in, absorb the calories of the acid and use it to fuel myself. It's *something* and there's vents, they have to go from somewhere.

There's hollow space there, I slide in, trying to find more and more and more. It fits me, I can feel glass, and a heartbeat past the glass. I'm moving every ounce and press against it.

I reach for the beat, and I tap on it first with a similar pace, "F. U."

The glass breaks, and I flood in, tightening and constricting around the heart. Then the pressure vessel seals around the flesh I sent in, vacuum pressure locking it with thousands of pounds of force per square inch.

"G. O. T. Y. O. U." I feel tapped on the outside of the vessel as my senses return, its vents still open, as if inviting more of me inside. It gives me a few seconds, as if that's something I'd *choose* to do.

Well that's more than a pound of flesh that's just gotten *eaten* up by this fucking thing. I definitely disconnect from that, and try to re-think my strategy. It *isn't* prepared, it wouldn't have taunted me with it's victory until it was sure it had won. There's gotta be a way.

*The bugs* "Fill him the next time he opens, I'll make them live." It's an order, and I'm already starting to work on the bugs, making them little processors, trying to get them to eat the ceramic, like the cars, like the concrete, like everything else. I make their carapaces hardier, I make their spiracles more efficient. I make them *more*.

Skitter follows instructions well if she sees the logic, and I can *see* her clad her wasps in other, smaller insects to breathe in the remnant toxin while they fly into the space, starting to fill him. Mannequin *bolts* after that, and moves fast, like a race-car scuttling.

Except *I can feel the bugs*, I *rip* that energy back into the stolen pound of flesh, using the bugs inside as calories for my meats, I multiply muscle exponentially.

There's a grinding sound as the weight of flesh moves inside him, momentum allowing them to alter him, but he's strong enough to fight me, there's just *not* enough, there'd need to be hundreds of pounds.

"Weren't you prepared enough? I guess not!" I scream after him.

There's another tap, "N. O. M. I. N. A. T. E. Y. O. U." From him as he runs off, having acquired a way to *talk* to me now.

I say to him through the flesh, "You literally just showed up, did nothing, looked like an idiot, and then fled."

"N.O.M.I.N.A.T.E. Y.O.U." The tapping gets a little more rapid.

"Oh my god, I have enough autistic people in my life." I say somewhat annoyed.

"A.S.P.E.R.G.E.R.S." The tapping *corrects* me.

"What? No, that's *offensive!* Why would anyone call it that?!" Oh right, it's twenty-eleven. Oh wait it's twenty-eleven, "You're a fucking retard."

"S.E.V.E.N. D.A.Y.S. P.R.E.P.A.R.E. F.O.R. M.E." He taps.

"Oh my god, you need seven days because you're that scared." I say back through the flesh. Holy shit, how far can I detect his now. This is just my meat, out and about.

I feel nutrients get dispensed into the meat to keep it alive and well, oxygenation, small doses of muscle relaxant for comfort as he tries to make its presence as non-distracting as possible. To let me be at peak capacity.

"Oh man, you do not get a lot of pleasant conversation do you?" I say back, shaking my head. "You want seven days so you can ta— Are you

over eighteen? Please be over eighteen, I'm around teenagers, I need to make dick jokes."

"F.O.R.T.Y. S.E.V.E.N." The tapping responds.

"Thank god," I say sitting down, I wonder if oh, yeah, I'm talking out of both mouths. "So like, what's the whole pecker situation? It's gotta vibrate right?"

"Are you *talking to Mannequin!?*" Skitter suddenly exclaims.

I look at Skitter, "Yeah? Jesus, did you think I was asking you?! You're *Sixteen!*"

"He's a *serial killer! He kills tinkers that can change the world!*" Skitter growls out.

"*I am also a Serial Killer! I kill... Pretty Nazis mostly! Entirely.*" I wave my hand at her, "Does it vibrate? Is it heated? I know you know what the Vagus nerves are. Come on."

"He killed a guy that was making hydroelectric dams that could power the entire US! That's at least a couple million dead!" Skitter points at the sky with an annoyed expression.

I groan, and then stand. "Yeah, and if I can bait him into something stupid. Make him think I'm an idiot, when he comes back around he'll be expecting less. If I'm affable, then it diminishes him."

"R.E.C.O.M.M.E.N.D. W.E.A.P.O.N.S." He pauses the tapping, as if taking a breath, "F.L.E.S.H. A.L.O.N.E. N.O.T. E.N.O.U.G.H."

"I will make *insane* weapons if you answer my question." I say to him, "I'll make shit that'll make whatever's left of your vagus system cream. Does. It. Vibrate?"

"N.O." The disappointing answer comes.

"See? I won," I said to Skitter, looking up at her. Then I realize she's not hearing the other half of this conversation. "He got spooked, he's in

hiding now for seven days. Also he no longer has like, *those* parts so that avenue isn't going to work. Sadly. You see a forty-seven year old heart in a tin can you hope it's a problem solved with a bit of spit and a— And you're still sixteen." I mutter to myself, cutting myself off immediately. "*God damnit.*"

"I'm not a kid. You can say stuff. Its just words." Skitter annoyingly states, her swarm buzzing. "He's gone again, past my range." As he still taps at me every so often to remind me of the flesh's presence.

"Yeah. Men are just... like that they brush up against you *constantly* and then back away scared." I say with a small sigh. "We just need to reach out and pin him. He'll get his."

"We don't know where he is, I think he has the advantage of initiative, but we're on the defensive." She says.

"Uh, what I'd like to do is a tactic known as Digging In." I look at her, "I'm gonna set up a Morse Code laser. Put it ontop of something and... Work. There. Why let him tease us?"

"He wants you to do that. He wants you to try and tech a way around him. He's a serial killer who *kills* Tinkers. Teching isn't the *solution*, at least not at your level." Skitter growls annoyed.

"I'm *aware*, my technical skills are dog shit to be honest. All I can do is make chat bots." I try to explain to her the plan.

"Exactly, and you can't improve *that* much in seven days." Skitter waves a hand at me.

"Skitter," I say quietly, "What would you rather do? Spend this time just pissed off saying nothing will work?"

"I'm *thinking*. What *can* you make, what's your specialization?" Skitter asks, starting to think.

I say to her, "Can I say my plan?"

"Get it out already!" She growls, moving from the spot where she struck Mannequin to somewhere near one of the wounded.

"I make *drones*, but I'm *really really* not good at it. The best thing I've ever made was a big RV." I say to her simply, "My real specialization is *talking* and *biokinetics*. We can tunnel the city out, create huge pockets of drones, the Queen Bee kind. I can't control them though, you can't make your bugs *better* just more. I can't make things *move* but I can make them better."

"We can make a horror show." I say simply.

"But he has samples of you and my bugs. He's going to make a new toxin. He *already knows* about bugs and meat Talia. Think *new*." Skitter says confidently.

*But I like bugs and meat.* It's annoying, but I'm exhausted and I'm *so distracted* by the lack of Loona, and the lack of Nessa, and Jessica. So new, what's new. "New. Wait, mushrooms were new, like entirely."

Five lights circle in my head, ready to be used.

"I made the mushrooms into meat, but that's just like... I can't get over the aesthetic." I am going to get screamed at I'm sure.

"Why?" Skitter interrogates, its not a scream really, just, *utterly* baffled.

"Because it's *me!*" I say waving my hand, "It's universal! It's..."

"You want to *win*, not be pretty doing it. Meat's got flaws in this *situation*, we need to move past it." Skitter says.

"So do bugs, are you planning to drop all the bugs?!" I say to her.

"I CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT THAT!" Skitter *screams* at me out of nowhere.

"Whoa, I didn't know that." I say quickly, readjusting to new information, I don't flinch, and I'm sure, in some way my perfect reaction makes it worse. "I didn't know."

Skitter's swarm slows down buzzing as she reasserts herself, "That's fine, you do know. How can you *change*. We need to *win*, that's all that matters right now. Weapons, armour? Vehicles? Vir-No he's sealed, think, *think*, nanomachines? Armsmaster made a nanomachine knife, it cut into Leviathan." She's just throwing ideas out.

"I'm good with guns, like, really good." I say to her, trying to get the point across, "I made a gun that caused Leviathan to readjust his plan. It transmitted healing, but it was a good gun. The Walmart had... Turrets all over it, the heist was with a unmanned vehicle."

"Robots?" I say, looking at her, "Like, like a—" I don't know. I don't really know, and I'm exhausted. It's only been a day I think. When did I last sleep?

"Okay, robots, guns, robots sounds better, focus on that, robotic things." Skitter notes my exhaustion somehow, probably the fadeout mid sentence. "I'll get you scrap electronics and metal, I'll get it to you, sit down, find tools, work on *robots and guns*." She's clear, concise and direct. Easy to follow.

I don't pout but I sit down, and let the mushrooms spread out and bring things to me in a crawling wall of mycelium, I press my back against an escalator and think. I don't want to give up this too. Not really, but I have too.

Because a sixteen year old told me too.

Because I'm so independent.

Loona probably pulled shit immediately, that's why I haven't heard from her. She's been in a chemically-induced coma this entire time. She might even be dead for all I can tell from the tracker.

They might have rehabilitated her. I might be all alone. With *no-one* to take advantage of. That's where I started, so... Slice a neck, steal a .38 and get back to work re-building. Knuckle-up buttercup. That's probably not it.



"A... A mech suit?" I *have* existing abilities, but I can reinvent them. I'll just... Make that, I guess, something I can floor in? Wait, I can control that flesh remotely.

Hundreds of mech suits? With a bit of me inside piloting them? No, I can't control that many instances of myself.

"Okay, what do you need for that? What's the ingredients? Metal? Copper? What?" Skitter asks, immediately going with the plan.

"I'm old and slow, I think slower." I say to Skitter with a deep breath. "I'm gonna need a minute, I don't do things spur of the moment. I just make it seem that way. Quick on the fly shit exhausts me to the point where I pass out."

I lean my head back and close my eyes for a second. Robots, Mechs, Drones, Guns, Meat, insects. Horror show. I can keep the aesthetic, but get rid of the power. I can do it, I just need to get rid of that, drop it.

Social manipulation, perfect *lies*, tricks. My strength isn't brute strength. It's knowing what pisses people off. What makes them tick. With Leviathan, I found out it was a trap. I try to shoot Miss Militia. He pivots, I get him focussed on me. He *loses* because *other people* beat him. Because I could figure out how to be irritating.

"We build the bots, we make the meat still, it's just a covering." I say with my eyes closed, "He plans for the meat, because that's what he sees, inside of everything is the metal. He deploys anti-flesh weaponry, the flesh dies, giant drones with-in that do the same thing."

"Okay, how many can you make in a week?" She asks me, and the answer isn't *as* great as I'd like it to be while the lights orbit and wink out, filling me with sparks of knowledge.

*Five*. I slam my head against the elevator. That's not good enough, it feels good however I realise I haven't *really* been with violence either. A few more solid thwacks, I can feel my head split open, one more and the skull cracks. It's *refreshing*, eye opening. "Five, I can do five."

“Okay, that’s fine. I need you *fresh* and capable for this. Take your rest. I’ll stand watch. When you get up, get to work. Lets win.” Skitter points to a cot nearby and then the swarm buzzes out, likely to thinly spread across the area.

“I... I need calories, literally anything that burns or decomposes. Rotting wood, acid, diesel fuel even. For rest, not for work, I need to eat. Bodies *actually* are good, it’s not just aesthetic, I don’t have to break it down, it’s just already existing parts recycled.” I walk towards the cot, and narrow my eyes at her, very frustrated that I’m being babied.

“I’ll find some,” Skitter has her swarm moves/

“You don’t like being babied, Skitter.” I say as I collapse into the cot, “You don’t need to watch over me, I’ve dealt with worse.”

“I’ll do what I think needs doing.” Skitter answers.

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She brought cheese. Specifically, fifty nine buckets of mascarpone cheese. Apparently one-twenty calories a tablespoon. There’s a lot of tablespoons in these buckets.

I don’t bother arguing, I just say, “Thank you.” And dig in, I know I’m winning, but it’s just *costing* a bit more than I want to give.

The recovery is rapid enough, my stomach can turn food into usable energy in about fifteen minutes, and that means at roughly fifteen minutes, I *immediately* start feeling better and better while the hundreds of thousands, probably a total of a little over a million calories settle in as fat, making certain aspects of my body swell up again after being drained to near-nothing in minutes of fighting.

“Are you healthy enough to work or do you need more?” Skitter asks, the swarm buzzing around.

“This is great, no I’m good. I won’t be doing party tricks for your friends next time. I need steel, old cars from the seventies, and aramid fibers.

That's kevlar, it's in high strength ropes, bullet proof jackets and shit. " I crack my neck, "The steel's going to get broken down into thread, mixed with concrete to make tires. The kevlar and aramids are going to be used for joints. What did you do with that nuke by the way?"

"PRT took it." Skitter says, "Would spider silk be better than kevlar? Darwin's Bark is ten times tougher. It's what I made my outfit out of." She points at the suit that caught Mannequin's blade.

"Uh. Yes." I nod, "I can super charge the spiders to produce faster maybe? Just pump energy into them."

"Good, this took me two weeks to weave normally. I'll lead you to my Darwin's Bark colony. They're expensive, be careful, they were four grand to ship." Skitter waves, leading me towards something outside, in the street and then further away.

This is a sign of trust, I don't know what I did to earn it. I just follow. I'm getting paranoid mostly because I'm isolated. That makes me *more* paranoid, because the thought *I did this to myself*, is *generally* something victims think. Though, in this instance, it's quite literal. There were a dozen stupid decisions that led to the *Darwin's Bark* colony.

She finds a house, goes into it, and has *fifty* spiders come out of a vent, covered in silk leavings, looking very exotic.

"Do you want... More? And also faster?" I look at them, I can feel them they're *really really simple*.

"Make them better at taking the cold. They breed in clutches of three thousand, I can keep them from eating eachother. Its just too cold here. They're from Madagascar." Skitter rapid-fire says as she lets them crawl over her.

It takes less than a second, they... Just need to be a little warmer. I give them little hairs. It keeps them warm. I make sure the hairs can still radiate out the heat if they get too hot. They're a bit furrier.

I make them larger, watching the internal mechanisms for the silk, and making sure that part is kept largely intact and in scale. I keep fiddling, three thousand, that's... Okay, but they're bigger now, they can do more. Each one is about the size of a hand now.

"Good work, this is excellent." Skitter says as she leans in, the orange lenses of her suit glimmering in the dark light as the spider moves, then scuttles, and then extrudes silk.

"You learn *fast*." I say with a smile, though I make sure they're efficient, being so much bigger might mean they need too much food to sustain themselves, but no that's *not really* a problem because Skitter can keep them fed. Can I make the spinnerets faster?

The silk comes out fast, I think roughly a metre an hour at a guess. With fifty, it should be fine. Its got greater extensibility than kevlar, I'll have to wind it tighter to account for that, but its internal strength is incredible, *ten times* the durability. One-point-three MegaPascals. My mind is racing with ideas, synthetic muscle made of it, introduce a holding fluid, a solution of flesh and fluid that I could control, base it off the spinnerets, muscle that can heal in a suit. Walking becomes a real possibility with this. I don't need carbon nanotubes, this is a close natural cousin.

"Spider... Mech." I say as I mostly thinking about the nano-weave.

"*Spider* Mech. Okay, you know what your powers do. Spider mech." Skitter moves on, "How much and what. Are we making one huge one? Several smaller ones?" She's interrogating fast.

"We're making four, and then we're letting them make insects into repairs. We're going to basically tinkertech a forge that converts things into auto-repairing components." I say, I'm trying not to snap. She's just *applying* what she's taught. That's the point of it.

"I have about three million insects around right now. Is that enough?" She asks. "And what else do you need. I collected metal and wires while you were sleeping or whatever that was."

"Temper tantrum, they can be extremely relaxing." I say as a joke, "I need *steel*/specifically high-quality steel. If a car is from the seventies, that's perfect. Those are built out of old tanks and shit."

"I...I got something better I think. Follow me." Skitter says, moving out of this place.

This probably isn't what you think it is anyways. Sure you're taking orders right *now* but that's not because you're broken. It's because we've got shit to do.

She leads me to a coastline sunken in by Leviathan. And *on* the coasts are the rusted *hulks* of old container ships and every other type of long-distance vessel, put together with the intent of taking anything a sea can throw at it, and bear its own million tonne weight.

"The darwin's bark can replace the silicon for most of the transistors. It's fucking *magic*," I say as I study the threads carefully, "The only reason we don't use it, is because it's a pain in the ass to get."

"I need old wood and shit," I say as well, "Carbon, base form of life. I'm assuming you're not going to hand me corpses."

"I'll figure it out, you can get to work." Skitter says, gesturing to the boats. "Check for algae too. Should be thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of pounds of it on the rocks and under the old dockways and the Boardwalk." She can *recall* so much on a moments notice, "Fish too, its crabbing season, so you might be able to draw in those."

"Sorry, I just uh. Solved... Climate change." I said looking at her and then shrugging. I reach out to the biomass in the swarm of bugs, and then I create a very horrific *thing* it's not a machine, it's a giant lung that separates carbon dioxide from oxygen. It pumps it all in, and then traps the carbon until becomes solid. It moves at such a rapid pace that the gas because sand almost instantly and the tiny flakes drop.

Which is the proto-type, I think, and make it big as a four-story building, with a tube to deposit the sand. It's now just *dropping* huge layers of graphite, it's chemically inert, resistant to high temperatures, and even

has a layered planar structure. "I'm taking Carbon Dioxide out of the air, keeping the Carbon, and then releasing the Dioxide."

"That's probably highly explosive." Skitter says as the building rises.

"No it's graphite, it's not explosive. It's a stable, non flammable, it takes—"

"Pure oxygen is." Skitter takes another step back.

*"Oh god it's just dripping LOx."* I mutter as I *also* take a step back.

"No fires, no sparks, its fine if there's no trigger. Maybe make it... keep the oxygen gaseous." Skitter suggests.

I'm already creating a bladder to collect it instead, and then *also* have it suck out some of the surrounding Hydrogen. Creating a nice, beautiful, lovely creature that has a single purpose. To make a spark, and explode hydrogen with LOx. I look at Skitter and bite my knuckle.

"We have to test one." I say simply as I gently walk over and pick up the bladder. "You ready?"

*"Why can't you just pump it into the water."* Skitter asks as she steps away from the bladder.

I toss it into the distance, and it *ignites* into a huge, spontaneous combustion. The fireball dumps 3,000 celsius into the atmosphere around it (Or 5,432 Farenheit.)

A ten foot crater around it turns to glass.

"Skitter, they're hydrogen grenades." I say to her with a big smile. "I made *mini-nukes*."

"They're more like incendiary explosives. A nuclear reaction would be a lot more violent. And would need a uranium starter wouldn't it?" Skitter questions me immediately, *refusing* to give me my moment.

"Wait, *yes*, there's radium around I think, I wonder. There's tho—" She's cutting me off pretty quick.

"No. You don't do that." The swarm buzzes, and she glares through the orange lenses.

I moan angrily, and kick some sand, "Why do you *limit* yourself so heavily?" I'm now talking to her *fully* like an adult, completely forgetting her age, "You are *So Much More* than all of this and it *boggles* me you waste it."

"You aren't going to *destroy* chunks of the city for no reason." She stares.

"There *is* a reason, the reason is showing *Alexandria* and the *PRT* that leaving me here, alone, with you is going to fucking—" Talia looks behind her.

"Showing me *what?*" Alexandria's voice crackles from the air behind and above me. She's flying with a cape flapping in the wind.

"Why did you let the Slaughter Nine murder an entire city?" I ask her immediately, having gotten her attention. I want to make her say it in front of Skitter.

"Ellisburg had an outbreak, New York had the Elite try and crash the world economy, a container ship in the Mediterranean was sinking, take your pick of crises Talia. You can determine their worth." Alexandria growls out.

"Hmm, well, the container ship has less people, and the world economy benefits billionaires." I say quickly, I wonder if she realises what I'm doing.

"The world economy feeds millions, the container ship was full of food and industrial parts." She explains.

"If only there were humans who could do something with biology, food, and water. They could possibly solve these problems." I say to her quickly.

"If *only* there were *trustworthy* humans who could be given the power to solve these problems." She bites back.

"If *only* there were people who were willing to try and trust the goodness of people." I say back I'm using what Skitter's been saying and weaponizing it to twist this into something beneficial.

"There's no such thing as goodness in people with *power*. There's rules and regulations and things to follow so we *don't* go to excesses. Don't try this debate with me Talia. I can end your position with five words." Alexandria states.

"Yeah? What's that?" I say to her with a raised eyebrow.

"Where are the Valkyrie Twins?" Alexandria asks, crossing her arms.

I kind of just stare at her confused, I don't... Remember them, it's not really a trick I don't know any Valkyrie twins. "The... You're so confident I feel like I should definitely be ringing a bell. I'm... I know this is going to sound terrible, I legitimately can't remember any Valkyrie Twins? Like angels?"

Alexandria stares through me. "The two women."

"*Oh!* Uh, Loona hasn't contacted me, you've killed them all." I said with full confidence, "You've murdered my family, there's just no real other way. "

"I should have. You're all monsters in one way or another. But no. It's why I am *back*." Alexandria states.

"No you're *back* because I was making *sense*." I said though she's definitely blackmailing me now.

"I'm *back* because Siberian broke into and recovered Lunar. I have reason to believe she is being nominated." Alexandria snaps.



"What the *FUCK* does that mean?!" I say, "What the fuck are you doing if your only payment was *fucking* protecting my *fucking* wife."

"It means you *and* her are being nominated for membership in the Slaughterhouse Nine." Alexandria ignores the question.

"The people you let kill an entire city, and then let my wife get kidnapped by, you. The invincible woman who wants to kill all the criminals." I snap at her angrily, *fully* losing my senses. "At *this* point the only reason I'm still *fucking here* is because the only person who can *fucking plan* is *her!*" I shout it loudly I try to push her and she doesn't move, my bones just crack.

I growl at her, "Just fucking kill me. I've lost everything. I'm done helping you. This is what you want, so just do it." I just sit down, I'm completely done.

"No one cares if you're done." Alexandria growls, before *booming* away in a mach-explosion.

I snort at her. "Yeah, eat shit, and die asshole."

Skitter stares.

"My family is dead, don't." I say at her.

"Mine probably is too. I get it." Skitter sighs.

"Oh, did Alexandria *kidnap* them and then *fucking forced you to work for her!*" I growl it out into the fucking sky. Where I know she can hear me.

"No, I left home thinking I'd come back to them. And then they were gone before I could." Skitter's voice is less enthused about the conversation, a little dull.

"I'm... Sorry." I say, putting my only feelings down. There's nothing left now. Thank god there's no actual rewards here or I might actually feel something. "It's hard, I know it's hard."

"Its not about it being hard. Its about winning." Skitter cuts through my attempted comfort. "You're losing right now, and you're just accepting the loss."

"Oh, uh know, I'm just changing the win condition." I say to her, "You're going to be better, I'm going to just... Fucking take orders and turn off like, the parts that care about my family. I'll be fine in a bit. I think."

"Good, there'll be time to break later." Skitter nods to me, accepting the logic.

I close my eyes, and rub them. I'm going to just keep working, though I do say, "She's *bad* at reading feelings or people. *Tell* her when you get mad." It's all I've got, really. I start working, the tinker fugue will pull me into next week.

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I'm just... Done... I can feel it walking on the mycelium. He's coming, he either hasn't figured it out, or it's a trap. The hydrogen bombs don't go off, so it's a trap there's no weight behind the sensation. I don't do much, they're robots covered in flesh. I'm just bait, honestly I'm kind of hoping that this freak just kills me. Loona will *absolutely* join the Slaughter Nine, Skitter *won't* let me live, she's gotten far closer already than she realises. My thoughts are interrupted by a steel fist connecting with my jaw.

"W. A. K. E. U. P." I feel tapped into a chunk of flesh in glass as Mannequin spins and twists, showing off manipulable tendons and a new, slick-white exterior that seems glossy or lacquered somehow.

I *growl* at the dick head. Though I also jump back, and try a tinkered together faux-weapon. It's advanced, sure, but it's not the main course. Just thrown together in a few hours, there's no light that fires from it, but hydrogen and fluoride defuse from collected materials around the city. It's hooked into my wrist, and I absorb it through the mycellium that surrounds me.

The beam cuts ragged gashes in the ground as I aim and fire. I need to see his preparations, so I know what the final piece of the drone should be.

It sizzles, visible only by the heat-ripple of air. It strikes the ceramics of his armour poorly, at an angle, he's never standing still, always dancing like an acrobat of plastic and plate, the ceramic heats, but it doesn't shatter, he moves too much for that. I dump the H-F cell.

"The ceramic *heats!*" I say to Skitter, underground Arthropod mechanics almost human put the finishing touches on the bots, and even as we fight, I wrap them in their hidden coating. To *hard sell* the lie I dive behind cover and pull out a far larger weapon.

This one fires chunks of myself that causes rapid cellular growth in the mycelium, thick lines of bulbous mushrooms fill and expand with liquid oxygen and hydrogen, then *detonate* in that line a half second later. Each shot I fire at him creates new growths that reach out and burst forward like dorsal fins breaking the tide.

The detonations form hot, but momentary fireballs as he moves through the Graveyard. Taking cover behind hulks of old steel leviathans and jumping over ten foot walls of steel from cracked old hulls. As always, he's almost lightning fast, and absurdly mobile with twisting limbs. Its easy to lose track of Mannequin, which is why Skitter is *hidden*, coating the entire area in bugs and buzzing a storm wherever she can sense him.

We're guiding him, towards something, something important. A *specific* steel boat, and he's almost there, almost in reach as the quivering flesh *undulates*. I think he's cocky, I think he'll want to show off. I think he knows it's there.

The boat *heats*, and then detonates with him inside it. A bloom of hydrogen pushes fire free of every opening, an ocean of it gone in a few seconds. There's an eerie silence after the colossal detonation. Skitter doesn't let up, pushing insects in to see as the air cools.

And then, Mannequin jokingly, like playing a game, shoves a hand through the metal, twists it all the way around, the blackened ceramic somewhat cracked by the heat exposure. And waves at me, a tapping continues, “N. E. E. D. M. E. T. A. L.”

The ground underneath him splits open as five of the drones I’ve made start to spill out. Giant hyper muscular gorilla’s with arthropod plating. What would be a hyper advancement of a biokinetic, actual puppetable life rushes Mannequin with tiny tails of hydrogen accompanying each swing of their massive fists. I keep firing my lines of hydrogen at him.

He darts between the drones, ripping his hand free of the steel to shove a whole plasto-ceramic body through, and dumps gas that utterly virulently demolishes flesh, a far more aggressive and lethal bioweapon with a short lifetime. One that is hard to adapt against, though I try, just to make the flesh last longer.

Still, the original intent works, and the arthropodic drones underneath the flesh reveal, unfolding additional limbs as cold, grey steel reveals itself, grasper appendaged reaching for him with mechanical shivering speed, jabbing forwards. He avoids eight of the ten hands by twisting, near-breaking and bending ball joints until one slams into his leg and gets a firm grip on it.

His blade embeds in its central processor near-instantly, but that moment of distraction lets the other four of the drone’s heuristic combat systems grab him tightly and start to *squeeze*, the heat from the hands builds as hydrogen torches start to burn at the palms, rapidly heating him as the barely combat equipment turns to rip into the Mannequin and his plating.

A bang from a rifle sees another drone taken out, making me hiss as I *need* to get better materials than just decent salvaged steel, I need to have more time to *work*. His outer plates give way with repetitive almost glass-like crack-crunches, falling to reveal a second, more flexible polymer white underlayer.

His limbs detach, and four new ones shove free of his back now, letting him fall between the drones that need a second to realize he's gone. He scuttles like an insect between their legs as the tapping in his chest speeds up, "G. O. O. D. V. E. R. Y. L. U. N. A. R. W. I. T. H. U. S." He starts to try and scuttle away, vanishing quickly.

The flesh inside him, his precious kept piece, I say through it with a giggle, "Has she uh, *gotten* any of you yet?" Then I make it rapidly expand like foam, eat at the metals inside. Tearing him from the inside out. Absorbing them and embedding them inside of it to create more teeth and steel abrasings.

"S. I. B. E. R. I. A. N. P. L. A. Y. I. N. G." He answers as the metallic components twist under stress, only for a new form of paralytic to be deployed into the flesh.

I have to twist and work my way around it, trying to develop a hyper relevant nerve system. I just need to *slow him down* so the robotic drones can catch up. "I don't know what that means actually, poor Siberia." I say as I will the body to create the equivalent of charcoal to suck out and store the new *chemical*. The constant evolution is exhausting I've lost so many calories.

"F. O. L. L. O. W. M. E. S. E. E. H. E. R." He answers my words, and continues moving,

"She's fine," I say with full and unflappable confidence, though it's merely a facsimile, "She can't be beat, she doesn't have any of the proper responses. She's better than me in every way." Sometimes I hope Loona can hear me over the sensor. That it still sends her my love.

"M. A. Y. B. E." He taps as the chemical is countered, the new containment method seems to be a liquid nitrogen discharge. He's adapting just as I am, every time my flesh is too far to modify, he creates new methods to hold and keep it. To keep it *h/s*.

The minute the chemical is countered, I try to split my flesh into processors to be controlled by Skitter, I can't *fee*/her pulse, but I've

learned how to emulate the insects enough that they simply behave with the rest of the swarm. *He's keeping it alive.*

New focus, I'm now trying to turn this against him. It's no longer about killing him, but about *faking* something, trying to make it seem like the flesh needs proximity now, that it's lost too much. I try to fake it *dying* doing everything I can to sell the lie. He can *try* to keep it alive, but I need him to *do something* to it. I want him to replenish my biomass.

The deep freeze sets in, and the flesh slowly stops responding to me. I need to pull this trick much earlier, when it's much closer to me. Some of it undergoes a violent apoptosis, but it's so distant the whole *attempt* feels like manipulating something with fingertips on a fully outstretched hand.

Finally, he's too far to easily track, though the tapping resolves into coordinates, and then a phrase, "Y. O. U. R. T. U. R. N."

It's a trap, and I've already mourned, to do so twice *and die* would be so *very* stupid. Loona would have never forgiven me. I don't need to tell Skitter the coordinates and I don't really react at all. I shrug, I locked it away, it's just... Gone now. "Nah, you lost, why would I chase? You'll be back."

"E. X. C. H. A. N. G. E. E. Q. U. A. L. D. E. F. E. N. D. T. H. E. N. A. T. T. A. C. K." Mannequin explains.

"Really am I running?" I ask looking around myself, "It doesn't seem like I'm running. No, yeah, no I'm definitely just standing on the beach watching you run away, and try manipulation through morse code."

"D. I. S. S. A. P. P. O. I. N. T. I. N. G. W. I. L. L. M. O. V. E. O. N." Mannequin taps back slowly and almost sadly.

I laugh at him, "I guess so, let me know when you want an ass kicking again, you're still cute."

Skitter kicks out from her hiding spot with a breath, taking in cooler air after turning a chunk of hull into a sauna with body heat and mental stress from controlling bugs.

"You trust me to let me heal you, or are we still at the like whatever phase." I say with a sigh.

"I don't trust anyone. Where did he go?" Skitter demands with a grit to her voice.

I look at her, and I say, "I'm not walking into a trap. He fled, he's playing games, it's a bad strategy. Said that Siberia and a few others will be there. It's an ambush, they want you to be a serial killer, Alexandria was stupid enough to think she needed me here to prevent that. I think like, I'm going to get extracted soon. I'm too dangerous to keep talking." I don't even look at Manniquin's general direction, "I'm going to poke a single hair, don't kill me, I can detect dna at this point."

"What? Why?" She asks, swarm starting to buzz.

"Your dad." I say as I reach out and just, scan it. It takes a *nano* second and the bugs are on me immediately, but I'm just... Done. I can feel the chittering swarm start to take me apart as I reach out. I don't fight them.

"Refugee shelter, he's deaf." I say as they keep going. "Bye, I guess? Don't blame yourself, this is pretty much just suicide." The swarm descends. It takes uncomfortably long.

[hr=3]

I dunno when I woke up. It's a moment between nothing and reality again. Like I turned off and on. Uncomfortable, displeasing and utterly shiver-inducing. It's *co/d* here. Utterly bone cold in a way that can't really be described easily. Winter in the East Coast this far north is never pleasant. There's no screeching noise of insects, nor a Mannequin waiting for me. There's not even a mycelium network, direct sunlight for weeks and months having made that struggle and die.

"Hahahahahaha," I laugh at myself, screaming and kicking, "I can't *die*. Fuck!" I smash my hand back into the ground beneath me. "Not even that is right. Just going to grow old I guess."

A silent coastline greets me in that statement. Eerie quiet in a way. I'm left with Brockton to my back and the Atlantic to my front. Salt fills my lungs, or at least the taste of it, while a breeze hits me.

"I dunno, it doesn't matter, I'll just start over." I say it for the third time now in Brockton as I stand, I look at my hands and feet, then look around to see if anyone's watching. If there's camera, I'm just going to step into something else entirely. I was functional back home, I can probably just be functional here if I dial it back a dozen notches.

"That so." *That bitch* is behind me again, slightly up in the air. Turning to glare at her, she looks...*rough*, like she went ten rounds with a threshing machine. Cuts that have closed up all over her face and uniform, black polymer and plates scratched to hell, or scarred to hell really by what looks like human-sized fingertips. Her voice is ragged, probably sourced from that throat scar that reaches up to her lower jaw which resembles an intentional mangling of vocal chords.

"Did she tell you? When she got angry?" I ask her, mostly because it'd be *something* it'd mean something to know I did even a little touch of good.

"A few times. You're mopey for a resurrected person. Why's that?" Alexandria sounds...humbler somehow. As if she's been brought down a peg, or at least is tired in a way.

I touched my jaw, thinking, "I took a risk, where either option seemed like a win. I tried to do what I promised, help Skitter find her dad. Touched a strand of hair and told her. She killed me for it, but I was okay with it. Either I'd die and not have to live with the consequences, or I'd be useful." I stand up, it's maybe sketchy logic, but she had mental health issues I hadn't accounted for, and I'd been pushing pretty hard. "Most people let up a little being around me for a week."



"She has a series of disorders, the least of which is paranoia and a distrust of authority." Alexandria lowers to the ground.

"Figured I was too weak to seem like an authority," I said quietly, "And you had just left. I follow S9 it's the same fate. I tell her where the S9 is, we run over there and I have to watch Loona die. If I keep it from her, then I fuck up. I dunno. I'm tired." I say with a true, weariness The kind that makes it hard to keep your eyes open even when you're standing. It's not moping really, just an exhaustion.

"The tiredness doesn't go away. You just live with it." Alexandria walks over with a stomp to her step. She's still unreadable, even more now with the scars through her dark skin.

I sigh, but I accept the empathy, nodding to show my appreciation. "Didn't think that could happen. That's not great." I say pointing to the scars.

"Mhm, you're one to talk." She points at the pile of dead bugs which ringed where I woke up from. "We have work to do. Lunar joined. Replaced *Siberian*." She growls that one out, flexing her hand.

"Can I just have *something*." I say to her as I stand, "I don't actually know what, but I just need *something* to hold onto."

"Our first task is recovering Lunar from the Slaughterhouse Nine. As far as the public is concerned, the newly recruited hero of the PRT was kidnapped. After that, you're going to shift her shape. We're going to write her off as dead." Alexandria explains, "After that, you, her and your...*toys*, if they're still alive, get to be one big happy family. And be useful to a goal greater than you can imagine."

"Alright, that's something." I say with a nod cracking my back and then shaking my hands out, stimming mostly to get the nerves going. It's hard after being *gone* for so long, and I don't know if the stream of consciousness counts as unbroken or not, however, I am me. If I am a copy of me then I owe it to me to be happy and keep going on.

I look up and say, "How do we get there?"

"Not yet. They haven't resurfaced. Its usually two weeks between hits." Alexandria says, offering a hand to me, "Before then, we're going to catch you up." The hand has long dried blood on it, the other glove is washed, but this one hasn't been.

I take it, but I ask, "Is the blood sentimental?" I ask now, it's a new thing, a new trait.

"Siberian's." Alexandria answers as we both rise into the sky, a slow sort of acceleration.

"I could make it something like... A ring? A necklace? You probably leave it unwashed for a reason." I say finally as we go.

"A warning. Nothing's unbeatable." Alexandria answers me, still a grim woman in most ways, just a little quieter now.

"What's your favorite band?" I ask with a small laugh. It's mostly just being casual to cut through the tension. I refuse to be *anything* but me even in this moment. Which proved my point, even if Skitter didn't see it. I have definition, the mirror just helps with the unimportant stuff.

"The Eagles." Alexandria gives a rare smirk, enjoying the question.

I laugh pretty hard, the irony of it, or at least the weird connection. "I do too, everyone knows Hotel California I think, but Witchy Woman is sick too." Then the moment passes, "I would *want* to start with if I had a positive influence on anything."

"Take It To The Limit for me. And you did. You just did a lot more bad." Alexandria's unfailingly brutal in her words as we drift through the air, "You let yourself descend into whatever you wanted instead of anything actionable. Chased highs instead of achievements."

"Uh, yeah? Achievements aren't really going to be much in a place like this. I'm just going to do a bunch of shit to survive, and then... ?" I kind of gesture vaguely to the future.

“‘Achievements’ is a vague word. There’s only one achievement, and it *is* survival.” Alexandria admits as we rise above the level where anyone could hear us, some half-thought adaptation keeping me a little warmer than I was to deal with the altitude. “But it’s not just yours. And it’s not just a town or a city.”

“Alright,” I don’t believe her, not really. She’s got this whole save the world thing, and hell it might actually be in danger of like cracking in two, “I’m down for it.”

“Scion has vanished,” Alexandria states, it sounds weighty in her tone. “Last we saw of him, he broke the loop Jack Slash was in, spoke to him, and then vanished.”

“He kinda just does whatever though right?” I ask her, it’s the gold guy I think? “Like, he could have saved Nessa and Jessica in like, a *half second* and just walked past because that’s what his weird ADHD brain focussed on.”

“Scion is not human.” Alexandria gives a new glimmer of information, “He-*It* never was human. Door Me.” She says, and a portal appears in open air that she flies through, pulling me with her into a darkened chamber of concrete and cold metal tiling. There’s no furniture here, and a heavy door out front that looks proofed for someone much stronger. A prison cell. “This is your workshop. Tell us what you need.”

“Huh, okay.” I say, wondering if I should do tinker or flesh. “What I’m going against?” I look around the place, “I need ways to smith advanced alloys, like an actual furnace. I need *good* steal, or just raw iron, and I’ll make it myself.”

“An alien with every power you can imagine.” Alexandria says.

I sigh, so it’s a death sentence, “Alright, then I’ll also need Calorie dense materials, I think Uranium is *actually* pretty calorie dense, I won’t make a nuke with it.” I look around, thinking harder, “Cameras, tapes of every fight with every cape. It needs to be annotated, the more detail, the better detail, the better. *Every. Single. Fight.* You can get. Hell, start up

illegal bum fights if you need too. I'd be happiest with billions of minutes, but the possibility of that much existing might be slim."

"We can have every fight ever recorded." Alexandria nods. "And a few more that never happened."

"Alright, all that needs to fit on storage medium," I say quietly, rubbing my chin.

"You'll have to build that. We can fill it." She answers.

I narrow my eyes, "Funnily enough *I think*, wait no I can just replicate the biology. I think there's a few, tighter kinds of superconductors I can make. Though transfer speed will be a problem." I'm not talking to her, I'm more thinking of raw materials.

"I've got one more thing." Alexandria says, and then turns to a wall, "Door, Eden." And a portal opens up.

It's beautiful. A mountain-far far far more of flesh. Its immense, its colossal. Crystal is hewn into the meat like a perfect union, bonding at a scale far far lesser and more minute than cellular. Its dead, yet its metabolism, powered by stars and black holes still ripples and roils without guidance, charging the components.

"*Oh fuck,*" I whisper looking at it, "That'll work." I say gently caressing this creation plucking at the seams for reactions. Studying tiny parts of it, "Okay, the data storage will be easy. This thing already does it." I say as I squint my eyes slightly, I want it *closer* and I reach out for it almost instinctually pulling it towards myself. To my shock, the flesh *moves* on it's own pushing towards my grip. It's a tiny fractional chunk, "I'll put it all in metal cases, that's better for outsides. Biology's better at computing, but Metal's better at dispersing heat. It can't be one or the other, needs to be both."

I look at the workshop again, and then back. "I'm going to make... A better Scion. I need human psychology texts as well. *Everything*. Good, bad, doesn't matter. We can fine-tune and align it after it just *knows* what's out there."

I whisper to myself, "Meats better for blunt impact, but metal is sharp." I walk over to the concrete wall and I make the skin melt off my finger and reveal the bone, and then crumble it's density to chalk, so I can write on the walls. It's a part list, for me.

"Force won't win. Think exotic. This thing bends time and space, every superpower you've seen is in it. Somewhere. Mine, Eidolon's, Legends. In a way." Alexandria says as she points to the mountains of flesh.

"Hmmm? We just need it to survive long enough to talk. It's a stupid idea, but it's my first instinct." I say as I write on the wall quickly, "It's a good instinct, it keeps failing because I've had to work with junk, with incomplete tools, with people who *are* alien. I'm learning, really well. Is Jack Slash alive?" I ask quickly. "We need him alive, he talked to Scion, scion's not human we need that social data."

"Jack Slash is in a time loop of seven seconds. If you walk into it, you'll be in the loop with him." Alexandria says, "He's also a psychotic idiot who did what he did knowing what'll happen."

"Okay, that's fine," I say writing out more equations now, this one far more temporal. I'm trying to find out how entropy works, by solving the equation, "I don't really want to talk to him, I want to rip out every memory of that conversation from his brain into something readable, I might just take the brain out entirely." I mutter to myself.

"Whatever this thing is, the thing that *everything* keeps coming back to is relationships. Interactions with humanity. Scion *talks* for the first time to Jack Slash? He disappears, I insult Leviathan, he tortures me and then loses." I point at the thing behind me, "That thing had more than... Computer, in it. There's *something* there. I can't tell you exactly what, it's *eldritch* like in the fairy sense. Before Lovecraft." I whisper as I write.

"We're..." I laugh quietly, grabbing my mouth, "We're going to make a chatbot. It's just going to give it a *reason* to care. It'll run through the human basics, and then extrapolate on the information it receives, editing itself into a *partner* that holds humanity above all else. Then instead of killing everyone, maybe it'll be in uplifting. Or stasis, or

keeping us as a pet. We don't know, but when Scion felt something, he started *saving* people. That was his first instinct."

I continue, "If that works, then we can get data from it, and that data will tell us *why* the disconnect is happening, and where we can fill in the blanks and guide the conversation."

"You plan too...talk them to death." Alexandria states, not *disbelieving* me but certainly hesitant.

I look at her and nod, "The idea is basically that evolution past a certain point is impossible without some form of pack bonding. Even the most evolved ascendant alien alive probably mates, reproduces, and discusses with each other. I want to give him cockroach wife syndrome, are you familiar?"

"What." Alexandrias tone is flatly unamused, as is the stare I can feel through her helmet.

"It's a real thing, don't—" I sigh, pinching my eyes, "You can train anything to really be attracted to anything if you just connect positive stimuli to the moment. In humans this happens mostly on accident as they chase highs until their interests spiral out from the norm. We're going to just try and get him to *like* the bot enough that he'll keep coming back to it. Then, after a while that'll be enough, because floating around doing random shit was *enough* for very long."

"And *how* long will this take." She asks.

"Well, if it fails, we'll know immediately, because he'll blow it apart, kill me, and then if there's *anything* similar to us be so pissed that annihilation becomes his only goal." I say quickly, with an intense honesty, "If I'm right, then he'll *stop* almost immediately, and keep returning for the positive, or possibly changing stimulus."

Alexandria looks somewhat unimpressed, but shakes the look off her, "We've got slim options, no point not trying. You've got access to the corpse for as long as we have it. Scion hasn't come looking for it yet."

"Doesn't him coming to look for it, prove my point somewhat?" I say as I continue to write equations on the wall, and then lines of code, then data.

"If he comes looking before you're done, all you'll have is you to talk him down." Alexandria states.

"I mean, if he comes looking before I'm done, was I really going to win? I don't work with timelines, probability, with futures or alternate dimensions." I say with a small laugh, "I work with people, breaking them down, building them up, twisting them. Everybody I touch gets... Different, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but different."

"Maybe that's all we'll need." Alexandria sighs, "You're one half of the effort to save the world. Don't be the half that fails." Before turning on a heel and saying "*Door Me, New Delhi.*" Passing through a burning door.

"Uh, wait, find a bunch of like, pretty much everything you have recordings of for Canary's music, send it to Skitter. It'll help mend things a little." I say as she leaves, "She killed me because I knew she would, it wasn't a bad read, I just wanted to die. It was stupid."

I'm muttering quietly now as I work on this *incredibly* stupid thing, and I record what Eden *is* as well. It's shape, it's mass, I try to incorporate *slight* elements in the design. Not *overt* hopefully, god hopefully not overt. If it's too obvious it'll just look like something offensive wearing it as a skin suit.