

Concrete and soil was still settling around them. Echidna's legs buckled beneath the weight of the collapsing ceiling, but she held firm.

Deep breath. Focus. Have to survive.

That she *had* a sense of self preservation surprised her.

There wasn't much light; barely any, with only one set of lights at the far end of the underground complex still intact. It made it nearly impossible to figure out how the ceiling might fall. She could only trust in luck and use the sole piece of shelter available: the gap beneath Echidna's massive bulk.

Her hands and feet slipped on the vomit-slick concrete floor as she scrabbled to reach the only place that was even remotely safe in the midst of the collapsing building. There was too much weight on her head, and on one shoulder, causing her to stumble and sprawl when she tried to stand. At points, she had to let her head drag on the ground as she tried to crawl forward.

Coil set the charges around the perimeter, and on the building above. We're roughly twenty feet below ground. The question is whether the weight of the construction will overcome the integrity of the ground above and the intact walls around us.

It probably will, she realized.

She was forced to lay in the vomit as more of the ceiling fell and Echidna's body was pushed closer to the ground by the burden. Echidna bore down, mere inches above her. The lights crashed to the ground, and the entire underground complex was plunged into absolute darkness.

She could feel grit covering her hand, pulled it back. Soil and dirt would be flowing through cracks, she knew, and even the slightest movements on Echidna's part were opening up more gaps. A thousand trickles of grit, like the sand flowing through a thousand hourglasses, piling in heaps that each slowly grew.

"*Do something,*" Echidna growled, and the base rumble of her voice caused more ground to shift around her, with concrete buckling and cracking under weight and more grit flowing down with the faintest hissing sounds.

Is she talking to me?

Nobody else was responding, so she opened her mouth to speak. Her face was gnarled, her lips refusing to move. It took her two tries before she could make the right sounds, rolling the sounds around her mouth until she found the right one. "Y-er talking to me?"

“Any of you,” Echidna growled. More ground settled around her.

A voice, from some place further away. Female.

“I won’t let it end like this,” Echidna rumbled.

“C-can’t help. I’m- I’m useless here. C-can’t really move. Head too big.”

Echidna growled in annoyance.

Again, that other voice nearby, muffled by the intervening terrain.

And a third voice. Male.

“Yes,” Echidna replied.

There was a sensation, wet and oily, followed by the thought, *I’m going to drown now*. Except it wasn’t liquid. It was darkness.

The sensation passed, and the Grue materialized beneath Echidna, a step away. He looked down. “Tattletale.”

“H-hi.”

She only had the real Tattletale in her mouth for a moment, spat her out, with a wad of vomit. Held me inside her mouth. It’s why I’m this warped. I baked too long.

“Can’t take you. Have to take *her*, and that’s going to be hard.”

Take Echidna. “I g-get it.”

She couldn’t quite explain *why*. It just... it made a kind of sense. Do the most damage possible. Maybe if they left Echidna behind, they could get away, find another way to get at the others.

God, she could imagine it. Just thinking about it made her adrenaline surge, gave her that *thrill* that came with facing down any major threat. Beating *the real Tattletale* in a game of wits? It was delicious on so many levels. To know how it would nettle the girl, even *break* her, depending on the degree of the win, while *she* could simultaneously enjoy the victory?

She’d make the *real* Tattletale suffer for her stupidity, her hypocrisy, she’d pluck out the girl’s eyes and puncture her eardrums, bite off her fingers before amputating her arms and legs. She’d leave the girl numb to the world, struggling, *striving* to take in information, slowly going

mad.

And when she was done with her alter-ego, she could go after the other Undersiders. Slowly, surely, *systematically* break them. Then she could destroy this fucking depressing city. The *world*. All the worlds.

Get the right information, reveal the critical details at the right moment... she wasn't quite the *Simurgh*, but there was room for one or two glorious plays before it all came crashing down and they stopped her.

Except there was no guarantee they'd get away. Too many forces arrayed against them. Echidna had more offensive potential, Echidna was the horse to bet on.

She'd settle for letting Echidna do the damage. Live vicariously through the monster. She heard the woman's voice again, speaking to Echidna.

"Wait," Echidna rumbled. "Wait as long as you can. Do it now, they recover before I can act—"

More ground shifted. Something heavy slid down towards the pair that were beneath Echidna. The Tattletale-clone had to crab-walk back to avoid having her legs crushed.

"I'm angry," the Grue-clone said. "Uneasy. Like I need to hit things. Hurt people until my hands are raw. Gotta get out of here."

The Tattletale clone exhaled slowly. She didn't quite feel like that. She felt oddly calm, given the circumstances.

The four humors, she thought. It wasn't quite right, an abstraction, but it made sense that they would gravitate towards certain extremes in behavior. If the Grue was choleric in nature, she was phlegmatic. He was driven to action, she was patient.

A step away from their usual natures, and not in a bad way. It might even make them more effective, for their individual roles.

"B-before you g-go," she said, "B-bring me the other one."

"What?"

"T-t-the one she's t-talking to. Or t-take me to her, if the c-cei... ceiling's less likely to f-fall on my head over there."

His power enveloped her, and then passed. She hadn't moved.

For a second, she thought that he might have left her, but he would have taken Echidna, and that would mean the roof would collapse.

“What?” the woman asked.

Inflection, arrogance; Shatterbird.

“T-there isn’t much g-g-glass here, but there’s dirt. Some s-sand. S-s-” Silicon was too hard to pronounce. “S-stuff there.”

“What of it?”

“E-e-...” the Tattletale clone shut her eyes. The name was too hard to pronounce.

“M-monster girl is leaving, and when she d-does, we d-die. U-un-”

“Stop,” Shatterbird cut her off. “It’s painful to listen to you. You want me to save you?”

“S-save *us*, yes.”

“If I save you, it’ll be by accident.”

“Re-reinforce it.”

She couldn’t see it, not in the absolute darkness, but she could *hear* the shifting sand. Silicon made up so much of the ground around them, and Shatterbird was collecting all of the available material in the area, moving it to where she could use it.

“T-triangles, or s-s-... domes,” she said. She’d picked up enough information here and there to have a grasp of basic architecture. Pyramids and spheres were the strongest shapes.

“I know what I’m doing,” Shatterbird answered her. “Shut up.”

“Going now,” the Grue-clone spoke.

“C-catch them off guard,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“And g-g-give-”

And he was gone, taking Echidna with him.

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by the resulting chaos. “-em hell.”

The ground shook to the point that she had to clench her teeth to keep from biting her tongue.

Dust and dirt blasted across her face and over her naked body, so violent and forceful that she could imagine it penetrating her skin.

Devastating crashes, groans, vibrations; slabs of concrete falling, some twenty or fifty feet across.

Dirt fell on her face, and she coughed, but she wasn't crushed. Slowly but surely, the sounds died down, and everything settled around them.

She raised her head a little, and felt the ponderous weight on top, jiggling like a cheap dessert.

“Huh,” she spoke.

Echo, acoustics, lack of further settling; in some kind of container. Shatterbird-made bubble or vault.

“I'm going to kill you now,” Shatterbird spoke. “Trying to decide between making it slow and enjoying myself in my last hours, or making it fast and leaving myself with more air.”

“O-or, you could k-kill yourself,” the clone responded.

“What?”

She did a read on Shatterbird, using the most basic information she had.

*Arrogant, powerful, performs city-wide attacks with each arrival at a major population center; reputation driven.
Reputation driven, proud, cultured; desires legacy.*

The information was in her head as fast as she'd looked for it, drawn together from a half-dozen disparate pieces of information. “Y-you dont' want people to re-remember you like this.”

“What?”

*Repeating herself, monosyllabic responses, confused; tired, worn out, exhausted from stress of days of containment and enslavement.
Easier to manipulate.*

“Y-you kill me, I die th-thinking that you go down like- like a wimp. C-crying, wailing. Y-you

v-vomit and sh-shit yourself and scream like a b-baby after I-I'm gone. Last person to see you alive."

"I wouldn't."

"I- I have powers. I can r-read you. I know the s-stress you've been under. Ens-enslaved. Can't blame you, if you're emotionally vulnerable."

"Do I *sound* like I'm about to break down?"

Shorter sentences served two ends. They made it easier to form the sounds she wanted to make, and they had more impact. "Doesn't m-matter. There's no dignified end. Covered in dirt, squashed by concrete. Or suffocate, capillaries burst. Face swells. Lips turn blue. Instincts take over. Scrape your fingernails against floor until there's trails of blood. Further along you go, worse it gets. Less and less control. Wait hours, days, get d-d-dehy-dehydrated. Hallucinate."

"You're Tattletale," Shatterbird spoke her realization aloud.

"Close," the clone replied.

"Then you should know, nearly-Tattletale, that I've spent too long in the company of monsters to be scared by *words*."

Interrupting, carefully constructed sentence; bravado, bluff, distraction. Scared. It's working.

"Th-then ig-ignore me. You- you'll be dehydrated, hungry, slowly go crazy. Worse, here, you can-can't stop to sleep. Have to use your power, keep the barrier up. Force yourself awake, so you don't slip."

"I think I'll kill you after all."

"And when you die, you die in an uh-ugly way. You shit yourself. They dig you up, you're squashed, your- your ass covered in feces."

Talking's getting easier. Getting used to this mouth.

Shatterbird shifted position, with a scraping sound as the innumerable glass shards that made up her costume were dragged against the floor beneath them. "It's not quite killing a *real* Undersider, but I'll settle for murdering a bad copy."

"And die alone, going cuh-crazy for lack of sleep and water, covered in shit and puke, mewling

like a small ch-*child*!” The clone’s voice became a growl, a shout.

“It won’t come to that.”

“Su-suicide? Seppuku? All the same in the end. A dirty body sitting in the dark, ass crusted in dried s-*shit*. The bird dies underground, and the people who dig you up I-laugh. Laugh at how the mi-mighty Shatterbird has f-fallen.”

“As opposed to?”

Changing her mind; more leverage.

“W-waiting. I-imagine this. Imagine if they dig here, to m-make sure there were no survivors. And they find you here, sitting cross-legged, serene in death, inside this glass case. And me, on the ground, broken, disgusting, panicked, covered in shit and blood. It’s about con-contrasts, it’s memorable. Photos, news.”

“It’s about me outlasting you, you mean.”

“They’d talk about you after, ‘re-remember Shatterbird?’. Clips on TV about the damage you caused. All the people you killed and injured. Cheering, of course. Hate. But you’d be remembered. Not as a la-laughingstock, but as something more- more than human. Your team would hear about it, remember you.”

“They were a means to an end.”

“This- *this* is the end, Shatterbird,” the clone said. “No escape. It’s a question of how you want to go.”

“This is a ploy.”

Statement, attitude, tone; she knows.

“Yes.” It didn’t hurt to say it aloud.

“But you can’t escape any more than I could. You’re buying time.”

“Yes. B-buying safety, too. You hurt me, you’re *cheating*, and we both know it’s b-because you were losing.”

“Not making any promises on that front. I’m doing this because the amusement of a game is more valuable than the lost air. And you aren’t entirely *wrong*. It *does* make for an interesting image. A dignified end? I’ll take the offer.”

You have to take the offer, the clone mused.

“G-good,” the clone responded. She shifted position, managed to get herself seated opposite Shatterbird.

Doesn't deny that the supports will stand if she dies, tone, attitude, language; I can kill her and I won't be committing suicide at the same time.

The clone smiled. Just a matter of waiting, now, finding an opportunity.

■

“From one trap to another,” Shatterbird’s voice broke the silence.

Thinning air, pace of water droplets falling; forty-three minutes since we last spoke to each other.

That Shatterbird had spoken first was another small victory for the clone.

“From en-enslavement to a cage,” the clone replied.

“To be buried alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality,” Shatterbird quoted.

“*Terrific*,” the Tattletale-clone echoed.

“It’s Poe.”

Poe, buried alive; The Premature Burial.

“The Premature Burial, I know,” the clone responded. She’d been working her lips in the silence, her speech had maybe improved. It still needed concentration, and would lapse if that concentration faltered.

“Clever little abomination.”

The clone smiled. *I’ve been pondering how I’ll take you apart,* she thought. *Mentally, physically. I’m going to break you, and I’ll savor it.*

“So much pride placed on culture and kn-knowledge of classical literature,” the Tattletale-clone spoke.

"It's what sets us apart from the animals."

"Says the f-feral lunatic who dresses up like a bird."

"Irony, little grotesque. Look it up. I was *wondering* when the head games would start."

"A-and you're eager to prove you're made of sterner stuff."

"That's not in question."

Hate arrogant people. Just like Daddy. I'll tear you apart. Break you, reduce you to a shadow of your former self, a craven animal, lapping the sand and grime from my feet in mere hopes that I'd give you some mercy.

"Breathing hard. You aren't *hurt*, are you?" The question was more interested than empathetic. She didn't need her power to note the barely restrained excitement.

The clone ignored her. *Where are you from?*

Sadistic, cultured, Middle Eastern, values appearance, values *appearances*; *private school. Wealthy parents.*

Birds of a feather, aren't we?

"How does one get from a fancy p-private school to *this*?" the clone asked.

"Non-sequitur, that."

"N-no injuries to d-describe so you can get off on them. Might as well ch-change the topic."

"And get information you can use against me?"

"Y-you scared?"

Shatterbird scoffed. After long seconds, she said, "My father was a powerful man in the United Arab Emirates-"

United Arab Emirates; Dubai.

"-and a man of his stature has enemies."

"Of c-course."

“He had no less than four bodyguards with him at all times. Two bodyguards for his two daughters. We were easier to get to, for someone who wanted to hurt him.”

“T-trigger event? No.”

“No. I’ve heard bits and pieces, here and there, since it happened. It was confusing at first, but I came to understand as I learned more about how they operate. Cauldron.”

“I know of them.”

“Powers for sale, in liquid form. Take a drink, and you get something that would otherwise require a trigger event to achieve. Only I didn’t ask for it. My father didn’t pay for it. I think the attackers heard that there was a high chance of mutations. They gamed the system, asked for powers with a high chance of physical deformities, but they didn’t want to use the stuff *themselves*. They gave it to the daughter of their enemy, no doubt thinking that their best case scenario was that I’d become a freak, and at the very worst it would interfere with my father’s politics.”

“B-but you used your powers.”

“*Kaboom*,” Shatterbird spoke, the word barely more than a whisper. “They did kill my dad, after all. And my sister. My mother. They gravely injured my cousins and killed most of my friends. *They* died, too, the ones who slipped it into my drink. I’m almost positive. Lots of sand. Lots of glass. A mercy, I suppose. I would have made it *slow*. I would have inflicted the worst kind of agony with my power.”

There’s an idea. I could make you eat glass. Grind it fine, fill your belly. Let it tear you up inside.

There was a scratching nearby. Not Shatterbird. The Tattletale-clone shifted position to help obscure the noise so it wouldn’t reach Shatterbird, while moving closer to the source.

Scratching, rhythm; digging.

Someone or something was scraping away at the earth nearby, getting closer.

Shatterbird laughed. “There’s only two ways to recover from something of that magnitude, to deal with the fact that you inadvertently killed thousands and thousands of people, and hospitalized twice that many. You break, or you *become* it.”

“And y-y-you became it, didn’t you?”

“Six months of fighting the heroes that came after me. They’re more military than police, where

I came from. *Harder*, if not necessarily stronger. Went to London, because I wanted to hit a big target, and I was well instructed in my English-

Too many details, excuses, unnecessary justification; Lie.

"You *r-ran*," the clone cut in.

A pause; she's nettled, mildly irritated.

"I left because it was uncomfortable. The sand *sings*, you have to understand. A dull roar, like radio static. And sand has a way of getting everywhere."

She can hear the sand; she's aware of the digging; she's suspicious I know she knows.

It was a question of whether she could get to Shatterbird before the third party entered the scene. Shatterbird had firepower, the digger had a possible escape route.

I'm the only one without leverage.

She'd have to manufacture it.

"For s-someone who prides themselves on c-culture and civility, you *are* fond of the b-brute force approach."

"I don't expect a bad xerox of a pathetic villain to understand."

"T-that sounds to me like you're deflecting. Y-you don't have an answer to that."

"Of course I do," Shatterbird retorted, her voice sharp. "It's *power*. It's not about the brute force, it's the *psychological* effect. It's about leaving a lasting impression, making an impact that reaches through your victims to affect their loved ones. An effect that ripples outward, resounding."

Tone, speech pattern, phrasing; parroted words.

"That's J-Jack's ideology, not yours."

"You're only showing how little you understand, mockery."

Insults, intensity of speech; she's covering up an uncertainty even she isn't fully aware of.

Shatterbird continued without pausing, "We're of like minds, Jack and I."

There.

Use of Jack's first name rather than full name; familiarity.

Familiarity coupled with respect for Jack; attraction and fondness.

Fondness, respect, familiarity, nothing further; reticence. Never made advance.

Never made advance; fear, disinterest in romantic relationship, too messy, too prone to drama. Justified lack of romantic approach with excuses.

"Y-you say that like you were a pair."

"We were."

"D-don't pretend. H-he looked down on you. He *humored* you."

"I'm now giving serious consideration to executing you."

"D-did I s-s-strike a nerve, Sh-shitbird? K-kill me then."

You won't, the clone thought. *It'd give evidence that what I was saying affected you.*

Shatterbird didn't attack. The clone smiled. *I'm winning. I'm wearing you down. Just have to do it carefully, so you don't kill me in that moment you snap. You're tired, you've been a captive, you're desperate. Need a few more burdens, a little more damage to critical areas, and we submerge this sinking ship.*

"You t-thought of yourself as su-superior. P-p-past, present, future, you had a hand in everything. You were the group's m-major recruiter, you were the one who h-h-heralded the arrival in any city, and always, your f-focus was on the *legacy*. Being remembered, being one of the o-ones who was remembered."

Every sentence, it was another small advantage, another nail in the coffin. For so many others, this kind of taunting would only create more risk, provoke a lashing out. But Shatterbird was used to restraining herself. Used to holding back. The angrier she got, the less she was able to act. It would mean acknowledging her more brutal side, accepting that she was a base killer, and giving evidence to the accusations laid against her.

She was acutely aware of the gradually increasing volume of something scraping against dirt and stone. She raised her voice to help cover it up.

"But you're j-just the opposite, aren't you? You kn-know as well as I do that he loved and ap-p-ppreciated Bonesaw more than he ever could w-with *you*. B-Bonesaw was smart, c-clever, artistic. C-creative. B-but you did t-the same things over and over again. Y-you w-were boring.

Y-your articles in the n-news, shorter and shorter.”

Not really, but you’d worry, you’d think it was possible.

“You’re reaching.”

Bluff, distraction.

“You’re t-trying to hide behind words, S-shitbird. N-not an option with me. Try again. T-tell me you weren’t merely f-feigning intelligence! T-tell me you aren’t just c-copying the best parts of the monsters around you!”

“The-”

The light that flooded into the small clearing was so bright it was like daggers stabbing into her brain. It reflected off of the construction of glass that Shatterbird had erected, casting light on the concrete blocks that had been guided into leaning against one another rather than falling flat.

The Tattletale clone grabbed the hand that held the flashlight, pulled with all the strength she could muster. The person on the other side came through the hole, her upper body exposed, her legs on the other side.

Vista.

She didn’t have the strength to pin the heroine down, so she merely fell across the heroine, pinning her in place with her body.

In the doing, she caught a glimpse of Vista’s horrified expression. The girl had likely been trapped in the tunnels, accidentally released when Noelle had her thoughts elsewhere. She might have tried to find her way free, up until things collapsed around her. Burrowing with her powers-

Missing breastplate; using it as a shovel.

-and a makeshift shovel, she’d accidentally found her way to trouble.

“Don’t try using her as a shield,” Shatterbird said. “I can kill you without touching her.”

“Y-you *could*. But you h-h-haven’t. Y-you need to come up with a retort, s-satisfy yourself that you were right, before you f-finish me. O-o-or my words haunt you for the rest of your life”

Expression frustrated, eye movement, lack of assault; hesitation, panic.

“C-come on! Say it! P-p-p-prove me wrong, *Shitbird!* P-prove to everyone present y-you’re more than a- a *common k-k-killer!*”

With that last word, she squeezed Vista. *Killer. Kill her.*

Get the message, brat.

Shatterbird’s mouth opened, but she didn’t speak.

“Come on!” the clone shrieked the words, squeezing Vista’s shoulders again.

The concrete slabs directly above Shatterbird warped, shifting. There was a scraping sound. Shatterbird looked up, and horror touched her expression, behind the clear, beaked glass mask she wore.

The dawning horror became something else. A silent scream of rage, frustration and defeat, something that would rip across the entire area. Not the city- the fact that she had to work past layers of dirt and rubble would slow her, but much of downtown? Yes.

The scream became audible, impossibly high-pitched, and in that same moment, glass shards tore into the clone’s flesh, and bit deep into what little of Vista wasn’t buried below the clone’s weight.

Quantity of cuts, sound, appearance of construction; mostly grit, finely arranged granules of silicon forming complex, miniscule structures capable of distributing and supporting great weight. Used to slow or nudge movements of granite slabs.

The scream was cut short when the slabs above Shatterbird fell. She was focused on causing harm and dismantling her construction rather than trying to stop the concrete from landing on top of her.

With only the light of her flashlight and the fact that Shatterbird had already controlled matters as the worst of the debris had settled, Vista managed to keep them from falling.

First Echidna, then Shatterbird, now the brat.

“What- what are you?” Vista asked, in the silence that followed.

“T-tattletale.”

“What happened to you?”

“A m-monster. T-they called it E-E-Echidna. M-mutates people. W-we have to go to the s-surface to help our teams, or t-t-they’ll all become like me. P-please.”

Vista’s eyes went wide, the whites all the brighter in the glare of the halogen flashlight.

“S-s-straight up, if you can. T-the ground’s already broken up.”

Vista nodded.

The clone smiled as the girl turned her back and started working on shaping the concrete slabs above them. She looked at the spot where Shatterbird had fallen.

A mercy, I suppose, I would have made it slow, her thoughts echoed Shatterbird’s words from earlier.



Compared to the heat and the oppressive atmosphere of the seeming eternity they spent underground, making their way to the surface, the open air was refreshing against her bare skin. It was all the harder because her head was so large, her shoulder misshapen.

She’d seen Vista glance at her, seen the looks of horror. It stirred a kind of perverse pleasure in the clone, to see it. To know she was so disturbing, but that the girl was so willingly, eagerly helping her out.

It was only when she was in the air, feeling the wind on her bare skin, that she became aware of the extent of her deformities. Her legs were small, atrophied and spindly, to the point that supporting her own weight was nearly impossible, her thighs and calves already burning with the exertion from standing for several seconds. Her head, by contrast, was bulbous, without a skull to contain or protect her brain. Her skin was thin, and she suspected her oversized brain was visible through the membrane of it. It was enough that her neck might have snapped under the weight, but the entire mass from the base of her neck to her shoulders, her left shoulder in particular, was a fused, solid mass.

Vista was leaning over, hands on her knees, doing her best to avoid looking at the clone.

Making it too easy.

Her arms and hands were stronger than her own legs. She reached for Vista’s throat. Stopped.

There were black flecks moving toward skyward, all around her.

*Bugs. Bugs ascending, moving towards a target point in the air; Skitter.
Skitter's heading home. The fight's over.
She'll keep the most effective bugs, redistribute all the other bugs to keep the ecosystem
going. Does it unconsciously.*

It was just a question of backing away, finding a spot where she was mostly out of the way of the mobilizing bugs.

She could kill Vista, but it might draw attention if any bugs passed over them. Her deformities were hard enough to hide from Skitter's influence.

No. Something else. She'd need to take another tack. If she couldn't hide, she'd have to do as much damage as possible.

For *that*, she needed information, and she wouldn't have access to any technology with Shatterbird's recent attack.

Vista was still recovering, taking a swig of water from a small flask on her belt.

I can be patient, the clone thought. She half-limped, half-staggered to cover, turning a corner around a parked PRT van and disappearing as fast as she was able.

Patience, and I can kill more. Identify the point where I can do the most damage.

She headed in the opposite direction Skitter had gone, stopped and hid as a group moved past her. Faultline's people, Weld, and four more monsters she hadn't noticed before. The freaks. Case-53s, as the Protectorate called them.

She eyed them as they walked away, stopped a distance away.

Group with common cause, pausing, deliberate stop; walking away from something, separating themselves from something. Critical division.

Something happened.

She smiled.

She took a detour, venturing toward the point that Skitter and the other group had been departing from. She stuck to the shadows, observing, taking in details.

Within seconds, she had a grasp of the situation. The excitement she felt was almost sexual.

Another detour, a clothing store. Pants that should have been skintight, hanging loose around

her atrophied legs, a strapless dress that wouldn't hang up around her warped shoulders or neck.

A permanent marker, to draw a symbol where it would be visible, masked beneath the transparent shawl she drew over her shoulders, as if she were ashamed of them.

Above all else, *confidence*, as she leaned against buildings and hobbled away. It was simultaneously the hardest thing to achieve and the easiest. *I have nothing to lose. I want to hurt those sneering, disgusting, small-minded people more than I want to live.* At the same time, she had to feign a complete lack of it. She was a monster, a freak in the eyes of society, and to sell the role, she would need to act in a fitting manner.

Weld and the others stared as she approached.

"Who are you?" a boy with red skin asked.

"I-I don't really know." *Quiet, feign a lack of confidence, to contrast myself from Tattletale.*

"You don't have a name?" Weld asked. His voice was gentler.

"I don't remember. I- I haven't really talked to anyone, since I wound up here." *Cover my body with my arms, as if I'm ashamed.*

"When?"

"A- a year ago? I don't k-k-know. I... I used a phone I found, w-worked online for some s-starting money. I found an apartment I could rent without m-meeting anyone, and haven't left s-s-since." *No eye contact. Shy away if they try to approach.*

"What are you doing *here*?" Weld asked.

"I- I thought I c-could help. But then I saw it... realized there was n-no way I could do anything. I- I'm not strong. Physically or otherwise."

"How many others like her are there?" Shamrock asked. "Victims of Cauldron who just hide from society?" The red-headed girl approached, put her hands on the clone's shoulders. She feigned fear at the imminent contact, then relaxed.

Modeling myself after that wretch Taylor, like she was at first, she mused. It was all she could do to keep a smile from creeping over her face. The lack of mobility and the over-thick skin there made it easier.

"Too many," Gregor answered, in his thick accent.

"You came at just the right time," Weld said. "We've been talking about what to do in the future."

The clone looked up, saw Faultline's eyes on her, studying her intently. She looked away from the intense stare, fixed her eyes on the ground, unblinking.

Fuck you, Faultline. Think you're smarter than me? You'll figure me out?

"You heard what happened?" Weld asked.

"S-some. I s-see and hear things, sometimes. F-from far away."

Faultline's gaze was still too intense, too focused.

The clone's eyes were watering with every moment she didn't blink. She blinked rapidly to bring the droplets out. They streamed down her face.

Shamrock noticed and turned the reassuring contact into a hug. The bodybuilder-girl with the brutal overbite set a hand on her shoulder.

Come on, Faultline, voice your accusations now. You'll drive a wedge between yourself and your new allies, maybe even hurt your relations with your team. And nothing will come of it. You have no proof and they can't afford to turn me away.

Faultline looked away.

"You get why we're separating from the rest? Striking out on our own?" Weld asked.

"Y-yes."

"Mercenaries," Weld said. He glanced at Faultline, "But not part of your contingent, no offense."

"So long as you're accepting if I want to hire you?"

"I'm not about to turn down our first potential client," Weld said. "So long as you stick to the rules. I'm thinking we'll only take jobs that *help* people. Screw payment."

There were murmurs of agreement from the other freaks.

"Tattletale's probably going to try to stop us if we do it, but I'm thinking we find a way to make other portals, whether it's hiring Scrub or finding someone else who can do the same thing. And we ask for a lot more money. Resources, escape routes, and space. There's so much potential, and I'll be *damned* if I let Tattletale have a monopoly on this thing."

"So long as we get a fair shake," Weld said.

"Faultline is fair," Gregor said.

"Good," Weld said. He flashed a smile. "Then I look forward to our partnership."

The clone's eyes roved over the group. Reading expressions, body language, tone of voice. The information hit her like a flood.

Pain, disappointment, hurt, recently lost hope, new hope. Excitement. Feeling like a part of something: some for the first time.

"Interested?" Weld asked. The clone realized he was speaking to her. "Want to get in on the ground floor of something new?"

It would mean backing down, letting the *real* Tattletale be for the time being. It would mean delaying her own gratification, in the hopes of a bigger payoff.

I want to kill you all... Dismantle your psyches, ruin you... You're so fragile, so lacking in confidence... It would be so easy...

She only averted her eyes, "I-I-I..."

"We could use someone to manage operations," Gully offered. "If you're worried about not being that strong in a fight."

She looked at Faultline, saw the young woman staring, broke eye contact.

She could be patient. Vista was the only one who had seen her in person, and with the recent division in the ranks, these freaks wouldn't be maintaining contact with the Wards to hear Vista's description of her and connect the dots. She could control what information they had access to, minimize the chances. Some strategic hacking might even cut any alerts short, if she could work around Dragon.

She could remember what Shatterbird had said, about striking a critical blow that might echo outward. To reference that directly would be too risky, but... something to remind herself that she was working towards something, so she could tamp down her bloodlust, bite her tongue at the critical moments.

She tried on a faltering smile, "Y-you can call me Witness. A-and I think this is exactly where I want to be."