Growth 4.4

Chief Director Costa-Brown, as the head of the PRT, all matters pertaining to the Birdcage goes through your department, is that safe to say?

That is incorrect, Senator. While the PRT does have some input in the administration of the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center, it is administered through treaty by the Guild and, by fiat of being the only person capable of adequately maintaining the facility, Dragon. The PRT provides administrative and material support in exchange for the ability to house parahumans that we are incapable of adequately detaining in Baumann's facilities.

So the Birdcage is not an American facility?

That is correct, Senator. Baumann Parahuman Containment Center is located in Vanderhoof, British Colombia. It is a Canadian facility.

Chief Director, are you familiar with the term extraordinary rendition?

I am, Senator. However, I do not see what it has to do with the matter of Baumann, Senator. Legally, all prisoners of Baumann have been convicted and sentenced for their crimes. Extraordinary rendition, by its definition, is a conscious effort by a nation to circumvent its own laws by placing prisoners in a location that is not within the offending country's territory. Baumann was ruled by the Harding Supreme Court in Cervanta v. PRT as a 'precedent in extremis', recognizing the necessity of having a facility like Baumann. Furthermore, the Harding Court in its own ruling noted, that while it is legally in direct contravention of existing jurisprudence, it performs in much the same way the enhanced detainment facility in Guantanamo Bay does to protect the American people.

I am quite familiar with Cervanta v. PRT, Chief Director. Were you aware that Selena Aguilera, who you call Cervanta, was murdered within the first hour of her arrival at Baumann? A rather ironic contradiction, don't you think, Chief Director? We send an American citizen to a prison facility in a foreign country to live out the rest of their natural life for their crimes, and they are killed almost immediately.

I would remind this committee, Senator, that Cervanta's Thinker abilities actions were considered a national security threat. It was her involvement with several criminal and terrorist organizations that invoked the Three Strikes Clause. While she may not have been the one to pull the trigger or plant the bombs, it was the intelligence she provided through her powers that allowed these crimes to take place. It was agreed at the time that Cervanta was incapable of being rehabilitated and remanding her to a maximum security prison, even the one in Guantanamo Bay, would not effectively contain her due to her connections and abilities.

And so Baumann was viewed as the only option due to these considerations.

Yes, Senator.

Very well, then, Chief Director. I'll defer to your judgment on this matter. I do have another question. What is the procedure if evidence or testimony is found that exonerates a Birdcage inmate? If it is determined that an inmate was unjustly imprisoned?

Unfortunately, Senator, Baumann is a unique facility that has been designed with no means of extraction. Once an inmate is admitted to Baumann, there exists no means by which they can leave. This is also one of the primary reasons why Baumann is considered a life sentence without possibility of parole. Once a prisoner enters Baumann, they are incapable of leaving.

I take issue with the fact that the requirement for a Birdcage sentence only needs a single judge to convict. Pretty it up all you like, Chief Director, the Birdcage is a death sentence. That's how the public sees it and it's how the Cape community sees it. By law, an order of execution is required to have a process of review. A process that the PRT does not have. Why has a process of review not been created for Birdcage prisoners?

Because we are dealing with an unfortunate byproduct of the world that we live in, Senator. If we were dealing with criminals who did not have powers, then something like Baumann would be unnecessary. Unfortunately, it sadly has become a necessity because the systems that you and I take for granted are ill-suited for those with the ability to level city blocks, or turn people into thralls who would gladly throw their lives away for their master. Baumann is meant to contain the worst of the worst who civil society has no defense against.

So…expediency is your explanation. Because you can't contain your prisoners you throw them in the cage quickly. And if a few people who might have been granted leniency, or even been found innocent are sacrificed at the same time? That's the price you're willing to pay.

I did not say that Senator. I will ask that you not twist my statements.

You might not have said it, Chief Director. But we heard it.

-Exchange between Chief Director Rebecca Costa-Brown, PRT, and Senator Charles Meadows (R-IA) on the subject of the Baumann Parahuman Containment Center before the Senate Judiciary Committee. May 15th, 2011

Accord
Boston, MA
May 16th, 2011

No plan survives first contact with the enemy.

It was a trite statement, uttered by fools. If a plan does not survive challenges, then it was a poor plan to begin with. By design, good plans have sub-plans, contingencies, and backups. Any likely obstacle should be accounted for and planned around.

Leviathan was a very significant obstacle, however. An obstacle that had ruined years of work in the span of minutes.

However, he was far from destitute in spite of the loss of physical assets. While something like an Endbringer attack could never be fully planned for, contingencies had nonetheless been in place. He may have lost his office and buildings, his men and women might be dead, and his organizational structure fractured, but he remained unconquered.

So now he found himself in a temporary office. It was a far cry from his previous office, but well-appointed enough to allow him to remain focused and effective.

And right now, he was doing what he excelled at.

Planning.

“Shemanefer, compile the following reports: 2010 Boston census data, Endbringer Damage Assessment - Boston published on May 11th, 2011, Endbringer Damage Assessment - Manhattan published on May 4th, 1994, Endbringer Damage Assessment - Seattle published on May 26th, 2003, Post-Endbringer Attack Migrationary Analysis by Timothy S. Layman updated on September 15th, 2010. Collate all data and create multiple simulations based upon compiled data.

Data began to flow in, the small device now integrated into his mask showing him a world beyond the material. With a twitch of his fingers, the data faded from his vision as he rose to his feet. Slowly walking over to the window, he stared out into the rubble that was the financial district of Boston.

Shemanefer was the latest creation that had been borne from The Girl’s fertile mind and, in his opinion, her best one yet. It was a ‘dumb’ AI as Taylor referred to it, one that she had put together for him when she had proposed her reconstruction plan. It was a thinly veiled, but effective, bribe to go along with her plans, designed to assist him in his planning. Restricted in the ability to communicate or exercise creativity, it was, as she said, ‘limited’. But it was excellent at collecting, cross-referencing, and compiling data. The information access and presentation was quite useful for his planning. The only downside to it was the need to be connected to the network itself in order to access the massive servers that The Girl had placed in Brockton Bay, but he could live with that limitation.

But what it offered…

"New project, Shemanefer, collate historic traffic patterns for Boston and extrapolate changes if a tram line is included through the downtown core."

…was efficient refinement. That's what Shemanefer offered. No more waiting for information; the 'dumb' AI was plugged into various government databases. No more imagining. Plans could be visualized in real time, etched out in holographic images hanging in the air before him. The program she provided him was a powerful tool in planning and simulation. It lacked the spark of creativity, but it understood and obeyed. The perfect servant.

The knowledge that she was actively working on a fully sapient artificial general intelligence, on the other hand, was still something being hotly discussed within their little cabal. But for now, it was viewed as a distraction from their more immediate goal. It could be discussed at a later time.

Accord took a moment, letting the silence of the room settle. He missed the clock he had restored, a 19th century grandfather clock. It was something he was going to have to rectify in the near future. He settled into his chair, reviewing the data found. Tram and subway lines would require new construction, but would reduce traffic congestion by several dozen percentage points. Construction could be done in conjunction with restoration efforts. He saved the plan for later.

"Give me a map of Boston, pre-Endbringer attack. Highlight businesses by industry. Add a color coding to industries by field, add additional keys delineating light and heavy industry as well. Good, now prepare a document. Record dictation," he began to speak, flexing his powers and his mind, the computer diligently copying his words.

The Plan, in its broadest strokes, was simple. A measured reconstruction of the economy and infrastructure to support it. That would mean thousands of new businesses, restoration of old businesses, and thousands of new entrepreneurs. Reconstruction would have phases. Expansions would be measured. Business plans would need to be written and respected. Each new entrepreneur would receive a binder, guiding them to success. Of course, a margin of error had to be included. Mankind was not perfect. They were frustrating and difficult to keep on track. But when properly motivated, they could achieve impressive feats; even without parahuman ability.

And profit was a useful motivation.

Accord had once gone to his (then) superiors with a plan to feed the world. They had dismissed him. Now he would prove them wrong. Boston would be his masterpiece.

The Girl had come to Accord asking for a plan. He would deliver.

Walking back to the window, he looked out, considering The Girl. She had once again exceeded his reassessed expectations, much to his chagrin. He liked to believe that he had a read upon

all that were under his aegis, but The Girl was annoying like that. Just when he believed he had an accurate projection of where she was going, she stepped in a wholly different direction. It was…vexing.

But, in a way, it was also beneficial in this case, which is why he ignored the urge to wring her neck. Well, that and the fact that she was the golden goose that kept laying more and more golden eggs for his aspirations. Still, energy cell and solar energy collection technology far in advance of anything existing was something he could utilize. Boston could not be restored to what it was, that was simple reality. Too much of its industry and financial sector had been destroyed. It wasn't feasible nor efficient to rebuild as the city had been.

No, Boston needed to be rebuilt with an eye towards the future. As grimly ironic as it was, the destruction left by Leviathan had given them a blank slate to work from. This tragedy provided him with an opportunity to rebuild the city to what it *needed* to be with The Girl's assistance.

All it needed now were the right components in order to make it work.

Tapping his thumb against his palm, he considered the path forward. Every post-disaster analysis of population density reached the same conclusions; there would be a mass exodus from Boston. The reasons were always varied, from losing their livelihood, their faith in the protection of the city, or just to escape the emotional trauma. But regardless of those reasons, those who were left would be the desperate, the destitute, the stubborn, and the opportunists.

And there would be opportunities as well. It just had to be channeled properly.

Unclasping his hands, Accord raised his right hand up, accessing a single file labeled 'Project Prometheus'. It was an old copy of the files that The Girl had provided during her presentation months ago. Even excluding the full breadth of terraforming technology that the Girl hinted she was capable of, there remained options that would reshape how the city functioned. Boston could not afford to arise from the ashes as it once was, the banality of 20th century architecture would be an open wound that served only to stifle the life of the Earth necessary for humanity to flourish.

Even implemented sparingly, some of her ideas would make the new Boston unrecognizable compared to before. The city would claim its place as the city of the future.

"Computer, call Uppercrust."

He spun around, Prometheus still dominating his vision as his 'assistant' began the process of contacting Uppercrust. There would have to be consideration made for those who would seek to take advantage of the chaos in order to enrich themselves. Many opportunists would try once the military left. Which meant the empowerment of law enforcement and of Parahuman deterrents would be critical in the near-term.

The call connected as Accord settled himself back in his chair. Uppercrust had forgone video conferencing, the only indication of his presence was the icon in the corner of Accord's vision.

"What is it, Boston?"

"Have you read the latest from DC?"

DC being the shorthand for Ryan. While their communications were encrypted with something that The Girl had referred to as Malachite Red, requiring a specific key that was tied directly to their Foci and neural signature, it still didn't hurt to be paranoid.

"I have."

"I believe Brockton is right. The time to make the announcement is tonight."

There was a brief pause on the other end, "I thought you wanted to wait at least another week before we announced the cooperative. You argued that we needed more time in order to ascertain how the announcement would affect the public."

"I did," Accord admitted, "that recommendation was made with old data. DC's report is clear. We have run out of time. If the cooperation is announced after Washington makes its own statement B.A.S.E. will lose the initiative, that will add months onto the projection. We need to strike before that happens, having our own announcement will allow us to control the narrative. And Brockton provides our best opportunity."

The long pause on the other end caused his hands to clench, before he closed his eyes and took a cleansing breath. Uppercrust was a good friend, and the man tended to be far more cautious than he was. It was different working with peers than it was working with subordinates.

"Do you have a plan?"

He bit back a scoff, "I do. However, it will require several refinements and we will have to put more pressure on Brockton to produce results."

That was the one wild card in all of this. The Girl had her own agenda, one that at times aligned with his, but at others did not. It made for a vexing relationship. He would not have put so much effort into these Sunwing and Skydrifter projects. Not when less resources could have been spent on producing the technologies alone. It felt like a waste when they should be maximizing all efforts to produce technologies quickly instead of machines, even if it opened doors that were previously not there in the market.

"I agree," Uppercrust finally said, "What do you need from me?"

“A united front at the next conference. Brockton's possible intractability needs to be quelled decisively. We need their full focus upon Boston. I also need you to reach out to Miami, he has an asset that specializes in recycling, correct?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, that may be difficult with the current situation. LA is increasing their hostile takeover attempts in New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. Miami does not want to risk his assets in the event that LA decides to focus their attention on him.”

That was unfortunate. If they had access to Reclaimer, they would have had a backup option in the event that The Girl proved to be as obstinate as he expected her to initially be. It just meant they would have to exert more pressure on her in order to get her to agree. Time spent convincing her would be time that could otherwise be spent solving the numerous remaining issues.

“LA is becoming a problem if they have Miami on the defensive. What are you planning to do?”

“For now? Shore up the defenses. LA believes they are pressing an advantage, but I’ve been preparing years for this, they will start hitting the wall soon enough. Once that happens, LA will begin overextending, because she does not take setbacks well. There will be opportunities developing that we will be able to take advantage of.”

This was firmly Uppercrust’s battle. They had already agreed that he would be the one managing the fight with Agnes Court, while he would focus on Boston. It was not an optimal solution, but it was the only one that they were afforded. They couldn’t focus on one without losing the other. It did help that Uppercrust had been preparing for years to deal with Agnes Court, it just did not sit well with Accord that he was depending upon Uppercrust to serve as the shield against the upstart. His own supply of Parahumans and loyal subordinates were tied up with salvaging what they could of his organization. They would not survive open conflict with Agnes.

“How soon?”

“A month or two. LA isn’t stupid, but they aren’t seasoned in this type of fight either.”

“Then continue with it. Let me know if you need any assistance. With Boston how it is, I can shift some help if you need it. But it will have an effect upon things here if you do.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Changing subjects, if we are going to pull the trigger on the restoration cooperative, I’m assuming that the paperwork is prepared.”

“The baseline contract is as ready as we can make it, New York,” which wasn’t as airtight as he wished it to be. But, in spite of it, he understood the necessity of leaving leeway within the contracts. If the demands were too restrictive it would only be detrimental to growing Boston back.

Still, he would have preferred more active controls in the contracts to safeguard against perversion of the intent. Sometimes the failings would even be unintentional, but usually not. Business was always a game of competitive greed at the best of times, and Boston would be in a fragile state for a long time to come. Contractors exploiting positions of trust in his plans for their personal benefit were only to be expected.

But every projection that he had run up until now demanded that there was an ecosystem of healthy competition. Boston would need the marketplace of ideas in order to begin its resurgence, and it would be through competition that it would flourish. It could ill afford monopolies or any sort of oligopoly for that matter, both would try to corner a market and would result in the strangulation of growth that was needed.

Still, with every single preparation, their entire plan was hinged on The Girl. Her contributions would be critical, and without them any attempt to resuscitate Boston would fail. Without what was contained within Project Prometheus being unleashed, the plan would inevitably fail.

He did not want this to fail. Even knowing the chances, knowing the likelihood that his identity would come undone in this endeavor; Boston would be his greatest achievement to date. Ever since she planted the idea in his head, he had fixated on it. He had refined it and created necessary contingencies to make it easier, cheaper, better and more tolerant of adverse conditions and human failings.

Accord would *not* let this plan fail.

AEH

All eyes are on Brockton Bay tonight, as Medhall CEO Max Anders has organized a charity gala in support of the Boston recovery at the Forsberg Gallery. Several big names are set to attend, with others having donated to the cause. Notably, it has been suggested that inventor and teenage businesswoman Taylor Hebert will be attending. A very appropriate presence, given her role in assisting Boston in the aftermath of the Endbringer attack.

Additionally, some observers are noting that there is a possibility that Hebert is going to be making a new announcement. While this has not been confirmed, it is worthwhile to consider that Hebert is rarely seen outside of the Zero Dawn campus, with only her presentation being the exception since Boston.

But what could it be? Is it related to Boston? A new partnership deal?

- TMZ Online, May 12th, 2011

AEH

Taylor Hebert
Brockton Bay, MA

Slumping into my office chair, I closed the window containing the finalized report on the Sunwing test. As expected it went well, but not without flaws. The flapping motion of the wings had caused connections to come loose, resulting in potential faults in the electricals. Several joints and welds were not holding up, showing strain that would shorten the service life of the machine before it required repairs. Most concerning, however, was that the thermal and radiation shielding for the MPT engines was insufficient. Furthermore, the machine brain had difficulty parsing data from the two distinct video feeds mounted on the frame in the belly and eyes.

Despite this, the test was still an amazing success. We had managed to maintain a much higher battery life than expected. The machine brain adapted amazingly fast to gliding and using the natural updrafts to keep itself moving. We actually never reached the 'end' of the flight, we had to call it back after it had drifted all through the night and into the next morning, allowing it to recharge as dawn rose. Granted, these tests weren't the same as a proper Search and Rescue scenario. But the Sunwing was designed for far more than that. I hoped to place these in national parks, allowing park wardens to track environmental changes, animal migrations, forest health, and so much more. I was not blind (hah!) to the fact that a lot of police and governmental organizations would love to have a machine that could loiter overhead for days at a time, but I wanted the Sunwing for far more than just that.

Sighing heavily, I leaned back, letting myself stare at the digitized representation of the ceiling as I attempted to unpack my feelings on everything.

Today was the Gala. I was going there to make a big announcement that would affect millions of people for years to come, along with making or breaking my company in the eyes of the public.

I was also going on my first date. It might be completely silly, but it was the second thing that has me more concerned.

Emma and I used to talk about boys. Well, Emma did. I just humored her and made the appropriate comments to keep her talking. Even with mom and dad being a happy couple, dating was an abstract concept for me. Then mom died and dad had descended into a melancholy that he is still struggling to pull himself out of. Then Emma turned on me and made me feel… worthless.

It still felt like anyone being interested in me would be doing it out of pity. Which only made my feelings on the matter of Theo even more complicated.

Jean's full explanation of her 'deal' with 'Kaiser' was simple: She would see that his son got a shot at dating me. Nothing more. Although the elder Anders probably expected more, Jean was very clear on her interpretation of things.

What was not so clear was what Theo's exact role in Kaiser's plans would be. By all accounts, Theo Anders was estranged from his father. The young man spent most of his time with his former step-mother, Kayden Anders. No evidence could be found that showed Theo, or anyone fitting his description, was ever seen at any rally that Kaiser frequented.

So…the first boy to show interest in me may or may not be a Neo-Nazi. He may or may not be following his father's orders. Or, maybe, just maybe, he was acting out of genuine interest in me.

HAH! Yeah right!

And even without considering all of that? It left the question of what to do with him. Jean had a plan to subvert Theo, use him to pull down Max and pull Medhall closer to us. It made sense as well, in a ruthless corporate cutthroat kind of way. The plan demanded that no obstacles be left in the path to success, because the goal *must be achieved*.

Part of me accepted this. I did appreciate the logic that allowed any action in pursuit of the goal.

The other part of me remembered all the times that Emma faked an apology. I remembered all the times I had been given hope, only for it to be ripped away as she twisted the knife just to see me bleed. There were so many times that my 'best friend' twisted our past together to use it against me.

I didn't recognize myself anymore, and it terrified me.

A soft digital chirrup drew my attention away from dark thoughts as metal nudged itself against my hand. I looked over to see Dolt's blue optical sensors looking at me with what I could only describe as concern.

"Hey Dolt," I greeted with a small smile rising on my lips, reaching up and caressing the metal plate on the Burrower's head. It leaned into the caress, a soft warble showing its pleasure at the action, "How'd you get in my office?"

"I let him in," I looked up to see Samantha, who was leaning against the door, "It was getting rather pathetic watching him paw at the door and whining like a jilted house cat."

The screech from the machine taking offense to Sam as it cast a glare at her caused me to smile. If there was one regret that I didn't have, it was leaving Dolt uninhibited in his growth. It may have originally been just to see how far his learning module would evolve. The answer was honestly much further than I could have ever envisioned.

When I had designed the machines, I had to be more utilitarian with their programming than I was comfortable with, due to inferior materials. The core of each machine's programming revolved around three key components: An identifier, a purpose, and a command.

The Identifier told the machine-mind what it was: Chassis, tools, operational limits and so on. It was the same way that a dog learns what it means to be a dog. A Burrower was born knowing what it means to be a Burrower.

The Purpose told the machine-mind where it fit within the world and into the wider machine network. In the case of Dolt, he originally learned where he stood as part of the Light Rescue Lance. But now that he was no longer part of the LRL, he had to learn his new role.

The Command was the last, most important, and likewise most complex part. At the heart was the singular command of 'improving and adapting your functions to better suit the completion of your Purpose and the growth of your Identifier'. One mistake could result in failure, or the creation of something incompatible with the greater whole.

And after that, came layers upon layers of search functions, operations refinement, and self-adjustments along with data collection and analysis. Everything that the machine-mind would need in order to improve itself and its operation. Even cut from the rest of the LRL, Dolt would still act as a Burrower. It could collaborate and cooperate with other machines, if necessary. It just wouldn't have the level of teamwork without the central brain of the LRL providing orders.

Anything related to executing a search, patrol establishment, and structural analysis was left to the Titan's command node. The temporary 'heart' of the LRL.

I had built these machines to learn, but the speed they did so concerned me. The way they pulled in outside information to do so, looking up information on the wider internet, was a shock. That was a level of intuitive problem-solving that I wasn't ready for. It was this concern that prompted me to add limiters to them. I wanted my machines to learn from their own perspectives, and not from data and perspectives online which may be biased or just plain wrong. All of them had been limited except Dolt. Even keeping him around was an experiment. Dolt is like…a rescue dog that had been removed from the job, adapting to a new home away from the action. By all accounts Dolt was adapting to its change in settings amazingly well, and doing a good job of discovering what was permissible and what wasn't. Frankly, it was fascinating to watch as the code and data changed within Dolt's matrix. Its intelligence would never reach true sapience, but it nonetheless showed that it understood that its role had changed.

In the month since Boston, Dolt has slowly become almost like a giant domesticated mechanical weasel. It went around the Docks with the curiosity and adventurism you would expect from such an animal, but it also sought comfort and attention from the various workers, slowly worming his way into their hearts.

Some of the workers had talked about turning him into a mascot for the company. I had not made a decision yet on that, but it was something I would want to talk about with Jean and the Directors once we had an opportunity where we weren't trying to go fifty million miles a minute.

“So what brings you to my office,” I finally asked, letting Dolt cozy up against me as I firmly put my focus on Samantha.

“I wanted to go over the security arrangements for the gala with you,” she replied, pushing off the drawer and taking a seat in one of the chairs. I hid a frown at the nonchalance in which she did it, that seat was more for Amelia than it was for anyone else.

“I’ll be beside you the entire time, but it never hurts for everyone to be on the same page,” Sam started off, walking me through the briefing one more time. I’d heard it all before, so when she got to the end and asked, “Any questions?” I decided to make something halfway between a joke and a suggestion.

“Is there going to be an afterparty to relax after the gala? It doesn’t seem like this event is going to be much fun for any of us.”

Sam smiled and answered, “There may be something, but I thought you’re not the type for beer, pizza, arm wrestling and karaoke. If you want to try it anyway, we can definitely make room for you.”

Then Sam’s smile fell back down to her blank, serious face expression and she continued on a different topic, saying, “But before that, I think we should talk. Give you some perspective on this event that I think you’re missing. If I’m way off the mark, you can say so, and we’ll leave it be.”

It was amazingly unlikely that anything would happen here. Max Anders was staking a lot on this evening going well. Most of the upper ranks of the city were going to be in attendance. Anything that negatively affected the evening was going to sully the man’s name.

“Alright. Let’s hear it.”

“I know Jean has been trying to make it clear how important this event is for you and the company. I also know that you’re saying all the right things, but you really think this is all a waste of time and that you have no place taking part in it.”

Samantha’s eyes held mine and I was reminded how little I knew this woman. She was beside me for almost every waking hour of the day. And while I made it a point to be comfortable with her, we weren’t friends. I had difficulty being much of a friend to the people I did put in the effort for, and my relationship with Samantha was so unbalanced I would be a shit friend at most.

“I’m not going to say I know exactly how you feel, Taylor, but I can make some guesses. The spa, now the gala, the reason why you are reacting so negatively to it is because it places you right back at Winslow in your mind. You’re back to not having any control and placing yourself in the kinds of situations where your tormentors would’ve abused you.”

My hand stilled on Dolt's head, completely caught unprepared for my bodyguard's statement. I felt Dolt turn its head up toward me, I could hear, but not hear the warble of concern that came from its vocoder, instead I found myself glued straight on Samantha's visage, even as I felt myself start to get sick.

Was I that obvious, I thought to myself with some panic. I know I didn't exactly avail myself well at the spa, my nerves and feelings all over the place.

"I-," I licked my suddenly dry lips, trying to find the words to say. Should I deny it? Or should I admit it? It was bad enough that Samantha was able to piece it together, but admitting it would open a whole different front that *I didn't want to deal with*.

Dolt's head suddenly was in my lap, causing me to blink, the heavy and cold metal like a flush of cold water on my head. Taking a breath, I suddenly let it out with a shuddering exhalation, my tension slowly fading away.

"I'm—I'm not really doing well," I said as I finally started putting words to my thoughts, my hands back to petting Dolt. The machine provided something I could safely express myself on as I struggled with the urge to fight against admitting this weakness. "I just," I paused again, struggling to find the right words, "you're right, I don't like any of this. It just feels unnecessary. All I wanted to do was build machines to make the world better, Samantha, not traipse around in expensive clothing and be judged by people who will never understand a millionth of what I have to do in order to achieve what I have done. It just feels…like a distraction."

The softening and knowing look that Sam gave me told me enough that I had done the right thing, "You're right, you know," she said softly, "these people will never understand you, because they'll never care to."

"Then—"

"But," she softly cut me off, "as much as I know you'll hate me for saying this, the knife cuts both ways. Those same people who will never make the effort to understand what you do, you have likewise not taken the time to understand the purpose they serve. It may not be as dramatic or as far-reaching as what you have done, but they fulfill a purpose too. Jean just explained it in a piss-poor way."

My retort died a swift death as I found myself looking at Sam in a different light. This was honestly the first time that she was actually approaching me personally, and in a different way, beyond only being invested in protecting me.

"Okay," I breathed, giving her the opportunity, because there was a part of me interested in what she was going to say. "Explain it to me then. Why should I care about this gala?"

“The people that go to these galas? To them, this is nothing more than an informal form of a corporate meeting or presentation that you have done.” Samantha started with what I knew, but then she told me more, “Only at something like this, they get the opportunity to trade the rigid structure focusing on you for an opportunity to speak more equally, speak with each other, let their hair down, and flaunt their status. To these people, all of this is merely just another means of business and negotiation. Jean was right that deals are made here, but what’s probably the most important thing in all of these social functions, more than the deals themselves, is the image that you project.”

“And how does that help me?” The question escaped my lips before I could stop myself. “Okay, so it’s nothing more than business by other means. That’s basically what Jean said at the spa, you’re not telling me anything different.”

“Because up until now, everything you have done publicly has had you firmly in control of the field, Taylor. You have been in your comfort zone, where anyone who enters is at an immediate disadvantage. Almost every single meeting and even the presentation, you have controlled it. This will be the first time you enter their arena, where *they* have the experience and you are at a distinct disadvantage. Just because you escaped Winslow doesn’t mean you won’t have to relive it.”

I shot to my feet, Dolt bristling towards Samanth in reaction to me, the angry chittering as it lowered itself, looking ready to pounce. All the while Samantha stared my glare down without saying a single word. All the while she didn’t budge, I could hear *their* laughter in my head as I grit my teeth.

“Congratulations, all that progress you made in making Zero Dawn in the last month just got thrown away because of one little word,” Samantha said softly. I couldn’t hear her voice right now, all I could hear was *her.*

Slowly, with as much effort as I could muster, I returned back to my chair. The soft warble from Dolt being the only sound other than the hum of the air conditioning. I sat there, staring at her as she equally met my gaze.

“Talk,” my voice was a mere whisper now, even as I struggled with the irritation and rage at how Samantha had made Winslow seem so…inconsequential. Like it wasn’t the second worst experience of my fucking life. I wanted to punch her right now, but I knew how futile that would be. Instead, I just allowed her to talk further, even if I wanted to scream her down and tell her that she was wrong..

“This event? It’s not about your company or what you can do. It’s about *you*. What kind of person you are. How you talk. How you interact. What jokes you find funny and what things you find offensive. The people attending this evening are looking to make connections, not business deals. They want to know if you are a friend, an enemy, or something in between. This isn’t about controlled presentation, meetings, or sound bites. This is a face-to-face meet-and-greet.”

I remained silent. I had a feeling that replying rashly would only reinforce whatever Samantha was trying to tell me. So, instead, I silently parsed over her words, letting my hand rest upon Dolt as I considered what she was trying to say to me, as much as I wanted to throw it in her face.

I knew I was going into a world that I frankly wasn't equipped for. The spa had only reinforced everything about it, how I tried to dismiss everything that Jean said to me at the spa. It all seemed to me as just being so…childish. Like it was Winslow all over again, with people making decisions based upon how people dressed or carried themselves, instead of more serious and important things.

This gala was all the more reminiscent of that, a social gathering, only it was for those that had money, power, or both. They would supposedly be gathering together to 'fundraise', but actually be there to traipse around, dress expensively, and party. The money that they were wasting on this thing could be better spent on the very city they were apparently fundraising for.

It just felt so…wrong.

And despite my fury at Samantha for crossing a line, I could legitimately feel she was trying to help me in her own way. She had a different perspective that she was trying to offer me, even if it was bluntly and haphazardly done.

So, I slowly took a deep breath, trying to bleed off the anger that just wanted to be let off its leash and thrown in her face. Because she didn't deserve it. I don't even know who does.

"So what do you suggest, then" I finally said, "because it seems you have some idea on what I should do."

She leaned over.

"Be yourself."

I blinked. Of all the pithy hallmark card pieces of shit advice, that's what she chose?!

My disbelief must have shown, because she quickly followed up, "Seriously, Taylor. Don't try to put on a mask for this event. They'll see it in an instant. Be firm. Be direct. And be yourself. The same girl that stood on stage and declared she was going to change the world. You've succeeded so far with that. Make friends where you can, avoid making enemies where friendship isn't possible, and aim for neutrality everywhere else."

She then stood, brushing her pants off, "Now. I'm going to get out of your way. Someone else wants to talk with you about this evening."

The sound of the door opening robbed me of my attention, as Sam started walking away just as Amy came walking into the room with a bag in hand. They passed by one another as Amy looked towards Sam before looking at me, her expression quizzical.

Dolt caused anything I might have said to catch in my throat as he scrabbled to his feet and darted towards Amy. My friend's expression looked panicked for a brief moment before he started frolicking around her, a series of excited chirps, warbles, and other noises emanating from him as Amy started laughing at the several hundred pound machine acting like a hyperactive pet.

"Dolt, come," I commanded, a smile blooming on my face, and the machine looked at me for a brief moment, before breaking away from her and coming back to my side, my hand patting him on the head as he warbled and settled back down.

"What was that about," Amy asked as she took the seat that Samantha had just vacated.

There was a moment in which I debated not telling Amy. The rawness of the conversation that had just happened was not something that I felt should be put upon her shoulders. But then I angrily dismissed that thought, Amy was my friend, and she didn't deserve my baggage without knowing the context.

"My abysmal lack of social skills and how much I don't want to go to this event."

Amy hummed as she took her seat, "I can relate. The second part, that is, I'll have you know that my social skills are fucking amazing."

I grinned, seeing very clearly that she was being playful, "Perfect. Jean's been bugging me about finding more PR people. We'll have you on stage in no time."

My friend grinned at my repartee, her fingers ghosting over my wrist. I let her. I could tell she was reading my biology when her eyes widened.

"What the hell did she say to you, Taylor? Your endorphins, cortisol, and adrenaline are all over the place."

I sighed, even as I relaxed into my chair, "Sam reminded me that this event is basically a meet and greet. It's the high school lunch room all over again, and that my lack of control over the social situation was making me lash out against everyone."

I took a peek at Amy's face as she focused on me, "Basically, Sam said the same thing that Jean did, back at the spa. Only she said it in a way I could understand."

We fell silent as I worked up the courage to find the words, "This is like being back at Winslow and I hate it."

Amy took my hand in hers, saying nothing.

There really wasn't anything to say. We both had our issues and scars. We were both slowly learning where those issues were in each other. There was no promise that things could be fixed or get better. Instead we had a silent promise to be there for one another. I looked at our clasped hands. Her mother's bracelet hung on her wrist, still a few sizes too large.

I squeezed back, giving her a smile.

"Taylor?"

"Hm?"

"Do you want to just skip it? If you are bothered this much…"

I couldn't help but smile at the thought, but I think both of us knew that it wasn't an option.

"I'm supposed to be the woman of the hour for this stupid gala, Amy. As much as I would love to feign sickness, I don't think I could get away with it. Not when I have a Panacea in my back pocket. And anything serious would likely raise too many eyebrows."

"Yeah, that was a stupid idea, wasn't it," she huffed.

"No, it was actually kinda thoughtful that you'd do something like that for me," and I honestly meant that, "I just…all of this, I was never really the sociable one. Not even when," I swallowed, "Not even when I was really friends with Emma. She was always the outgoing one, while I was the hanger-on."

Another squeeze of my hand. No platitudes or pity. I was okay with this.

"Plus, you know what's even more of my mess? This is my first date."

Amy blinked, "Like ever?"

I nodded, "Like ever."

"No 'boyfriend' in the fourth grade who promised that he would marry you when you both turned into adults at fifteen?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, "That sounds very specific."

She shrugged back, "Vicky was very popular from a young age."

Another reminder that I wasn't the only one dealing with struggles. This time, I held her hand tight.

"Taylor?"

"Hmm?"

"I don't know what it was like, all your time at Winslow. No one can. And I don't know why they did what they did. But I do know that it was their choice. Not because of anything you did. Ever since we met, my life has been…so much better than it was. You helped me, even when I might not have deserved it. You helped the people in Boston, even when you didn't really have to. You're building something amazing here, because you want to help people. So please, do not listen to what those girls said. Don't let them pull you down."

This was probably the most verbose I had ever seen Amy, outside of her talking shop, and I found myself nodding dumbly in response to it all.

"You are a good person. You are dedicated, driven, and proud. And those are all mixed with enough kindness to help everyone you can. That's the truth of who you are, Taylor. Not whatever those girls tried to fill your head with. The people who matter will see you for who you are. Anyone else? They can get out of your way. Be the best, most honest version of yourself you can be tonight."

I swallowed once. Trying to keep myself contained. But it all hit me at once. Not just Amy, but the fact that I had people that legitimately were making an effort *for* me.

Just what the hell had I done to deserve people like this, I thought to myself, shaking my head as Amy and Dolt both struggled to figure out what to do. A mechanical head nudged me like a cat seeking attention, and Amy was completely gobsmacked at my emotional departure.

"Taylor, I-," but she stopped as I hugged her, her confusion only growing more pronounced as she floundered in response. I let her go, even as I sniffled again, wiping away the tears that had decided to mar my cheeks.

"Thank you," I said aloud, "you have no idea how much I needed that, Amy. After hearing for the last two days from everyone about how important this damn gala is and this and that, it's refreshing to have someone just tell me how it should be."

"I…You're welcome?"

I couldn't help but laugh at Amy's dumbfounded expression. Settling back into my chair, I couldn't help but give her some flak, especially at how she reacted earlier, "You know, Sam told me the same thing. To just be myself."

Wiping at my eyes again, I forced a change in subject.

“I doubt you came here to listen to my problems, Amy. So what’s up?”

“Taylor, I’m your friend, if you have problems, I’d like to help you with them. As for why I’m here,” she reached down and held up the bag, “I thought I’d do your makeup.”

“Amy, shouldn’t you be focusing on—”

“Nope,” she cut me off, already opening the bag and rummaging through it, “What did I say about helping out friends. Besides, I didn’t spend five hours over the last couple of days looking at makeup tutorials just so you can hand it to one of Jean’s people.”

Retrieving whatever it was that she was seeking from her bag, she held it in hand as she stared at me.

“So shut up,” she said with a smile, “I’m doing this, because you deserve it and you’re going to knock their socks off, you got me?”

I let her get to work, smiling, and trying to not let more tears ruin her work.

AEH

Chief Director Costa-Brown, I have reviewed the procedures and protocols the PRT has for Endbringers and I find myself troubled. While Boston only served to highlight that there exists significant faults and weaknesses within these guidelines, the fact of the matter remains that these failures are so abundantly clear that even my aides had no problem in identifying twenty-three additional weak points on a cursory review of your procedures.

The fact that these protocols have remained unchanged since the founding of the PRT and Protectorate fifteen years ago is disturbing. During your inaugural confirmation hearing, you told this committee that the purpose of the PRT was to ensure that there was a governmental department that could focus upon the parahuman issue by consolidating all parahuman law enforcement measures into a single department in order to avoid interdepartmental barriers. Yet the testimony that has been given here indicates that interdepartmental barriers exist, but they were created by the PRT, not the other departments.

Furthermore, I find myself troubled by the blatant systemic disregard that seems to permeate your department. While Boston may be the most egregious example of this indifference, it is not the only example. Witness testimonies have established that there exists a culture within your own department that views itself as the only supposed experts on parahumans. That the PRT is peerless in its handling of all matters relating to parahumans and Endbringers. Boston has not only proven that false, but it has highlighted failures of your stewardship.

If this committee had the power to censure and remove you from your position, Chief Director, I would be voting wholeheartedly in support of this measure. It is readily apparent that you have lost control of your organization. - ***Senator Elaine Welch (D-IL), Senate Committee on Parahuman Affairs, May 16th, 2011***

AEH

Theo Anders
Brockton Bay, MA
May 16th, 2011

The trick to being nervous, without showing that you're nervous, was in the toes. Clench and unclench. If you did it carefully and didn't shift your weight around, you would give nothing away.

Theo didn't know where he learnt that trick, but he was using it now. These kinds of fancy events made him nervous. Too many people watching, judging, and assessing. And now he had a date, which he tried to prepare for. Honestly, he did. However, the advice he got was…conflicting.

Despite the awkwardness, he did ask his father. Max pressed him to present himself well. Prove that he was a young man of means. Speak confidently of his plans and how Taylor could find herself being part of those plans.

Kayden had a very different take. Listen more than talk. Try and engage with Taylor, asking questions that couldn't be answered with a yes or no. Just because Taylor had accepted a date didn't put them in a relationship. So be kind, respect her space, and learn about the girl. Her likes, dislikes, and hobbies.

So now he stood waiting outside Forsberg Gallery, while cameras and reporters milled around, making conversations as guests arrived. Max was further ahead, by the doors, shaking hands and welcoming people to the event. A very small part of Theo was glad he didn't have to be in his father's shadow for another meeting.

Another car rolled up and he looked it over. Unfortunately, he didn't think to ask what car she was arriving in, so he was stuck checking each one. This time, his attention was rewarded. He recognized Taylor's bodyguard, the ravenette woman with a lick of white in her hair wearing a tasteful but severe suit appropriate for the evening. Theo began walking over. Not too fast to make it seem like he was hurrying, but not so slow either that he would be late.

Then the car door was opened and Taylor stepped out, causing him to slow to a stop.

She was *beautiful.*

She wore…he couldn't quite call it a dress. The upper half was a jacket, with sharp shoulders and golden threads in the shape of leaves, vines, and more running up and down the sleeves and collar. The metallic colors contrasted radiantly with the back of the jacket. It slimmed down around her waist, before shifting entirely to a skirt of organza. Again, delicate stitching of gold in the shape of leaves was spread in patterns across the shifting fabric. Her legs, which he noticed for the first time were…very long and covered in soft cream-colored pants. Her pants were tucked into black, ankle-high boots that were also decorated with golden threads. Beneath her jacket, she wore a black, high-neck blouse.

She stepped forward, cameras now turning her away, flashes lighting up the night. Her hair was braided, and hung down just a touch behind the ears. The rest of her black hair was held back by a decorated hairband. Golden leaves twined through her hair, a flash of color against the dark.

It was not anything he was expecting. It was not a dress she wore, but a statement. She wore it with such confidence. She looked proud, striking, in control, and completely unbreakable.

He swallowed nervously, stepping forward and smiling as best he could, "Taylor. You look beautiful. Thank you very much for coming this evening."

"Thank you. It's good to be here," she replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her pearl-white eyes. Taylor took a moment to look over the crowd and the attention that her arrival was garnering. The Focus on her temple glowed hypnotically through the thin strip running down its middle. It was reassuring to see, it meant that he didn't have to fumble determining how much help he should offer.

With a gentle turn, he extended his arm for her to take. The left arm, of course. Kayden had made him practice. There was a brief moment of panic as Taylor stared at the offered appendance in…call it bemusement. Or possibly shock. But she threaded her arm into his, resting her hand just a touch too high. It was supposed to be near the elbow. Whatever the mistake, Theo found himself fighting down a smile, as the two of them walked up the decorated steps of the Gallery.

"Well, this is very fancy," the dry voice pulled his attention on his right. He glanced over at Panacea, who wore her very own respectable red dress with much of the same vines and leaves of gold running over it and long opera gloves. But she wasn't his date, so it would be rude to pay too much attention to her.

"I can't comment on the lights," Taylor replied, "But the building is…certainly something. I think I've only visited once before."

The Forsberg Gallery, with its distinctive architecture, was certainly a sight to see. Normally, it was lit by a changing pattern of lights. But tonight, it was bathed in a unique blue. Apparently, the colour is the same blue as the flag of the City of Boston.

“Would you like me to describe it? I’ll try my best to make it more interesting than ‘a Jenga tower made of glass and steel,” he offered with a light tone. Taylor turned her full attention on him and he was struck by the considering expression on her face.

With a small smile, she relaxed, “Not needed. If the returns I’m getting from my Focus are accurate, your description is spot on already.”

No further conversation was possible as they had reached the doors, and his father. Theo dropped his arm, allowing Taylor to step forward.

“Ms. Hebert,” Max greeted, extending his hand out, which Taylor took in hand.

“Mr. Anders. Thank you for both the spa appointment and the invitation to tonight's events.”

“Of course, Ms. Hebert,” his father cannily replied, releasing her hand, “You’ve set the bar very high for those looking to help Boston recover. I hope tonight, we can live up to your example.”

Taylor smiled, but it had a hint of teeth, “Competition in benevolence. I look forward to being outshone in that regard. Fair warning however, I have my own little announcement to make. Would it be possible to address the crowd?”

Theo watched as his father’s smile tightened an inch. But even he knew there was only one option here.

“Of course, Ms. Hebert. I’ll make sure that some time is set aside. Is ten minutes enough time?”

“That’s plenty. Thank you,” she smiled again, and wrapped her arm around Theo’s arm again. He didn’t resist as she pulled him along.

“Ms. Lavere,” Max greeted as they walked into the building proper, “It’s good to see you. Can you spare a moment?”

Taylor shot a look back as Amy stopped to speak, a bodyguard on her shoulder.

Stepping into the Gallery proper, the pair walked in silence for a moment before they finally arrived in the main room of the event. The Forsberg Gallery was built in a modular fashion, with rooms able to be rearranged, and entire walls moved depending on space requirements. This meant that this gala would take place in a large central area, with several connecting rooms being open for smaller gatherings. Various hanging art pieces were suspended from the ceiling, while standing tables dotted the perimeter of the hall. Theo knew, from reviewing the planning for the event, that the side halls still held some choice artistic pieces to showcase the Gallery.

“So tell me, Theo, do you know how your father intends to distribute the funds raised here tonight? It’s fine to say that the funds are being raised for Boston, but I’m curious how those funds are going to be spent.”

Taylor’s question caught him off guard and he glanced at her again as they moved away from the doors.

“I believe that the goal is to support the rebuilding of business and industries in Boston, allowing them to hire workers and rebuild the economy.”

Taylor hummed, “But that’s just a variation of trickle-down economics and without suitable support and monitoring systems, it will end poorly once people realize they can game it. Are there any safeguards in place?”

The young man swallowed, feeling a little put on the spot, “Despite what you may think, I have very little control or insight into father’s company, or his plans.” It was a deflection, he knew, but it was a truthful one at least.

“That’s fair, but I would still like your perspective and opinions. We’ll treat it as a thought exercise. You see, the problem with support only going to a select few is that it invites opportunists. Gangs function best where people are desperate. They come in, offer solidarity, money, support, and protection. In response, the people who feel as if the entire world is against them buy into that offer of membership. The Eighty-Eight, the ABB, the Merchants…they all operate the same. They prey upon the fears and destitution of those without means. We saw it here in Brockton Bay and I don’t want to see it happen in Boston.”

Theo shivered at her mention of the Empire Eighty-Eight, acutely aware of how close he was to the edge. He knew he was tainted by association despite never buying into his father’s propaganda. Could Taylor know? Unlikely. She would have never come to this event if she did. Hell, it was widely accepted that Taylor had powerful friends. If she knew that Medhall was compromised, something would have happened already.

“I completely agree. Unfortunately, though, for people like me there is little chance to control where the money goes and how decisions are made. I must hope that the people making the decisions have the best interests of everyone in mind.”

Taylor looked up at him, her white eyes staring. Not accusingly, but contemplative. He found himself swallowing under their intense focus. It felt strangely like he had failed some sort of test and he found that he cared a great deal about what Taylor thought of him.

“I’ve been at the mercy of people above me making decisions in my name many times. I didn’t care for it then, and I don’t care for the idea now. I would prefer not to put others into that position.”

The room quieted slightly as the orchestra finished their song. Theo found himself looking back at her after his glance over, finding it novel that she was slightly taller than him.

“And I think that’s why you’re such an inspiration for many.”

You certainly inspire me, he wanted to say, but held back. It was a sentiment that he wanted to share, but now was not the time. It would be too forward, too bold. It would feel more like flattery, when it was a statement of fact.

Their conversation ground to a halt as the orchestra struck up another song and various people paired off. He caught Taylor eyeing him with a complicated expression on her face. He extended a hand towards her.

“Would you like to dance,” He asked, taking some small joy in the look of surprise on her features.

“I don’t know how.”

“Then we can simply sway to the music. Have some fun with it.”

She hesitated for a moment, before she extended her hand. He took it, detecting a slight tremble in it.

“Are you okay,” he asked quietly, not wanting to pull her into something she was uncomfortable with.

“I’m fine,” she responded too quickly, her features tense. She then looked straight at him, offering a small smile that right away that he knew was fake, and said, “First time jitters and all that.”

“I understand, it’s a first for me as well,” Theo responded easily, but Taylor only arched an eyebrow back at him silently. Blind or not, Taylor’s expression was delivering very clear and very well-aimed disbelief. “It’s the first time I’ve actually had a partner that I wanted to dance with,” Theo explained himself, and then smiled, trying not to blush.

There was a weird look that crossed her face, before she relaxed, “Thank you, Theo.”

“You’re welcome. Shall we?”

AEH

In an action that some are calling a blatant abuse of power, Acting Governor Herres has written a new law into effect. By executive authority, all electrical service providers will be forced to develop and provide a power buyback program, as well as develop and provide the

infrastructure to support such actions. Many are calling this an attack on the free market and a sign of government overreach by an unelected official on business practices. Others have called this a sign of the Boston redevelopment to come, where renewable sources would allow power to be created locally.

Herres is also being accused of favoritism in his decisions, owing to a close relationship that has developed between himself and Taylor Hebert. Zero Dawn Technologies has recently unveiled a startling leap forward in solar energy development and this move by Herres is prompting some to suggest corruption or collusion given the timing of both events.

AEH

Amelia Lavere

“Yes, I agree that insulin regulation should be a priority, but at the moment, it’s not my priority. My team and I are looking to perfect the SHR production methods. Which I can’t comment on, of course,” I took a small sip of my drink. Only half-listening as…I forgot their name, tried more flattery and reworked their questions. Smiling slightly, I untangled myself and retreated to the snacks table. This event felt different, and it was obvious as to why. When I had previously attended functions as Panacea, I had always been in the shadow of Victoria. I was always in the shadow of the entire rest of the New Wave family too, since I wasn’t a front-line action hero worthy of a swimsuit pin-up poster like absolutely everyone else either was or still is. I was the plus one. People were always telling me they respected me for my hospital work, but I never drew frenzied crowds.

But as Amelia Lavere, the creator of SHR-1, it was like night and day. People were determined to talk with me. Some wanted to know what I’m working on next. Others wanted to know what Taylor was working on next. A select few had suggestions for future partnerships and ‘areas of study’. Jean Brown had briefed us all about the risks earlier today. Information about ongoing projects, or future projects, could be used to impact the stock values and future prospects of major pharmaceutical companies. Which meant that I needed to watch my words.

Grabbing a few snacks and balancing my plate as well as I could, I found a secluded standing table to use. There I relaxed a little, shaking out my ankles one after the other. Thank God I didn’t wear heels. With my moment of peace acquired, I looked around the room, picking out our party.

Jean was entangled with a group of men and women, discussing something or other. Knowing her it was probably business. The spa was the only time I’d ever seen that woman ‘off the clock’ as it were. Monique was off to the side, back straight, hands clasped before her. Her eyes were fixed on Taylor, tracking her even as someone tried to speak to her.

And in the center of the room, swaying to the music, Taylor and Theo danced among the crowd.

I wasn't exactly sure how to feel about the matter. On one hand, I was happy for my friend. This was the sort of thing that she honestly needed for her self-image. An attractive young man asking her out to a gala was something that she couldn't argue against. And, as much as Taylor acted like a cat that was being forced to do something it didn't want, I could see the effect that it had on her.

A very small part of me was worried that I was going to be replaced. It was silly and selfish…but still there. Taylor was probably my first friend. The only one that was mine, not friends with Vicky, but with me. But then I remembered how it felt to be trusted by her when doing her makeup. After the talks we had, and the support she gave me, I felt disgusted with myself. That was a black emotion that I hadn't felt in awhile. Not since I…

"Amy?"

My heart lurched and a shiver traveled down my spine. I turned, and there was Vicky.

She was gorgeous, clad in a white dress with gold accents. It was like her cape costume in a more elegant form. And I had no idea what to say to her.

Daniel smoothly stepped from around me and put himself between us. The look of hurt that flashed over her face made me call out in reflex, "It's fine, Daniel."

He glanced back at me for confirmation and I nodded slightly. Yes, it was true that I had missed Vicky. I missed my sister. Spending time with Taylor didn't change that. But, I also didn't know what to say to her. Would she accept me? *Could* she accept me? Bracing myself, I refocused my attention on Vicky.

"Hi Vicky," I greeted her as she stepped forward. She took a moment drinking in the sight of me, looking me up and down. I felt self-conscious as she silently made her judgment.

"Amy, you…look good," it was a hesitant compliment, but I could tell it was genuine. I supposed she found this situation just as awkward as I did. We were feeling out the borders of our new relationship, neither of us sure where the other stood.

I cleared my throat, desperate to keep the conversation going, "Yeah, Parian did good work with this. We did a lot of back and forth on the design."

If anything I'd say that was damnation with faint praise, she did amazingly with the design. It was a red, backless dress that left my shoulders bare. Like Taylor's dress, it had the same gold leaves and vines running over it, starting from behind my left leg, curling up it, then around my waist and back, before coming up around the front and disappearing up in the direction of my right shoulder. I also wore elbow length opera gloves with the same golden vines running up them. It was definitely not as extravagant as Taylor's dress, but the message remained that we were Zero Dawn.

“Parian? The doll cape? I didn’t know she made dresses.”

“Taylor called her in for a work thing and they started talking. It kind of just grew from there. I’m too busy to go out shopping, so Parian did the shopping, and then the fitting.”

Vicky shifted a little, eyes glancing down to the table, my wrist, my bracelet, my gloves, then back to me.

“Right. Work. You should really hear what they’re saying about you at school. It’s been crazy.”

I resisted the urge to wince. I hadn’t spent much time thinking about school. Objectively, I knew that Taylor and I both needed to get our high school diploma, but it seemed like such an insignificant concern against the weight of what we were doing. There was talk about us getting tutors, allowing us to sit our GEDs, but that was a future problem for Mr. Eaton.

“I’m sure that things have been crazy. It’s been…really cool working with everyone. I actually had my first team meeting recently. So we’ve got my projects to work on.”

Our conversation stalled for a moment. I’m not sure that Vicky was quite ready for me to talk shop, even if the idea excited me. Then again, was this the first time I actually *was* excited to talk about my work with Vicky? Putting that thought on the backburner, I asked the most natural of things.

“How have you been?”

Vicky looked at the table, giving a little shrug, “Things have been fine.”

I breathed deep, before downing the last of my drink and throwing caution to the wind. It worked with Taylor, and it seemed I’m stupid bad at casual talk. Letting out an explosive breath, I let Vicky have it.

“Bullshit. Okay? I know that’s shit, you know that’s shit, and we’re both dancing around the issue because we don’t know where either of us stand. I’ve missed you, but I’ve also been having a really great time. However, I don’t want to make you feel bad or anything. So can we just…get over all this ‘walking on eggshells’ and talk properly?”

Vicky’s expression twisted wistfully, it was honestly something I had never seen from her before. Once upon a time, she had always seemed invincible, where nothing could make her feel down. To see her so vulnerable, it made me realize just maybe I had always been wrong and that it had taken me leaving New Wave to realize that.

“Okay,” she sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. “Okay. Let’s start over, then.”

“How have you been?” I asked again.

“A mess since you left. Everything’s just so different now. Crystal went back to Boston and isn’t talking with anyone. Mom and Dad are both depressed,” I frowned, holding my reaction back. A surge of old pain and repressed anger coiled inside of me as Vicky spoke. “Sarah and Neil have been trying to help where they can, trying to get mom to see a therapist. Arcadia,” Vicky laughed, a hint of bitterness in her tone, “it’s been one big rumor mill. Everyone wants to know what’s going on and what you are planning to do next.”

She quieted down, before adding, “Mom has been missing you as well.”

I bit back an angry retort about it being too late, but recent lessons whispered in my ear stilled that response. Instead, I chose to keep myself as diplomatic as possible, “Carol. I know she’s always been a mother to you, Vicky. But not to me. I’m learning about my mother who died before I could remember her. She was a wonderful woman.”

Releasing a sigh, I ran my fingers over her bracelet, something I never left the house without. “But…the more I’m out here, dealing with things on my own? The more I realize just how much Carol did for me. It still doesn’t excuse her for *anything*. But she tried her best, as messed up as it was. She did keep me safe, even if she put me in a cage to do it.”

“And she was wrong to do that.”

I blinked. I certainly was not expecting that from Vicky of all people. I rarely, if ever, heard her contradict Carol. If there was ever any disagreement, it was usually over small details. Not like this, it was never like this. I had to wonder just what had taken place in the Dallon household for Vicky to act like this.

But that was no longer my concern. It was in the past and it was for the best.

Still…

“Thank you.”

And it was a heartfelt thanks. Even if it was a long overdue admission, the fact that she had done it in the first place meant more than she could ever possibly know. It felt like, for the first time, that she actually chose to have my back.

Maybe she was growing up?

“How have you been?”

“Busy. Too much to do and not enough time in the day to do it,” I admitted, turning my attention slightly to where Taylor was, watching as Theo led her off the dance floor, “But it’s fulfilling. More

than the hospital ever was. I can help so many more people with this than an entire lifetime spent in the hospital could have."

"Then it's good that you found it," and my attention came back to Vicky, who had a brittle smile on her face, "I'm sorry Amy. I wish I had seen it sooner, but…well, you know me."

"A little too fixated on yourself?"

A soft laugh escaped Vicky's lips, but it was as fragile as she seemed, "Yeah, that's fair. I wasn't exactly the best sister for you, was I? What kind of sister doesn't notice her little sister doesn't like the things she tries to rope her into? Not a very good one."

I didn't respond to her immediately, searching her face for any hint that this was all an act. I knew it was irrational, Vicky always wore her heart on her sleeve. She had never had a deceptive bone in her body, and it didn't appear to have changed. In fact, she looked probably the most vulnerable I had ever seen her.

In the darkest corners of my heart, I wanted nothing more than to completely cut ties with my past. There was not much there to warrant me even wanting to return to it. I had spent years in the Dallon household, and it was only now, after I had finally broken free of it, that Vicky seemed to have even a minute understanding of what I had suffered. Yes, Carol had done it to protect me, but she went too far.

But then I had to consider the fact that if there was really an innocent in all of this, it was Victoria. I could easily construct an argument that called her as guilty as Carol, but could I really live with myself by placing the sins of the mother on her? If anything, it would make me no different than Carol.

I know what Taylor would say, even if she would deny it profusely. There was still a small part of her that longed for the bitch that had nearly destroyed her. To have what she once had before everything went wrong.

So, I did what she would do, because Vicky's sins had nothing in comparison to what Emma Barnes had done.

"Biologically speaking, Vicky, I'm the big sister," I said, offering her a soft smile, the metaphorical hand being extended, "I was born August 18th."

Maybe it was petty of me, but I held it as another strike against Carol. Even if it was to protect me, I couldn't help but feel that this was another piece of pettiness that Carol couldn't stop herself from committing. Making my 'new' birthday later than her daughter in order to render me subordinate just felt personal in lieu of everything involving my father. Maybe there was a rational explanation, but I wasn't looking for one at the moment.

After a moment of shock, Vicky started smiling, “Really? Actually, this could be fun. I can absolutely bring some little sister energy to this whole thing.”

I blinked, watching as Vicky’s grin got larger. What does that even mean? I could only feel a chill running down my spine as her grin became almost predatory at my confusion.

I shook my head, moving on from the subject.

“Oh come on, Amelia,” Vicky wouldn’t let me nobly retreat, “Little sister energy. It’s my god-given right to pester and be adorable. Like…Where’s your date for the night? Your friend Taylor seems very cozy with Theo Anders…please tell me there’s a story there!”

“No story. Not really. Be nice, Vicky, it’s her first time on a date. He asked her to the gala back when she gave her first public presentation. The one I was part of.”

Vicky glanced across the crowd, looking for the pair, “First date…like ever?”

I hummed, not wanting to comment more on Taylor. It felt like talking behind her back and she didn’t deserve that. I did have something else right in front of me to ask about, or rather someone not in front of me, “And where is your date, Ms. Dallon? No Stansfield armcandy tonight?”

Watching Vicky’s face fall, I knew that something was wrong. She huffed, tossing her hair to one side, before glaring across the room. Following her gaze, I could see Dean talking to a group of well-dressed men, many of them older. Notably, Dean’s father stood next to his son, talking animatedly.

“Dean and I are…I don’t know. He’s changed since Boston. I mean, he’s been supportive and everything with you leaving the house, but there’s just this…I guess, disconnect. But Mr. Stansfield, he’s considering running for Mayor. So Dean has been glued to his side, shaking hands and so on. Apparently he needs to show family solidarity and all that.”

Vicky shrugged a shoulder, clearly uncomfortable with the subject, but not sure how to put it into words. I decided to give her an out.

“Alright, well let me tell you what I’ve been up to. Actually, I could use some suggestions! I might, *might*, be getting into beauty products. Got any ideas?”

Vicky’s mood did a quick turn and I raised a hand for a server to bring another drink. Opening a file on my focus, I began typing on the table as I listened to my sister gush. Quietly, I thought to myself that being a big sister was harder than expected.

AEH

Taylor Hebert

Offering a smile, a nod, and a few empty words, another faceless individual stepped away from me. Before someone else could ambush me, I took a sip of my punch, sparing a glance over at Theo who wasn't safe either from all the rapacious opportunists.

He wasn't what I expected. While the jury was still out on whether he was cut from the same cloth as his father in beliefs, he was charming in his own awkward way. I wasn't entirely sure if it was a façade or not, nor was I going to assume that it wasn't. Nonetheless, he had surprised me by being a complete gentleman, showing none of the arrogance of his father.

Perhaps our fears were unfounded…

He finally was able to extricate himself from the lickspittle who was likely trying to cozy himself up in order to get access to Max Anders. Honestly, it was tiring to deal with all of these people trying to curry my favor. So many seemed to think that if they gained my friendship they'd get some sort of special treatment. They were sadly mistaken if they thought it would make a difference, but that didn't stop them from attempting it anyways.

I would never care for any of this, despite what Jean may try to get me acclimated to it. I got the point of it, thanks to Elizabet, but I still couldn't bring myself to care. It just felt unnecessary. In the long run, all of these people would benefit from the choices I was going to make, regardless of whether or not they were my friend or not.

The soft sigh from Theo as he stepped back beside me drew me out of my thoughts as I looked over to him. Again, I found myself wishing I had made the time to upgrade my Focus to include a camera. The fidelity may allow me to read expressions, but it never gave the full breadth of detail to provide an accurate rendition. It was a detail that I sorely missed right now, trying to divine Theo.

"Sorry about that," he breathed, looking me over.

"It's okay," I easily answered, "I'm still getting used to it myself."

Theo shrugged, trying to feign ease, "It's a process. I'm more comfortable with a more intimate approach." A beat of silence settled between us before he panickedly corrected himself, "Not that I'm trying to imply anything, of course! I just mean that I would prefer to meet someone one-on-one without all this," he waved his hands at the room, "Pageantry."

I was certainly not expecting that sort of admission from the son of Max Anders. If anything, I expected the exact opposite, considering what I knew of how the elder Anders operated. The man was the very definition of smooth, and for his son to voice an opposing opinion was rather surprising.

Smiling a little at his emphatic correction, I put his mind at ease, “I understand. Everyone here just feels like they’re trying too hard to be friendly.”

He turned back towards me, “Exactly,” he stopped, searching to find the right words, “There’s an authenticity that is only possible when you spend time with someone. Get them to relax. It’s like…”

“Ms. Hebert,” whatever Theo was going to say was interrupted by one of the attendants, and I found my attention drawn to them, “Mr. Anders will begin his address in a moment. There’s one speaker before you and then he’ll call you on stage. We can make room for you backstage if you’d like?”

I glanced at Theo and then the small table we had secured for ourselves, “We’re fine here. Theo will escort me when the time comes. Thank you for the offer.”

With a concise nod, the man left, and the two of us watched as the Master of Ceremonies took the stage.

I took the time to glance back towards Theo as the master of ceremonies announced Max to the gala. I noted the thin line of his lips and the tension in his posture and eyes. It appears that there was something there between himself and his father.

Interesting, I thought to myself, as the applause ended for Max, and he began speaking.

“Thank you everyone for coming to the First Boston Fundraising Gala. It’s quite heartwarming to see so many of our upstanding men and women here offering their support to such a worthy cause. Our brethren to the north appreciate all that you are doing for them.”

There was another round of applause that slowly died out.

“Even now, Brockton Bay opens its arms to Bostonians, offering hearth and home to those who seek shelter in these trying times. Meanwhile, we reopen our ports and railyards in order to provide for those unable to leave. It is through all of us that we show the world that this city isn’t what they have claimed we are!”

Applause broke out again, and I took the time to scan through the crowd, trying to get a barometer of the feeling in the crowd.

“Now, before we begin to speak about the reconstruction of Boston…We must speak of issues closer to home. Brockton Bay has suffered loss. It has fallen on hard times. But, we are recovering!”

Max was a talented speaker. I’ll give him that. He then gestured to the crowd, shifting his voice, and emphasized choice words and phrases. So he was morally bankrupt, a chauvinist, a

powerhungry oligarch…and also a talented orator. I could see how the E88 had thrived under his rule.

“The blood of our sons and daughters has been shed and we have all been affected by the grieving fathers and mothers. We can all relate and sympathize with Mayor Christenson, who lost his son and has since retired from public life. But! We are here to speak of new growth. A better tomorrow. A brighter future. A new Mayor needs to be elected to nurture the prosperity of Brockton Bay. So tonight, allow me a moment to introduce the man that I believe will help this city back to greatness!”

Max waved his arm off to the side, where a tall gangly man of African-American descent waited in a pressed suit.

“Thomas Calvert!”

I…was not expecting this.

AEH

Thomas spoke well, if not with the same charm as Max Anders did. He spoke of facts, numbers, and projections with just a hint of passion where needed. He emphasised the ‘new possibilities’ that his mayoral regime might bring. Given that he was speaking to a group of wealthy donors and industrialists, it’s clear that he was pandering to them. There were also enough comments about the support of ‘ordinary citizens’ that he could get some nice sound bites from the various journalists in the room.

I leaned over to Theo, who was staring intently at the stage, “I’ve never heard of this man. A friend of your father’s?”

I was nearly dumbfounded by the oddity of the leader of a Neo-Nazi movement endorsing a black man for Mayor!

“I’ve heard of him in passing. Venture capitalist of some kind. Investments, things like that. Nothing ground-breaking, just more investments made across a wide range.”

Sam stepped calmly up to my side and I glanced at what drew her attention. A young woman was walking over, a notebook held in her hands. She had a sharp smile, an almost skin-tight dress, and her hair back in a tight ponytail.

“Ah, don’t you two look good together. I’m sorry to step in, but let me introduce myself,” she extended a hand, unconcerned with Sam’s calm assessment, “Lisa Wilbourn, Executive Assistant to Mr. Calvert,” her smile seemed to sharpen somehow.

“Nice to meet you,” I shook her hand while replying noncommittedly, “How can I help you?”

“Mr. Calvert would like to schedule an appointment with you at your earliest possible convenience. He’s interested in the vision you have for Zero Dawn Technologies and the effect it will have on Brockton Bay.”

While I nodded along, I mentally frowned. It was inevitable that I would get involved in politics. Hell, I was already neck deep in it with Vice President Ryan, but there was a stark difference between national and local politics. This was especially true for a mayoral candidate. Did I really want to dip my toes into the local election, when it could blow up in my face?

On the other hand, I was absolutely aware that having a friendly voice in the mayor’s office would help my efforts immensely. Naturally, I would similarly have to hear out the other candidates when they emerged. Before committing to anything, I wanted to hear from Jean. Out of my ‘inner circle’ she would be the best able to advise me.

Reaching a decision, I put my attention back on Ms. Wilbourn, who…was giving me an uncanny look. Like she knew I was going to turn her down gently. It raised my hackles, because it reminded me too much of another person.

Tamping that down, I offered a disarming smile, “I’m afraid that it is too soon for a face-to-face meeting. I’d like to see what Mr. Calvert has to offer before we sit down. I assure you, we will follow his campaign closely.”

There was that damn smile again, as Ms. Wilbourn’s lips twitched upwards into a smirk, “Of course. Thank you for your time, Ms. Hebert. Mr. Anders, good evening to you as well. I look forward to speaking to you both in the near future.”

“You too,” I offered as she sauntered off, leaving me to mentally shudder at the dirty feeling that I got from the blonde. If this was Calvert’s executive assistant, I didn’t think I would find anything likeable about the man to support him.

On stage, Mr. Anders had taken back the microphone and was continuing his commentary about this event and how it would benefit Boston. A small competitive part of me was eager to see how he reacted to my announcement.

“Well, that was more drama than I expected,” Amy declared, wandering over to our table. I heard Theo exchange my words, but my attention was on Anders senior.

“But perhaps there is no person more representative of the dedication and hardiness of our great city, than the young lady I am about to introduce you to. Despite all of the adversity she has gone through in her short life, she has persevered and risen from it stronger. She is an example for which we should all follow, and she has a few words of her own on the Boston reconstruction. Let me introduce to you, Miss Taylor Hebert.”

That was my cue. Theo appeared quickly at my side and we walked arm-in-arm to the stage. People parted before us and applause filled the room. I did my best to smile and…be gracious? I wasn't sure if I was succeeding, but I did my best. Up the stairs, and leaving Theo behind, I shook Max's hand before striding over to the podium and looking out over the sea of faces. Even with my Focus, I could only see so far. But it was enough.

I had to wonder what they saw, looking at me with my unseeing eyes. Did I look like a social climber trying to claim my fifteen minutes of fame? Or was I something else to them? Was I a threat to eliminate or an ally to enlist? No doubt I was both those last two to many in the room, perhaps even both simultaneously to some of them.

"Thank you very much Mr. Anders," I said, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. While I *had* something resembling a speech at the ready, it didn't feel natural. I didn't like it. I was someone who preferred to speak from the heart, instead of with some prepared statement. Maybe it was irresponsible, but it was me.

"I won't take up too much of your time," I continued, looking over the crowd, "...but unless you have been living under a rock you know who I am and what my company is." There was a titter of laughter from some people and I allowed myself a smile, "But I'm sure you haven't had a chance to get to know me. I said before that I'm a firm believer in cooperation and I stand by that. And to continue my goal of leading by example, I will share with you tonight how I, and my allies, intend to help Boston recover from the terrible tragedy that has struck it."

I waved a hand theatrically, not feeling a modicum of shame at having remotely hijacked the projector and having it light up the screen behind me. On it were images of the LRL at work.

"First, the Light Rescue Lance has been fully repaired, upgraded, and reinforced. I will be donating it, in its entirety, to the city of Boston to aid in the recovery and rebuilding efforts. My company will cover a five year contract of repairs, maintenance, and upkeep on the machines, with a machine shop being established inside the Boston city limits."

Applause rang out, more freely this time. It was less politely tepid. But considering that most here were business men and women, they understood that I was donating tens of million dollars worth of machinery and equipment to another city. Even with all the valuable field data this would allow me to gather it was still a significant donation to the recovery efforts.

"Now, as proud as I am of my machines, I know they are not enough. Boston requires more. More investments, more time, more plans, and more…leadership," I took a pause, shifting the screen behind me to a neutral blue, "After all, we can't let the government lead this reconstruction. The result will be over budget, under delivered, and over the deadline."

I smiled as the room laughed, and one or two people hollered.

“As the classic author Lawrence J. Peter once said; ‘*Sometimes I wonder whether the world is being run by smart people who are putting us on or by imbeciles who really mean it.*’”

A polite laughter rippled across the crowd, but I pressed on, “So…what are we to do? We’re going to do it better.”

Behind me the screen changed, showing a somewhat stylized and simplified satellite image of Boston as it used to be. Once everyone had time to take it in, the image changed once more, giving an aerial overview of the devastation Leviathan had wrought.

“Over the last several days, Zero Dawn and our business partners have bought up critical plots of land in Boston.”

On the screen, colorful outlines showed up, highlighting ruin after ruin that we had acquired for cheap. Most of them were located close to the former city center, but a good chunk of the larger properties were also located close to the city’s borders and harbor, where we would need to rebuild the infrastructure to support larger industries.

In front of me, I could hear a low murmur go through the crowd. Understandable, really. WHile I personally might have felt bad for how cheap we were buying everything up, from a pure business point of view, it still was a ludicrous waste of money. Ignoring the crowd’s reaction for now, I moved on.

“In addition, we have bought up several of the public transit and utility companies servicing the Greater Boston area.”

I paused for several moments and let the reactions of the increasingly agitated crowd play out, while behind me more and more colorful lines, representing bus lines, utilities, and other services, started to snake their way through the rubble.

“More importantly, however, I am pleased to announce that as of—,” I took a breath and let the LED on my Focus blink once to visibly indicate I was checking the current time, “—two hours ago, the federal and state government have fully transferred both their stakes in the local assets, as well as the powers of government to B.A.S.E, the newly formed **B**oston **A**utonomous **S**pecial **E**nterprise. I believe the president will be making a public announcement to that effect any moment now.”

This time the crowd’s reaction was more lively as the people started to catch on to where I was going with this. Rather than wait for everyone to calm down again, something that I doubt would happen any time soon, I moved straight on, “This means that B.A.S.E. has been empowered to create its own laws and regulations, control taxation, build infrastructure, and largely operate without external oversight in the Greater Boston area.”

Truthfully, we had been lucky that the President was already on his way out of office and had nothing left to lose, while still having favors he could call in. While every politician in DC had been happy to get rid of the bottomless money sink and source of bad PR that Boston had become, a few of them would be willingly caught on public record admitting that they had basically sold part of the country to a private company in exchange for promises of future investments in the area.

And while the fact that they were managing to get a major city rebuilt without spending excessive amounts of taxpayer dollars might win them some voters, I highly doubted it would be a popular decision in Boston itself. After all, the military governor was only just starting to hand power back to the elected officials. Everyone knew that telling the locals that most of their newly elected officials would now be replaced with a board of governors staffed with company appointees would not go over well.

We were lucky that Disney had created a similar precedent with the Reedy Creek Improvement District in 1967 and that there were extensive legal frameworks for condemning entire cities following Endbringer attacks. It wasn't originally intended for something like this, but our legal teams were already working around the clock ensuring that the foundation for BASE was ironclad while we still had a favorable president in charge. We simply couldn't take the risk that the next administration would override the decision before we had time to properly establish ourselves. While, for now, everyone was willing to play ball, that was sure to change once election season came around.

Focusing back on my audience, I resumed my speech, while behind me, 3D mockups of futuristic-looking skyscrapers started to rise out of the rubble, "With full control over the new autonomous district and with significant technological and financial resources already committed, BASE is certain that it can rebuild a better and economically highly competitive Boston. As a first step in our rebuilding efforts, a team from a new Zero Dawn subsidiary, Focus Communications Systems and Technologies, or FoCom will be building their headquarters and production facilities in Boston. This will provide jobs for thousands and hopefully far more as Zero Dawn expands its own operations."

"Furthermore, I am pleased to announce that we have started talks with several other interested parties about strategic partnerships and opportunities for collaboration in the Greater Boston area," all but telling the assembled businessmen and women that their competitors might already be in negotiations to get a part of Zero Dawn's pie, I stepped slightly forward and nodded towards the audience, "I wish you a lovely evening."

The applause as I left the stage was not the enthusiastic ovation I could have gone for. Instead, it was slightly confused and hesitant, but also calculating. Clearly, the cogs were already turning and the larger fish were considering whether they should take a bite out of my obvious bait.

Idly, I wondered how many of them realized that in a mere footnote of my speech I had just declared outright war on the established telecom providers. Given how much headache they

had caused me over the past few weeks it felt kind of good how quick everyone was to ignore them in the face of bigger news.

The original plan had been cooperation between them and myself. I provide the tech, they revamp their infrastructure. But they didn't like that plan. Negotiations had stalled, with their demands being signing over all patents and adhering to a non-compete agreement.

My compromise was reasonable. They refuse to bend? Then they'll have until FoCom gets off the ground before I start putting them out of business. If they didn't want to get with the times, then they could go the way of the horse and buggy.

AEH

Theo Anders

A few quiet words to an attendant sent them scurrying away, searching for the event organizers. Theo turned back to the ongoing storm that surrounded Taylor. Her announcement was…bold. He was beginning to expect that from her at this point.

"No, Mr. Beasley, the distribution of new business licenses will be managed by the team in Boston. We've certainly considered the idea of bringing in franchise businesses early to help with kickstarting the economy. However, the underlying problem is the propensity for franchises to extract the money out of the area to external companies, which could be crippling during the early stages of the project."

Theo leaned over, fully aware that Sam had been tracking him as he navigated the group. In a low voice, he explained, "I've asked the building organizers to open the Gallery so Taylor can get away from the crowd. I'm sure you'll want your men to look things over first?"

For a brief instant there was a flash of suspicion in her eyes, he had seen it enough over the years to recognize it, before she tapped her focus, speaking in a low tone. The more he saw it in action, the more he was starting to believe that the focus was the future. It was just too handy of a device to discard as a fad.

His job done, he strode towards Taylor, quietly sidling up to her side even as she continued debating with Mr. Beasley, who refused to give up. He had to think about where he knew the other man from before he realized that Beasley was one of the regional managers of Northeast Grocery. It made sense why he was trying to strong-arm his way into the coalition, it would only benefit the company as a whole, considering there were quite a few stores in the Boston area, but their headquarters was in New York.

"Look," Taylor seemed like she was growing tired enough of his badgering, "I am not the one who is making the decisions on who is and is not getting the grants, Mr. Beasley. If you wish to

discuss it further, then I suggest you reach out to Mr. Gabriel, he is currently in charge of the planning. Otherwise, I have nothing further to offer you."

He took that as his time to intervene, judging by the tight expression on Taylor's face, placing his hand on her elbow, "You heard her, ladies and gentlemen," he said, looking them all over. "If you have any further questions, you know who to reach out to. As for us, I think we'll have a breath of fresh air after all this excitement."

He then gently led her away from the sharks, making a beeline for one of the side doors. Taylor's bodyguard had inserted herself into their shadow as they moved through the crowd. The door was opened by one of the attendants and they slipped through, the door being closed behind them. The sound of finality, from wood striking wood, allowed him to relax just slightly.

Guiding them to a nearby bench, they sat down. The sight that escaped Taylor's lips told him what a good idea it was. Stretching out a leg, she wiggled a boot, "I asked Parian to be as gentle as she could with heels, but it still feels like I'm going to be sore tomorrow."

Theo, wisely, said nothing, letting the comfortable silence settle on them.

"Thank you," Taylor's words broke the self-imposed silence and he found himself looking over to her.

"Think nothing of it," he offered quietly, not sure if it was the right thing to say, only that it felt that way, "I know how draining it can be."

She stared at him for a brief moment, resting against the wall. Her hair tumbled across her shoulder. He considered maybe he had said the wrong thing. But then to his relief she nodded offering a small smile, "So, you've successfully kidnapped me. And judging by the fact that Samantha is not losing her mind right now, this was planned. So what is the plan?"

He blinked at her comment, certainly not expecting such an irreverent statement for something so serious. Even if it was made in jest, joking about being kidnapped, especially in reference to how important she now was to quite a few people was…he didn't even know *how* to react to it.

Her smile faded away, as if she realized her mistake, "Sorry. That was inappropriate. Just sometimes the stress-"

"It's fine," he cut her off, and it was. Everyone had a way of dealing with stress, he tended to retreat into painting. If Taylor handled it differently, even if it was a bit…worrying, then that was hers. He had no right to judge her on it. If anything, the complexity of her humor only added to her charm.

"Well, I thought we could take an opportunity to rest for a bit, then walk and see the artwork. Get away from all of the work talk."

Her lips twitched upwards, “I wouldn’t mind some time away from the crowds, but,” she paused, taking a look further down the corridor, “It seems a little dark in here. I’m probably not going to be able to see the paintings.”

It didn’t initially register what she was referencing, but when she waved her hand in front of her eyes, it all clicked with horrifying clarity as his heart dropped like a stone. He had completely overlooked *that*.

“Oh. Shit,” he winced at his sudden descent into coarse language as he struggled to recover, “Uh, I’m sorry…it’s just…I didn’t mean….”

Taylor laughed gently, even as continued his attempted apologies, wanting to make it right, “I…It’s just easy to forget that you’re blind, Taylor. Everything you do, it’s like you can see everything.”

She leaned back, and her laughter briefly filled the room as she faced across the corridor at a large painting. It was a landscape piece, watercolors on canvas if he had to guess. As Taylor’s laughter came to an end she inhaled to speak, saying, “I’m not offended, Theo. I’ve worked hard to make up for my lack of sight. The fact that you can interact with me and forget that I’m clinically blind is nice.”

“I don’t understand.”

The young woman extended an arm, running her fingers down the length of her jacket, tracing the threads distractedly, “That’s the hardest thing to adjust to, honestly. How people treat you is different. Like you’re broken, or worse, fragile. I’m fully aware that I can’t see, but that doesn’t make me dumb. And it certainly doesn’t make me helpless or somehow…*lesser*.”

She turned her head towards him, giving a small smile, “So the fact that you forget that I can’t see is a nice thing to say.”

“Can you tell me how it works? Like what can you see?”

Taylor pointed at the painting, “I can see the frame, because it stands out from the rest. In some cases, I can see where the paint has formed ridges. It’s a lot like braille, even if that was never the intention. I can see the elevation of the material. A flat surface could be anything to me, but if there is any sort of texture to it, then I can perceive it.”

“Oh,” Theo thought to himself for a moment, before coming to a decision. Standing, he offered Taylor a hand, “In that case, I think I have a solution.”

The two of them walked for a few minutes, Theo glancing around. Finally, he led her over to the piece he was looking for. A quick glance at the placard confirmed his suspicions: Oil paint on a

metal plate. It was an oddity among the collection, oil paint that had been applied with palette knives instead of a brush.

“What do you think of this?”

Taylor stood still for a moment, cocking her head to the side. She then reached up and brushed her hand through the air, fingers dancing on invisible buttons, “Huh. I can see it. If I turn up the gain on the Focus, I can get a good impression of the paint. I couldn’t tell you the color, of course, unless I cheated and accessed the details.”

Folding his arms, he rested his weight on one leg, “You know, that’s actually an interesting idea. Art pieces without color. Conveying meaning through shape.”

“Isn’t that just the main idea behind modern art? Sculptures that are recycled and combined from something else?”

“Not…really? A lot of modern sculpture art is based on engaging the imagination of the viewer. Most historic sculptures were all about capturing the realism of life. It’s why there was a large focus on muscle groups, posture, and pose.”

Theo paused, worried that he had said too much, but Taylor smiled and took his hand again, “Another? And you can tell me more. I will warn you though, I’m an engineer, so I’m certainly gravitating more towards realism than something impressionist.”

The young man smiled and led her deeper into the gallery. He felt…a little more relaxed about things. Sure, Sam was still a half-step behind the pair of them, and he could see another four men walking ahead of them, but the awkwardness between Taylor and himself seemed…less.

And that was enough for him.

AEH

According to anonymous sources reporting to the New York Times, the Department of Energy is preparing to make a landmark announcement on nuclear energy. In a surprising reversal of a nearly decade-long policy, the Department of Energy is planning to recommence nuclear reactor production.

While details are still scarce due to the fluidity of the situation, sources indicate that this decision stems from a breakthrough in nuclear reactor design. A Thorium Breeder Reactor, or TBR, is a reactor that uses Thorium-232 in order to produce energy through the on-site creation of fissile material. The existence of this type of energy technology has been known for almost sixty years, but has been, up until recently, been largely relegated to the laboratory, with many issues relating to the design, scalability, Uranium-232 generation and molten salt corrosion.

Furthermore, these sources have identified the origin of this design as being connected to up and coming inventor, Taylor Hebert. Hebert, the CEO of Zero Dawn Technologies, has been in the news recently with the reveal of her robotics technology and her actions in Boston. Attempts to reach Zero Dawn for comment have been met with silence.

If this report is true, according to Nathan Orrery, of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, this could initiate a revitalization in the field of nuclear energy technology after its chilling by Behemoth. The Endbringer, responsible for nuclear meltdowns in Moscow, Johannesburg, and Jinzhou, resulted in a worldwide agreement to shut down nuclear reactors for fear of additional meltdowns.

Capitol Hill is demanding answers, with Senator Tammerlane Shaw of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs, along with Senator Kaitlyn Naystrom on the House Committee on Energy and Commerce both initiating an inquiry into the decision-making process that went into this decision.

- CNN Headline News