

War on Protector?

“Drake? The military has developed a new weapon to protect the island. Something that can supposedly detect any threat to us and shoot it down. They’re going to be giving it a test this evening, shouldn’t you be there to see if all that money they get for their budget is being put to good use?”

“There are only three things I need to know right now. Is it aimed here at my office, is this prototype going to lead to other experimental weapons, and how likely is it to explode?” The last time Drake ran all the way out to a military testing center their project almost blew up in his face. Quite literally, there were times he wondered if it had been intentional. Some of those scientists were crazy. And not the good kind of crazy either.

“Umm. Notes say that it is Not aimed here at your office. It can only fire at anything in the air over the island. They aren’t sure of its range yet, apparently that’s part of the testing. There are explosions included, hopefully when the weapon hits its target and not when it’s shooting. If it works they want permission to produce dozens, maybe hundreds of them. With proper sanctions and...”

“And to satisfy all the protest groups that will come with their big budget of new toys. Saying they won’t put them in or near cities, that they won’t put them where they can harm wildlife, that they won’t cause pollution. Then they’ll go for the angle of those new weapons making jobs. For the production of parts and for assembly, maintenance, all the usual garbage that they claim. When we both know perfectly well that half of that goes into someone’s pockets and half of their claims will be completely ignored. But we have to let them try this thing just in case it actually can do everything it’s supposed to.

Just get ready to call whoever's in charge of the project so I can yell at them or congratulate them, whichever comes first."

"Okay. You're the boss. I'll at least try to get something up on video and we can watch the demonstration." Rynn couldn't shake a nagging feeling that something was going to go wrong. Not in a normal way either, something that Drake actually Should be at the test site for. Something that would need his personal attention.

Over at the test site for their new weapon a group of ten soldiers kept watch over the military's newest "toy" as Drake would call it. A sort of hybrid between a missile and a cannon, high speed projectiles were supposed to be fired at and guided toward anything flying over the island that could be dangerous. That meant anything with a weapon as far as they could define it. "Sarge I feel stupid holding this string."

"You'll do as you're told cadet!" The sarge turned to their Lieutenant also called by most as the Geek. Only holding his current rank due to his works in the science aspect of their outfit. "How likely is this thing to blow him up while he's holding the string?"

"Please sir I'm not incompetent! This isn't some lightning experiment, long as he holds that kite string he's perfectly safe. Maybe a little falling debris from the explosion but you really didn't need to go find a fresh recruit for this. Okay, turning on the weapon. Now it's going to scan the immediate area, find the kite, detect the rifle we tied to it, and that should have it fire. We lose one rifle but we know that it'll work."

"But really is a damned kite going to be enough? Didn't even reckon you'd get it up there with the weight of the rifle added."

"That's why you're an ignorant grunt soldier and I'm in the science division. I had the kite specially made, the gun lighter, not loaded, now shut up and let me get this

thing working.”

“Hey I give the orders here! Now get this thing working.”

Stupid commanding officer. Always had to feel like he was in charge. Now time to sit back and watch. Radar from their new weapon picked up the kite and registered it as a weapon just like it should, calculated how close it was, and fired. Only a second later a loud explosion overhead and a very thoroughly destroyed kite fell to the ground. “Alright. Minimal shrapnel and other debris from the detonation. That’s a good sign. Registered the target immediately, very good. Okay now send up the regular one. Need to make sure it won’t fire at something that doesn’t pose a threat. Like any random citizen with wings.”

“Aw come on this is stupid! I don’t care if it’s going to defend the whole island, I look ridiculous!”

“Do it cadet or I’ll make sure you never get any further in the ranks! In fact I’ll see you locked up for disobeying orders.”

Oh that annoying Sarge. Made even worse from the fact that his name happened to be his current rank. Always pushing around the others, someone needed to put him in his place. Shame none of the others present were brave enough to stand up to the jerk. Once their second target was up he turned on the weapon again. “Okay... radar is picking up the target... registering... it’s good, reading target as not a threat. Well boys I think that means we’ve got a nice shiny new gun to keep focused on the skies over our home.”

With one slight problem. Their new toy hadn’t been turned off yet. The radar was still scanning, a faint blip just barely on the edge of its range appearing for a

moment. Something just over Yann City. Their weapon picked it up, turning and orienting toward a place it shouldn't have been able to aim at. "Hey guys? Is it supposed to do that?"

The assembled soldiers could only stare at the new weapon while it fired. A heavy explosive projectile on its way toward the capital. Guided by a faint blip on the radar that was just about to disappear. "Okay geek what the hell is it firing at?"

"I don't know! The readings we're getting here, it's not showing anything big. From this distance it really shouldn't be able to fire... I'm actually quite impressed with my invention."

"Well whatever it's shooting at, someone's going to need to do cleanup duty. Uhh... let's... call it in? After all we can't afford to be leaving this gun without its protective detail? Geek, you get to tell the base about this minor malfunction. Good luck with that."

With the faint sound of an explosion he had to agree, time to let the bosses know. Military wouldn't be the only ones responding to the strange explosion though. "Officer Blake? We've got six different calls about an explosion in the air over the city. You're closest and, well, probably the best man for the job anyway. Come on it's an explosion, that's cool right?"

"That's what all the rookies would say. I'll go check it out, have an emergency response team ready just in case. Why's all the crazy stuff always happen on My shift anyway?" Because he worked just about any shift he could? Daytime, evening, night, whatever they needed the most experienced officer for, he'd be doing. And without his car too, oh well at least the incident hadn't been too far away. "I'll be in the area soon,

probably five or ten minutes at most.”

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The unfortunate victim of that explosion just happened to be one of the city’s idols. Protector, on his way back toward the lab after a day out in disguise. Even a hero had to have a life outside his nightly duties of watching out for innocent people in trouble. It had been a risky idea to begin with, flying back to the lab for a quick recharge instead of walking. Then again he thought he’d be going fast enough nobody would notice him and he was wearing his helmet.

It was only at the last second that anything registered in his systems. No projectile, no shot, nothing in the air detected until it was right on top of him. The alert message didn’t even get to finish displaying itself before impact, sending him crashing down through an old abandoned building’s rooftop and out a third story window to a back alley. *Alert... systems... critical... severe damage to... l..t w..g a.. ..m. Op....l syst... un.... t. di....y*

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Blake’s phone rang just as he was getting into the air to try and pick up any sign of the explosion. Drake, well now wasn’t the best time but it could be worse. His brother didn’t call too often while he was working unless it was important. “Yeah? What’s wrong Drake?”

“Blake! I know you’re out there on patrol and there’s an emergency you’re probably being called to. Whatever you do, DO NOT FLY THERE! Stay out of the air until I call again, the military’s messed up big this time. You hear me? Stay out of the air, they’re testing some sort of weapon that fires at...”

Blake didn't register the rest of the conversation. Instead he snapped his wings tight to his back and let himself fall. Just in time too, another shot came from out of nowhere and detonated where he would have been just a few seconds later. Blake felt a pain in his back and shoulders as he threw open his wings again to try and put the brakes on his descent. In time to prevent any serious injury but it was far from a comfortable landing. "Blake? BLAKE! What was that?!?"

"That... was you saving my life. If I got your call two seconds later I'd be dead right now. Whatever the hell they're doing get them to stop. Then drag them out to the station. Call it in for me, get as many uniforms as you need. Either that or get me their names so I can kick their asses one at a time."

"Yeah. Well just be careful out there. I'll let you know when the weapon's shut down."

Great. No flying and the military was involved. Just one normal day. Why was that so much to ask for anymore? Wasn't this hard twenty years ago. Now there had definitely been another explosion earlier. Whatever the results of it may be he had no clue but it was his job right now to try and find something, anything. A trace of debris, and though he hoped not to find it there was a possibility of the remains of someone else like him that could have been shot at. Side streets, if there was anything left it'd be on a side street.

"Blake? Officer Blake come in please."

"This is Blake, got any news for me Dispatch?"

"Yes and no. We just got a call here telling us to, and I quote, Stand down and keep all officers out of Aqua Street. That's right around where your explosion is so, you

know.”

“Yeah I do. Completely ignore what the military wants and proceed to that area. Thanks for narrowing down my search a bit.”

“They’re serious though, already sending a team to recover the “test kite” as they’re calling it. Be careful and get out as soon as you can.”

Only five streets up and he’d be right on target. Closest military base was at top speed in one of their transports, maybe half an hour. Yeah, that should be plenty of time to deal with whatever they’re up to.

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“Sir? This is the sixth call from the prime minister’s office. What should we do?”

“Ignore him until we finish our assignment. Alright, everyone armed and ready? Let’s go see if the lab boys are right and we shot down the mysterious Protector. And if we did, we collect all the pieces we can find to bring them back. Now until we actually hear from the prime minister we’re allowed to roll right into the city, remember that.” The prime minister or a higher official in the military. Seeing as part of their equipment in the transport would be blocking out all radio or cell signals that provided a nice little loophole, nobody could contact them until their task was complete.

Six of the island’s best were fully geared up. Assault rifles, grenades, smoke bombs, stun batons, heavy flak jackets, helmets, it all seemed excessive for a recovery mission especially in the city but if it was anything important then they couldn’t let anyone else have it. “All heavy firepower and explosives are in the back of the transport sir. We’re good to go. Something just doesn’t feel right about all this but everyone’s on

board and following orders.”

“Good. Let’s move out. One of us will have to stay with the transport until we find out if the big guns are needed. Everyone else, when we arrive at our destination fan out. Find traces of anything and feel free to fire off a round or two. It’ll get the rest of us to come running. Half an hour to the target zone, and I want things wrapped up quickly.”

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Ugh, Blake could smell something in the air. Smelled like he was right in the area of the explosion... stupid military, always having some sort of trace in their weapons but really this was too much. Smelled like garbage and smoke, terrible. Least there weren’t any other civilians in the area yet, must have all been spooked, ran into their homes to hide from trouble. Not to mention it was getting dark, was about as good a reason to stay home as any. This would be the third alley he’d search, time for some good luck.

Alert... approaching... neg...ve... t.r.e. is... kn..n... fri..dly... Blake. Blake? No, he couldn’t let the cop see him like this. Damaged, weak, helpless. Had to get up, get out of here. Power levels were bad, whatever hit him had definitely packed a punch. Couldn’t even tell all the damage, just hoped that he could get a decent distress signal out to his friends. Protector leaned against the closest thing he could reach and almost fell over when the garbage can tipped and left him with no support.

“Hm? Is that...” Blake saw a familiar metal figure rising up from a pile of garbage but frankly given his condition it had almost been the right place for him. Without Protector stirring at that moment he would have just walked right on by. “Hey, what the heck happened to you? Huh? Your helmet.”

What? No no NO! Protector tried turning away, tried covering his face, the

remnant of his helmet almost falling off. Oh what was the point? It was too damaged right now to be of any use, might as well stow it away. “You’re not supposed to see me like this.”

Blake took a few cautious steps toward the metallic figure, backing up a bit when sparks flew from a few damaged spots in his armor. “Like what? The beat up and injured part or you without obscuring your identity?” Mountain dragon, that much he did get to see. Now if he could just get a little closer. “You need help right now. And that’s my job. Come on, military’s probably on their way to try and find what their weapon hit but I’m not about to let them collect you. They nearly shot me down too.”

“So that was the other explosion I heard. Well let’s get moving, get out of here. Least it’s going to be getting dark soon.” Protector kept himself supported against a wall, much better than that trash can from a moment ago. “See anyone on your way over here?”

Blake shook his head as he got closer, even got a good look at the Mountain dragon that was hiding under that helmet all the time. He... “he’s just a kid...” Ohhh damn, did he just say that?

“Maybe you’re just old.”

Yep, he heard it. “Sorry. Hey, let’s find something that’ll keep your secret from anyone else. Then I’ll get you out of here, not much time before the troops come rolling in. While we’re at it, you actually like sugar? I’ve got some here with me. Figured if nothing else it’d have the local kids liking me for supporting you.”

“Right. Kids. Yeah sugar helps. Need it.”

Was he depressed? Maybe embarrassed? Couldn’t worry about it now, had to get

him out of here and maybe find a way to patch up some of those injuries. “Wish the standard med kit I carry around had something designed a little more for you. Can you walk?”

“Don’t need a medkit, just need energy. Sugar, please.” After pouring all that Blake had down his throat a few warnings faded, system energy was back up to about forty, he could feel his hands, all nervous systems seemed to be operating... thankfully without him feeling any pain from the damages. Now he had a chance to look himself over. Nothing seemed to be too deeply damaged, aside from his ability to fly. Breaks in his armor on each arm, the torso, even a spot on one of his legs. A few unsteady steps, something was messed up and making him shaky.

“I can work on my own car but you’re entirely different. Still it doesn’t look like you’re going anywhere fast. Lean on me, we’ve got to get moving.” Blake didn’t want to be stuck in this alley if the military showed up. Now a few streets down there’d at least be some side streets out, a sewer access point if they were desperate, only thing they had here would be a pile of junk to duck behind.

Lean on him? He had to be kidding right? “I’d crush you. No thanks.”

“Fine. You get to the entrance of this alley on your own, you can walk by yourself. Otherwise I’m helping you the whole way.” It really didn’t look like it but Blake had a fair amount of muscle on him. Sure he could understand how Protector was proud, wanted to be able to take care of himself, but this was serious. The cop shrugged and walked to the mouth of the alley, waiting for his friend. Kid could still move, that was something. Whatever that armor of his happened to be, it was strong. Just not strong enough, he was clumsy on every step and had to lean against a wall repeatedly.

“See, nothing wrong with me.”

“Yeah yeah, enough playing the tough guy. Just try leaning on me for a minute, I can take it really.” Protector was waving him off. Blake’s patience for that was just about up, everyone kept thinking he couldn’t handle himself, that Protector was so much better than him. Well in a lot of ways he could be but right now... When he was being waved off Blake ducked under the arm and put it across his shoulders. “There, nothing difficult about that. Start walking.”

Mobility stabilized... attempting further distribution of mass... successful, power usage cut thirty percent... goal now within possible travel radius. Assuming he could keep leaning on the cop. Protector wasn’t sure how much was being put on him but it was helping, much as he wouldn’t want to admit it. Had to find out what was causing him to be so awkward, what threw him off balance. Maybe another diagnostic scan, whatever was wrong he couldn’t see it himself. “Okay. Need to get to Bill’s lab.”

Honestly Blake would just be happy if they got out of this area. If he was right and the military didn’t waste any time they’d be here in a couple minutes at most. “We’ll get there don’t worry. This is my job remember, helping others. Now if any soldiers come rolling up on us just let me handle them alright?” Speaking of which maybe he should see if they were close. Checking his radio, trying to call the station Blake was met with static. “Yeah, definitely got to get moving.”

Once he got the kid moving it wasn’t too bad. Kind of heavy on his shoulder but so far no worse than if he was dragging another officer out of the line of fire. One side street, two, three streets down and no sign of trouble, maybe their luck would hold out. “Hey mister?” Huh? Ohh no, someone on the streets at this hour? “Heeey, is that

Protector?”

“Shouldn’t you be at home right now?”

Protector put a heavy metallic hand over Blake’s mouth, silencing him. “Can you keep a secret?” The kid nodded vigorously to Protector’s question. “Well, it’s a secret, but I’m training this cop here so he can be a little more like me. I’m pretending to be hurt so he can help me down the street. You know, teaching him how to properly rescue someone. Now if anyone comes along asking, you didn’t see us did you?” Another vigorous nod from the kid before he ran off. “Bet by morning he’ll tell all his friends about this.”

“Hey, who’s rescuing who here?”

“I don’t need you to rescue me. I can make it on my own.” Protector was silent for a minute as he continued leaning on Blake, limping down the street. “But since you’re here I do appreciate it.” *Nano repair functions at maximum, primary focus on mobility and weapons. Diagnostic scans inconclusive, suggests break in circuitry... Nanos dispatched to investigate further and begin repairs.*

“You know it’s not just because this is part of my job. I like being the unofficial “go-to” cop when we need to get in touch with you somehow but even if this wasn’t what I do for a living I’d be out here wanting to help.”

“Stick with police work, you are not skilled in public speaking.”

Blake would have given a sharp reply but something far more pressing caught his attention. The roar of a military vehicle’s engine not too far away. “Damn, gotta get out of here now.”

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“Alright men, we’re at the target destination. Start looking around, report anything you find back to me no matter how minor it might seem. We give this spot a complete sweep then spread out. For all we know there’s some civilian’s remains here, or an armed and dangerous weapon. Yes boys, I can see the trash here and it looks like it’s been knocked all over the place. You WILL be digging through it until we find something or someone. And check the rooftop as well, if nothing else maybe you’ll see something in a surrounding alley or down the street that we can’t.”

If Blake had been able to stick around he would have delighted in snapping several shots of the military boys digging through trash and messing up their uniforms. Unfortunately it was only a matter of time until they found what they were looking for. A few trace drops from some fluid that seeped out of Protector’s injuries before they were mechanically sealed. The broken piece of his wing. Heavy boot prints, they had to take a few photos of their own including of the nearby damage to buildings but it wasn’t long before they were on their way again.

“Alright spread out. Groups of two, if you find anything signal the rest of us. Remember we start with the non-lethal firepower and if something shoots back we switch to lethal no matter who or what it is.”

“SIR YES SIR!” Four of the six set out in Blake and Protector’s immediate direction, breaking off into two groups as they started searching down each path, shining spotlights wherever they could. Only two blocks back at most from their target. “Streets are pretty dead.”

“Would you want to be out walking about when there’d been an explosion or two overhead, and then we come rolling in making a scene?”

“Be glad the commander doesn’t hear you talking like that. Come on there’s nothing here, let’s keep going. Thought I saw movement over there.”

“Over where? Huh? Hey, yeah I see it. Someone’s just a little further down the road! Could be the target.”

“Or it could be some civilian, don’t go shooting yet.”

Blake couldn’t make out what the voices were saying behind him but he knew they were there. “Any chance you’ve got some sort of camouflage system? Blending in, looking different, something like that? Even if it’s only for a minute and eats up power? Come on if we can slip away from them now we might make it.” Protector just shook his head slowly. “Was a long shot just to ask. It’s never that easy for me. Okay, you keep going as best you can, I’ll double back and see if I can slow those guys up. Maybe stop them entirely.”

“Too risky. It’s two on one. They’ll kill you. And more nearby.”

“I know what I’m doing alright! Just keep going, and try not to make too much noise. If you have to just stop and lean against a wall, stay out of the light as best you can.”

Protector looked like he was about to give an opinion, his hand gripping Blake firmly before slowly, grudgingly letting go and giving him a chance. “Yell if it gets rough.”

Two soldiers, both relaxed but heavily armed. Their combat rifles would probably rip through his body armor after a few shots, maybe the first two or three would be stopped but he needed to avoid any rounds being fired. Didn’t need the attention of all the others just yet. “Evening. Looks like you guys got called out here for the same

reason as me. Haven't seen anything, just one guy I was helping to get home. He's pretty out of it, think he's either had a few drinks or just got really shocked from those blasts. Thought it was fireworks or something at first and just got an exaggerated call but, well if you boys are here maybe it's serious."

That's it, closing the distance and they weren't aiming at him yet. Maybe his uniform was helping, or maybe they were too busy trying to look past him. "Officer huh? Thought you guys were obsolete? No offense, lots of residents think the same of us. Say the island doesn't need military. We've got it from here, not even a crowd for you to try and control."

Least they weren't being too much of a pain yet. Blake didn't want to hazard a glance back to see if Protector was actually getting any further away, just had to keep these guys focused on something or someone else. "Not obsolete yet. Probably don't get all the cool toys you boys have but what they give me still works. Least I'm pretty sure it does, always dread those days where I might have to find out first hand. Hey, you guys get any of the same training we get? They make us stand there and take a shot from stun guns to see if we can hold our own, get sprayed with that pepper stuff, hit with an ITD, glad I don't have to go through that too often."

"Really? Okay, I'm glad for my career choice now. Our CO only has us do drills, exercise, but we never get zapped or anything like that. Rough. You've got my sympathy."

"Think I've got to agree. I'm not happy having to charge into the city tonight but it's better than your training. So if you see anything you'll let us know? Looks like your friend over there's still having a hard time. If we had time we'd help you, but, kind of

have to see about those explosions. Be careful.”

It couldn't be this easy could it? No, these guys were highly trained... er, supposedly. “Thanks. I'd better get him off the streets then just in case.”

“Hey!” Oh great, two more soldiers joining in just as he was about to get these guys heading in another direction. “You there, get off the streets and out of our way!” Even worse, it was their commanding officer. “What are you two doing just chatting with someone, we've got a job here.”

“Sir yes sir, but this is a local police officer and...”

“And what? We don't need anything from him other than for this guy to get out of our way. And who's that down the road? Someone just turned a corner up there, who is it?”

“It's nobody you'd be interested in.” Their commander didn't look convinced in the least. Blake gave a little mental sigh, this wouldn't be easy but he had a chance to slow these guys down. “Look, I'm just escorting the guy home. So leave him alone okay? Go back to your base or whatever you guys need to do around here.”

“Ya know cop.” Oh great, their leader was starting to get an attitude toward him. “I think you know exactly who or what we're looking for. I'm willing to bet that you've already found it, or him. And that you're trying to help it. Now far as I'm concerned that means we have the authority to shoot you and go after him. It is him, isn't it? That stranger down the street?”

“Not much point in trying to tell you anything else is there? You military officers. Any time you make up your minds there's no changing it until someone above you says you're wrong.” Blake slowly reached down to his belt, making it as casual a

movement as possible. There, one of his crowd control bombs. His finger slipped through the pin, now he just had to hope it wasn't the flash bang. "Okay, fine, guess we do things the hard way? I think we can manage that. Always wanted to know why you guys get all the money and cops like me are stuck on a low budget. Better earn your pay tonight."

There was a slight metallic "tink" sound as the pin was pulled free and Blake dropped the bomb. Smoke soon enveloped all five of them, thank goodness it wasn't the flash bang. Now to try and get some of these military thugs down.

"What the? A smoke bomb? This is the best you can do?"

One punch, two, Blake felt a rifle butt smacking into his side but he ignored it as best he could and swept out the legs of a third. It was all he could do for now, too long and he'd just be stuck in a brawl with all four attacking him. Hopefully those punches and the trip were enough. Now he just had to dart out and head for Protector. Easy enough, he still knew which direction to go and lept over the one he swept down. There, out of the smoke for now. Just had to get a little separation, get down the street and around a corner.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

"No you idiot!" The commander's voice, accompanied by a few coughs. "You might hit one of us in this smoke! Get clear then start firing!"

"What? He's a cop! We can't shoot a cop!"

Someone wasn't listening and let a few rounds fly. Blake turned the corner just in time, two bullets hitting the street and bouncing off only a few feet away. Didn't do enough damage in the smoke to stop them, but at least Protector was starting to get some

good distance. Dashing down, working to catch up. “I think I made them mad. Get moving! Huh, hmm, think I’ve got another idea to slow them down.”

“Better than your last one?”

“Yeah, the sewers. Come on, there’s an entrance just ahead.”

“What? You can’t seriously expect me to...”

“Of course not, but those damned covers are heavy. Need you to lift it and move it to the side, then get out of sight. They’ll think you ducked down. Might throw them off your trail.”

“Stupid idea but alright. Did they hit you?”

“Nothing to worry about. Get that cover open then keep moving. I’ll get you to safety one way or another.”

Even if they did want to try and sneak through the sewers it became evident as Protector tossed aside the cover that he’d never fit. Hopefully the military wouldn’t know that though. The kid got himself out of sight just in time... still hard to believe he was a kid though especially with strength like that. Here they came, Blake didn’t want to get into a firefight but it’d definitely slow them down.

“Last chance cop. Get out of our way or you’ll turn into a casualty.”

Only two of them, maybe they left behind the guy that wouldn’t fire at a police officer? Right about now he wished he had some sort of radar to figure out where they all were. “Not happening, you’ll have to go through me to get to him. You want to start a firefight in the middle of the city, be my guest.”

He had to dive for cover again, apparently that commanding officer didn’t care if he shot a cop, didn’t care if he could hit a civilian, just wanted to get the job done.

“Okay! Maybe that was a poor choice of words!” More shots, they were getting closer. Couldn’t stay in this little hiding place for long. Across the street he saw an open window to a run down house, no, couldn’t risk dragging any innocent people into this whole thing. Couldn’t fly yet either, no convenient ladders or ways to scale a building and get an advantage, only option he had was another bomb. Tear gas maybe, or... yeah, had to go with the flash while he could. A few windows might be blown out, a car alarm might go off down the street, but the more noise and distractions the better.

Taking a deep breath, pulling the pin, throwing his second bomb out around the corner and hoping for the best. There was the flash, he managed to cover his ears in time to avoid part of the deafening blast too, good. Blake got a good running start and glanced over his shoulder, turned, fired a few rounds of rubber bullets and kept going. He wasn’t following behind Protector now, just kept heading down the open street. Another look back, and there were three soldiers at the sewer entrance. Two diving down, one still following behind him but rubbing his eyes. Down another side street, switching to his stun gun. Now he just had to wait and hope for the best, had to try and get that officer. Stun gun, tear gas, two more rubber bullets loaded, and his dart gun. Then he’d have to go with live ammo and see what happened... hopefully it’d never come to that.

“Alright you, freeze!” Damn... another guy he hadn’t seen before came down the opposite end of the alley. So much for taking down the commander, he’d have to stun this one instead.

“You guys really should give up, I can still take you all down one by one.”

That’s it, keep walking, getting closer. The soldier didn’t know how to keep his distance when using a rifle. Just about in range, there, perfect. “That’s enough cop.

Orders are to take you down, alive if possible, so you'll tell us where the target's gone off to. I'm not about to let you get away, you broke my friend's nose earlier, he's stuck back at the transport getting medical attention."

"Good to know. With you down that'll leave four more threats."

"Huh?" Blake smirked and took advantage of the confusion, aiming his stun gun and firing a good heavy charge at him. Poor guy must have been confused when he was being splashed with water, until the electric current kicked in and gave him a big shock. He wouldn't be getting up for a while, shame the stun gun only had one or two more good shots for that kind of distance.

"Nice toy. If military ever needs a less lethal option, we might have to borrow that thing from you." Damn, waited too long to deal with the newcomer and now their boss was right behind him. "Drop it."

"Tougher than I thought. Hoped that flash would keep you out of the way for a bit longer." Blake had to drop the stun gun, trying to reach for his last bomb.

"None of that either. I'm tired of your toys officer. No more smoke, no more loud noises and bright lights."

"So... what now?"

Alert. Radar and scanners functioning at short range. Detecting threat to Blake. Mobility restored to eighty percent, ninety in an emergency. Higher function and exertion leading to power leaks... Nano repairs insufficient to seal all leaks. Suggest turning back to assist friend. Huh, power leaks? Was Billy's lab still in range? Calculating... careful reserved movement and further efforts on power leaks make the trip possible but slow. Any exertion reduces chance to ten percent or less. Ten percent.

Safest bet was to go back and see if Blake got himself into more trouble.

“Okay officer, got a choice. On your knees or I can give you a blindfold. Not going to have you getting in the way, no matter what.”

“Sure you want to do that?” Just had to keep him talking for a little bit, get him off focus. Didn’t seem too hard with the other military guys. “Sure I haven’t already called for backup, or that the guy you’re after won’t come back and blast you?” He’d better not. Blake gave him an order to keep going and get to safety.

“I think I’m going to enjoy this cop. Someone needs to get rid of that attitude of yours.”

Said the military guy shooting randomly in the streets, chasing an unknown target, getting in a grudge match with local authorities, and threatening execution of an officer. Huh, whatever he did it had to be fast, at this rate the one he zapped would be getting up and making himself a problem again. One chance to turn around and make a grab for the rifle or to try and knock this guy out, after that he wouldn’t be talking he’d just be shooting.

“Well let’s just see how this plays out shall we?” Now. Turning hard on his heels, whipping around, throwing himself toward the military boss. It was worth trying but he knew it had been a desperate move to begin with. One hard shove sent him back and off balance, a sudden strike from the rifle butt cracking into the side of his head.

“Couldn’t get me with a trick like that in a cloud of smoke, not going to work when I’ve got the advantage either.” Apparently they did have decent training, enough to match his experience. There was a splitting headache creeping over him but at the moment he felt that was probably the least of his worries. “Time’s up cop.”

Target identified. Suggest manual takedown, surge from firing has potential risk.

Odds? Estimated forty percent chance of igniting from power leak. Ten percent estimate for explosive reaction. Protector wasn't quite used to having his systems able to talk back but the Nanos likely had a better understanding of what was still damaged. It was amazing how quiet he could be when it was necessary, his shadow falling over the soldier. "Nobody hurts my friends."

Never had Blake been so happy to see someone doing the exact opposite of what he'd told them to do. Protector closing one hand around the rifle and crushing it, the other hand staying in an open palm and smacking hard into the soldier. It was something he was kind of proud about as he watched the strike send that guy flying. "Told you to keep going."

Protector actually smirked and held a hand out to Blake. "Told you to yell if it gets rough. He'll be out for the rest of the night. Come on."

"Yeah. Just a minute." Blake took the hand up and took a little detour, throwing a set of cuffs on the now unconscious commanding officer and the quickly reviving guy he'd stunned earlier. "Okay, now we can go. That leaves three more out there somewhere, shouldn't be too hard to get you to safety. And... thanks."

"Sentiments later. Hope they don't call for backup."

*IMPORTANT UPDATE! Vehicle detected approaching, jamming signal temporarily offline. Hacking into military coms. **I can do that? Since when?** Never underestimate determined Nanos. Backup is being called in now. Attempting to redirect them to a different location is possible but may cause power drain. Proceed? **Do it.** Evading extra troops would be an even bigger power drain. Affirmative, hacking*

transmission... sending false coordinates... done. Get moving.

“They’re bringing the vehicle in. We need to go.”

Blake sighed, following along behind his metallic friend back out into the main street and off toward the lab. “One with a broken nose has to be there, someone had to help him back to it, hopefully that’s all we worry about the rest of the night. Keep going, I’m going to leave a little surprise for them.”

“How many tools do they issue you?”

Blake couldn’t help laughing at that. “Standard issue? Not too many. Advanced gear, plenty. I usually carry around more than our riot cops because half the time I used to get drafted into their ranks in emergencies. I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve.” First of which would disable the vehicle. Blake removed his belt and snapped it down the middle, unfolding and unrolling it across the street, hooking a little battery at the end. “There, improvised EMP strip. They drive over it, it’ll zap the area. Doesn’t look like much but it’ll send out a good burst. You don’t want to be here when they hit it.”

“Did you just take off your belt?”

“Yeah but that’s how it was designed. What? Time to be moving away.”

What else would he use the darn thing for? He had special pockets in his uniform for just about everything else, just used it to hang the spare bombs like the flash bang on. With any luck it’d disable any special weapons in the vehicle too, save them from heavier firepower. “I can hear them coming down the street, not good...”

Vehicle approaching at greater velocity than anticipated. EMP can shut down but not immobilize. Evasion suggested. Protector took Blake’s arm and shoved them as close to a building as possible. This time there were no side streets to duck down, no

alley to use for cover, just the street itself.

“Turn. Turn! You’re gonna hit them!”

“I can’t, the steering’s dead! We’re skidding on the street, can’t stop the damn thing.”

Damage alert! This is not our night is it? Protector’s back got clipped by the vehicle, not a pleasant feeling but better than being completely run over. “Still alive?”

“Damn I should be asking you that question. Better yet, the guys in that transport. After it hit you, look, started rolling.”

Scanning... scanning is about all we can do for you right now by the way... confirmed two soldiers present. Rough estimate puts one at thirty percent injured and other at fifteen percent. Amendment... translating to non-mechanical terms. One suffering broken nose and arm, other appears to have broken leg.

“Oh no.” Blake slipped away from Protector, running to the crashed transport. Why was he going to assist them when, oh, something had managed to ignite. Again Protector found himself slightly amazed at all the gear Blake carried with him, this time a fire extinguisher. “Doesn’t matter if they’re trying to kill you, still can’t leave them helpless in there. Got anything that’ll help?”

Do I? Negative, fire suppression is strictly internal. Suggest upgrade upon return to lab. Great. There was still something else he could do to help. Moving slowly over to the transport, grabbing the roof which currently faced him, peeling back and tearing it away to be discarded.

“Okay, that works too.” Both soldiers were dazed from the crash, being pulled to the opposite side of the street and left leaning against a building. “Well with that thing

down maybe I can finally radio in and get these guys taken care of. Going to have to make sure someone shows up too, can't let any military weapons end up out on the streets, don't think you'd like that either."

"Probably not. Stand back." Protector took care of the problem in his own way, firing at the transport and triggering an explosion in that back that knocked Blake off his feet, broke a few nearby windows, but certainly would ensure nobody would be using any of the weapons there. It also had the side effect of leaving a smoldering wreck in a little crater along the street.

Remember prior evaluation of risks for shooting? New damages detected, attempting to evaluate full extent now. Not on fire, no explosion evident but definite signs of a drawback.

Blake blinked, turning to look at Protector. The kid's eyes were red, he thought it was just that helmet but staring up at him like this the guy was kind of scary. "That was a bit excessive. Probably had another way to handle it."

"I've been shot at." Protector's tone had changed to one of heavy irritation. Not that Blake could blame him. "I've almost been blown up and it caused me damage. I've been run into by a transport. They are on my last nerve and I'm not about to let them come after me with more explosives and guns." *Scans indicate final two soldiers that entered sewers earlier are now alerted to our presence. Expect resistance to arrive soon. Maps of the city indicate closest access point would be one block up.*

"Well, that's where all my training pays off. Come on, we can walk and talk. Preferably away from the scene of a large explosion, and let's let that be the last one today alright?"

“What about your training?” Protector idly listened to Blake’s ramblings but he was more focused on what information his systems were able to provide. Leading the way down the street, Blake having to catch him once or twice from stumbles, but it didn’t matter much. They made it to the manhole access, as one of the soldiers tried to lift it up Protector stomped hard down on it, a little smile creeping across his face as he faintly registered the sound of a splash down below.

“That... wasn’t very nice, but guess it’s better than wanting to shoot him.” Blake was spouting more nonsense about how police have to deal with frustration all the time, how he had to take it and accept it all without losing his temper. Made being a cop sound lame, no wonder they didn’t get much respect. All he ever had to do as Protector was swoop in, look intimidating, toss some bad guys around and leave.

“We’re almost back to the more populated parts of town, doubt the military will follow us from there.”

“With all the crazy things they’ve done tonight I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried.” *Speaking of which you have the final identified hostile nearby, waiting for you to cross his field of vision from a side street.* “Last one up ahead, just registered on my systems.”

“Your cannon have any weaker settings on it? Maybe a convenient stun level?” Protector shook his head, actually the Nanos were busy giving him another update on that topic. *Firing weapon resulted in a rupture in power flow. Rough comparison, call it your version of internal bleeding. Attempting to seal off affected area.*

“Guess he’s mine then. Hang on, think I’ve got one or two more tricks that’ll get us past.” And his last two rounds of rubber bullets. “They said it wasn’t perfected, there

were a few problems apparently, one of the test subjects had his entire outfit sort of... catch fire. Then budget cuts and, well long story short I borrowed this before it could get trashed. If it ever works, it'd make the police force that much better."

"What are you talking about?"

Blake laughed, waiting until they were at the side street to demonstrate. He took off his bulletproof vest, this already seemed like a terrible idea. Now he was working on something, pulling his shirt out, doing something with the badge and a wire frame beneath it... *Creating mental note. Find out where Blake got that technology and insist Bill try to install it as a major upgrade.* Somehow the officer seemed to move several feet to one side but he hadn't taken a single step.

"Displacement technology. I haven't moved but it makes an image of me a short distance to the side. Now I just hope it works long enough for me to get that soldier." Interesting, the image was even speaking just like Blake would be. Next thing Babe saw he was running down one side of the alley, gunshots ringing out repeatedly until suddenly nothing. Blake came back fanning his shirt and patting it down, several holes in the uniform.

"What happened?"

"Damn thing caught fire when I was halfway down the street to him. Still it confused the guy enough I was on top of him, had a bit of a scuffle, but he's dealt with. Come on, I hope it's not too damaged, still need someone that can get it to work right."

And speaking of damaged, it was a good thing that the last bit of opposition was out of their way. Blake noticed it at about the same time his Nanos were giving more warnings about some sort of liquid slowly dripping from his fingertips, fine little rivers of

it leading back up to a break in his armor. “That doesn’t look good. Here, let’s see if we can torni... er... maybe that won’t work... Well let’s see what we can do.”

Blake brought out his medkit though it was far from practical in their current circumstances. Still he had to try to work with what he had, grabbing a wad of gauze and attempting to plug the leak. Whatever it was it felt kind of strange, not quite like oil, not quite like blood, not even a mix of the two. “Don’t mean to offend or anything but is this uh, blood, poisonous? Or flammable?”

“I have no idea. Never really came up before. If you collapse in an hour we’ll know the answer to at least one of those questions.”

Blake was about to wipe his hand off on his uniform then thought better of it and used a spare bandage from the kit. “Well take a step or two back and we’ll find out the flammable part.” A few drops had hit the ground and he happened to have a book of matches.

“You smoke?”

“Not too often, mainly for special occasions but I carry a couple around with me. Why?” Blake struck the match and dropped it down into the drops of whatever that liquid might be. Thankfully nothing blew up, no massive flare, in fact it was almost like if he’d dropped it into a common everyday puddle. Just a little hiss and the match was extinguished. “Well that’s good to know.”

“Yeah. I won’t blow up if someone throws a lit match at me. Hey. You happen to have any on you right now? Uh, any cigarettes? Just wondering.”

“When this is all over and you’re safe at the lab maybe I can part with one. I’d call that a special time, escaping a bunch of crazy soldiers that want to shoot us? Now

let's see if we can get this patched up any better real quick. Keep moving your fingers, uh, well it's probably not a bad idea but normally that's just to be sure some circulation still gets down to the hand." Not often he had to stuff a wound instead of just traditionally bandaging it up. Adding another wad of gauze and tape trying to reach up to where this apparent leak was coming from.

"That's enough. Don't need you shoving that stuff in my arm any more." *Leak has resulted in loss of energy, you're going to have to lean on him again to get home. Currently ninety percent stopped, final repairs likely to require replacement segments beyond our current supplies. Is that stuff Blake jammed in there helping? Surprisingly it did give us some assistance. We can't quite stop the flow, faster you can get proper repairs the better.* "Okay, let's get out of here."

. . .

"Hey, you're not planning on trying to go out on a nightly patrol are you?"

"That depends on how fast I can get repaired and combat-ready again. Bill's going to have to work fast."

Ill advised. Estimated time for full repair well exceeds anything that would allow a safe patrol. Addition, due to current condition flight is not possible. Ground patrol not suggested given risk of encountering further military presence. Given what we saw what are the chances another of their weapons can cause me serious harm? Typical firearms five percent, heavy weaponry thirty percent or more assuming restoration process mends most current issues.

"I'd really rather you take the night off if you don't mind. Don't worry we'll take care of things, cops aren't completely useless are we?"

“No. You didn’t have to but you certainly proved your abilities.”

Blake came to an odd sudden stop even though they were finally in sight of Bill’s lab. “Listen... earlier... I’m sorry. You’re not just a kid, you’re pretty damn impressive. Guess I’m just jealous, or old, or both. Just don’t think I’m useless.”

“I would never call you useless. Maybe the rest of the police force but not you. Even without any gadgets, without any weapons, you’re alright.” *Warning, suspected hostile vehicle approaching from behind on main street. Looks like your friend will have to distract them while we get inside.* “If you take down a few more troops maybe I’d even go so far as to say you’re good.” Protector wanted to say more but it might give Blake a swelled head. “You’re still going to be calling me Protector though. After all I saved you a few times too.”

Blake managed a little laugh as he took a quick look over his shoulder. “Yeah, well, I’m not too keen on fighting off more of those guys right now. I’d rather just run you inside and hope they keep on moving. Even if they do catch up I won’t let them take you anywhere.”

“Hey... you don’t want me going out on patrol but what will you be doing?”

“Well as much as I’d love to sit down and have a drink with you or something I don’t think we’d be having the same kind of drink, and I’m heading back out to finish up my night on the streets. Least I won’t be alone out there.”

The distant sound of sirens loaned a little strength to Blake’s argument despite how he currently felt physically. Helping a metallic dragon taller than himself walk took a toll in addition to handling several soldiers, almost being blown up... though he couldn’t complain about that last one given he had just escorted someone that Did get

blown up in a way. He'd still have to go back and clean up the original scene. "Heh, hear that, maybe I won't have to kick more soldier ass on my own. Think I might come inside for a bit though, see if Bill has anything lying around that I can borrow for the evening as a less lethal weapon?"

"You want Bill to share? He's like a little kid. Makes a few dozen gadgets, gets bored with them, but the moment someone else wants one he's suddenly really interested in it again. Maybe he'll hand over something but if he does make sure that He tries it out first. Sometimes the bugs aren't worked out."

. . .

Blake's night was far from over, first a lengthy discussion with Bill on what he could borrow, then a few accusations from the lab assistant relating to how much damage Protector had been subjected to. At least he could see it in her face, worry over a friend. "So uh, if I take any of these things, they're not going to malfunction or anything right? Body armor's actually going to work, gun won't explode in my face, nothing like that?"

"Haven't had any problems yet." Bill was giving him a big friendly smile but he muttered something under his breath while his back was to Blake. "Haven't had any field tests either."

First goal once he finally managed to leave the lab was to recover any fragments or broken pieces of Protector. Second goal, visit Crimson's boyfriend the doctor. No need to let anyone here see him injured and besides it seemed to him that most of their first aid was oriented more towards a mechanical field. Nothing really wrong with that but he'd rather get taped up and stitched together instead of replacing limbs and the like. "Well okay, I'll get it back to you soon as possible."

Blake may have been having all the action but his brother kept busy as well. After a few dozen failed attempts to call bases and commanding officers he figured a more direct approach might be necessary. “Come on Rynn. We’re going to be paying them a visit down at the base.”

“Not that I’m opposed to the idea Drake but shouldn’t we bring along a security detail? Maybe, a large one like half the police force? Just in case they want to make a scene?”

“It’s under control, trust me.” He had a few ideas running through his head and plenty of backup plans. One thing he learned early on in politics, if people don’t like the direction you’re headed you should have an excuse and at least a few ways around whatever gets in the way. Backup plans were essential and it usually took about three or four of them to get back on track. “Heru still hanging around the office? Never hurts to arrive in a bit of style and he is a good chauffeur.”

It almost took longer to get in the gate at the military base than to drive from his office down there. A good twenty minutes of delays probably buying the higher-ups time to make excuses before he just had Heru drive past security and nearly ram through their gate. “Uh, you know I have to pay for damages to the car right Drake? I love ya but not quite enough to lose several months of salary over a stunt like that.”

“They opened up didn’t they? Remember, you’re both considered essential to me so they can’t try to escort you out or even lay a hand on you. Rynn, I have a very specific reason for bringing you along.” At least they weren’t supposed to but he figured there might be a little trouble at some point. Rynn followed him into a fancy office building decorated with dozens of medals, portraits of men in uniforms, and all sorts of

decorations they expected to see from a “family of soldiers” trying to make everyone else around feel less important.

“Prime minister, it’s getting rather late in the day to be paying us a visit here isn’t it? What urgent business brings you here that couldn’t wait for morning?”

Pompous looking uniform with the entire chest covered in pins, medals, patches, probably worn by several generations to actually get all that stuff on it or they came up with a bunch of nonsensical awards to feel important. Didn’t help that the middle aged griffin wearing that suit matched his overbearing attire perfectly.

“Nobody wanted to answer their phones down here so I figured I should stop by and see what’s going on. With all the money we allow you guys here, pretty sure something as simple as the phone lines shouldn’t be down. Costs a lot less than one of those fancy tanks out there in the yard I’m sure.”

“We do apologize about that however all senior officers were in a meeting and couldn’t be disturbed. The next highest set of officers were seeing to a military hearing for one of our men, someone really should have tried to explain it to you but...”

“But you’re lying. Very calmly lying to my face though so I’ll ignore that for now. You’re aware of what’s happened today? One of your new projects that we so vigorously fund had a severe mishap?”

“Really? That comes as quite a surprise to me prime minister. No such report has made its way to my desk yet. Please enlighten me as to the details if you have them.”

“Rynn could you pull up a few chairs for us please? It seems our host here wants to waste as much of our time as he possibly can.” Waiting for his seat, never taking his eyes off the commander and nodding for the griffin to take his seat first. Waiting two full

minutes but he wasn't about to lose any ground with this guy. "That's better. You had an explosive weapon fire over the city and create some panic as well as property damage. Then it fired again on one of our city's officers as he went to investigate the incident."

"Oh my! Was anyone hurt?"

"From your malfunctioning weapon, yes I believe there were some minor injuries. The full report won't be on my desk for a while either but I'm very well informed. The officer in question happens to be my brother."

"Well mr. prime minister that explains it. You've taken a personal interest in this whole affair and blown it completely out of proportion because you're concerned about his safety. Rest assured I'll have my men look into it, fix whatever went wrong, and you won't be hearing any more from this issue."

"You're not getting off the hook that easily."

"Oh yes we are prime minister. If there's any personal involvement you can't be a fair and impartial opinion so we don't have to bow down to your 'mighty' administration."

"No matter which citizen of the island it was or could have been I still have a personal interest. They elected me, put their trust in me, while you're quite literally a loose cannon. You don't send in any reports on experimental weapons, or on half of your finances for that matter. So, I'm here to inform you that first of all whatever you're working on right now is to be put on hold or cancelled completely. It's proven dangerous to the general populace and I won't have it. Second, you're going to have to learn a lesson from all of this and that means cutting back on your cash flow. You get nothing until we have proper assurances another incident like today won't happen."

The griffin stood, turned his back to Drake, and stared out a window. A completely empty gesture given it was getting dark out and he couldn't see anything but Drake knew it well. A chance to avoid someone reading expressions and body language, a chance to gather himself and try to go on the offensive.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that prime minister. I'm fairly certain you know what our weapon fired at and you're trying to cover it up and make us back off. I'm telling you now that until that weapon of yours is disabled and brought to us for study we won't be scrapping any of our projects."

"Your army hides behind those weapons and yet my brother was able to bring down one of your elite units. By himself. There's nothing to deliver, no weapon other than a well trained police officer doing his job."

"I have video of the explosion. Your weapon was there and ours nearly brought him down."

Back still turned, trying to hide a bluff. Even if there was video it wouldn't prove anything, might even make the military look worse for shooting at Protector. "You're lying. And it wouldn't make any difference."

"We won't give up until it's in our hands. You won't be getting in our way either."

"Drake, sir, did he just threaten you?"

"Actually he threatened us Rynn, not just me. In a way that can't be proven but I'm guessing he doesn't want us driving out the front gate. Don't worry, he won't be stopping us."

"Why exactly is that prime minister? There are hundreds of armed and trained

soldiers around this base. And you are not your brother. You're not leaving until we have it."

"Except I hold all the cards, not you."

"Come again?"

Ah finally, Drake said something that got him to turn around and reveal a clearly puzzled expression. "Because you can't hold us hostage here. The people are on my side not yours. The men here are paid because my office allows you to have money to pay them. My brother is on the outside which is exactly why you should be worried about him right now, and if I really have to say it there's also Protector."

"I'd love that. Let the weapon come here, save us the trouble. My men are loyal to me and one cop can't barge in here and arrest all of us. Even if he got through the gates he doesn't have any authority here."

"I suppose it doesn't really matter since I gave you the message I intended to. No more money until your weapons are under control. You're going to be bringing everything by my office now so there aren't any further incidents. Oh and, one last thing? About Protector. What makes you so sure he isn't already here making sure I get out safe?"

The griffin's jaw dropped as he started looking in every dark corner of the room as though Protector were some sort of ghost that could spring out from the shadows and attack him. Reaching for a button under his desk and tapping it repeatedly, something Rynn finally had a chance to smile about. "Hey. Electric dragon here. Great for shorting out little things like that security button. Well, see ya later. Oh. Drake? Can I? He did threaten us after all."

Drake gave a little nod, all his friend needed to throw a punch across the desk and floor the griffin. She added a little shock for emphasis before dashing to catch up with her boss. “Can they come after me for doing that? I mean, when he wakes up that is?”

“Maybe, but how are they going to prove anything? No working security cameras in there either. Could have been anyone. Still we’d better move fast just in case. Don’t want to actually get stuck in here and hope Blake or Protector can come bail us out.”