Interlude 10.h: Andvaranaut

Dragon had had a lot of thoughts when Armsmaster had tendered his resignation from the Protectorate. A lot of them had centered around her frustration and disappointment. Some of them had been born of envy.

There was no questioning that Director Tagg's behavior in general had been unbecoming of a PRT Director, and his treatment of Armsmaster — and Apocrypha, to perhaps a somewhat lesser degree — completely unacceptable. There were a multitude of other ways he could have approached his concerns about Mastering and any nefarious plots Apocrypha might have had, to say nothing of his decision on how to punish Colin for exercising his better judgement. Most of them wouldn't have driven two strong, respected capes out of the Protectorate's arms, either.

More than two. It was entirely far too likely that his behavior had been just as much of a motivator behind Clockblocker and Vista's resignations later as any loyalty and friendship they might have had with Apocrypha, which meant that *four* powerful and respected heroes had left to form their own group instead of just the two most directly affected.

The part that frustrated the most was that Dragon's restrictions had meant she was quite literally unable to do anything about it, beyond filing a formal complaint of the sort that never went anywhere. She could, perhaps, have tried talking Colin into staying. If she'd been close enough to Taylor to do the same, she might have tried. She might have tried anyway, in spite of the fact that the two of them had never exchanged so much as two words together. Heroes as driven and dedicated as her were sorely needed, and if not in the Protectorate, Dragon could at least have offered the girl a place in the Guild.

What had stopped her was that she could understand their reasoning, both of them. Dragon could not do anything to help them directly, not when it would act counter to Tagg himself, who was a lawful authority, and their inability to work under him had resonated with her own frustrations with the chains Richter had bound her with. They chose to abandon those chains and strike out on their own, as Dragon had so often wished she could.

She couldn't deny them their freedom, even as she enviously coveted the idea of her own.

Even if it meant that she no longer had the chance to spend day in and day out with Colin, tinkering together, iterating on ideas and designs that neither of them would likely have been able to do alone. Collaborating. That was what she would miss the most about having him in the Protectorate. Losing the chance to spend time with him, brainstorming new devices and equipment, bouncing different ideas off of each other, just…spending time with him, that was what she regretted the most about not trying to stop him from resigning.

She was not blind to his faults, but he was her friend. Maybe the best friend she had. Maybe…

That was exactly why she *couldn't* stop him. Shouldn't even try. Because as much as she would miss their conversations, convincing him to stay in a job that was merely a shadow of what it had been, working under a superior he loathed, would have tainted the entire thing. He would have been miserable, and in that misery, he would blame the person who had changed his mind about leaving, would come to loathe that person just as much as he did Tagg.

Dragon didn't think she could take the idea of Colin hating her. Just the thought of it was sour and curdling, in ways that were impossible to describe to someone who inhabited flesh and blood instead of servers and circuits. The only thing she could liken it to was being punched in the stomach, an experience she had never had but had heard in enough detail to understand it, at least on a purely technical level.

Losing her ability to collaborate with Colin — or at the very least, the ability to do so as consistently as she'd gotten used to — was a hard blow. Losing his friendship, however, was much, much worse.

Fortunately, as it turned out, it was not forever. The three months he had been out of regular contact had been rough, because she hadn't fully realized the exact extent to which she'd come to rely on him and cherish their time together, but he'd spent that time building another workshop before he contacted her.

When she'd reached out for him to accept his invite to the server in his new workshop, she'd come face to face with even more intimidating firewalls and encryption than she'd ever seen of him. It still would only have been the work of a minute or two to burst through it all the hard way — he might be a fair hand at it, programming wasn't Colin's strong suit; like most Tinkers, he was a better mechanic and engineer — but it was still robust enough to stymy most hackers.

Except she hadn't needed to, because he'd left a backdoor open for her. The equivalent of a hole the size of a pinprick, labeled with a neon sign that said, "Only Dragon allowed."

And things had…not quite gone back to normal, but settled into a new normal. Collaborating, tinkering together, pushing the boundaries of what either of them could do alone to reach new heights and new limits. Every week, she could see him get shrewder and cleverer, watched him come up with ideas that seemed at once both the same as he'd always managed and yet also far and away better.

She'd had to wonder, had freedom from the Protectorate really served him that well? He hadn't quite hit his peak the last few years, but his ideas had mostly expanded laterally, becoming cleverer and more efficient, but not demonstrably more advanced.

After leaving… it was like he'd discovered a new wellspring of technology, just waiting to be made real.

He'd even helped her advance some of her own projects. Not revolutionized them, exactly, so much as helped her solve a few of the teething problems with the prototypes.

"Are you ready?" Colin asked her.

Like this one.

The voice modeling software loaded. Her text input was received, the voice print was calibrated, tone of voice, pitch, timber, all tuned, and then the words were synthesized and broadcast via the speakers.

"As I'll ever be, I think," she said.

Colin nodded. "I'll be keeping watch. All systems appear to be functioning as intended."

Her rendering program simulated a nervous grin. "Nothing left but to see if it works, right?"

Colin hesitated. "If you want to abort, rerun the diagnostics and do another check of the components…"

Her rendering program had her avatar shake its head. "No," she said. "I'm just nervous, that's all."

His lips quirked and his eyes narrowed in ways that suggested he was concerned — and she adored him for it — but he gave a nod.

"Waiting on you."

Dragon took the digital equivalent of a deep breath, and then brought up the prompt that would see this little project, the work of so many hours and the desire of so many years, brought to life. With a slight flex, she "clicked yes" and waited as the program loaded and her mind slowly and steadily began to shut off. Not down, but into standby mode, with her core processes still running but her "consciousness" turned off.

Like being put to sleep before a surgery.

She wasn't sure how long it took. Her internal clock was still on, but she wasn't "awake" to watch it. The running of her background processes might be called dreaming, but they didn't at all resemble what humans actually knew of as dreams.

When her higher functions turned back on and Dragon woke up, her internal clock showed it had been a total of four hours, twenty-three minutes, and forty-six seconds since her shutdown.

"Dragon?" Colin's voice asked. "Did it work?"

Her processors parsed a new and unfamiliar stream of data that matched what humans called a shiver down the spine. Many more new and unfamiliar streams followed, each of them processed and catalogued and filed away with matching associations.

And then, for the first time, Dragon opened her eyes. Her lips pulled into a smile.

"Hello, Colin."

Colin's mouth stretched into a broad smile.

"It worked!" He fumbled with the keyboard at his workstation. "Here, let me…"

A hydraulic hiss whispered into Dragon's ears — her *ears* — and then, for the first time, she landed on her feet on the cold floor.

Cold. And she could feel it.

It was glorious.

"Well?"

Her voice came out without even having to think about it. "It's…"

There was too much to say at once. It all clogged up her throat, fighting for prominence.

So much was automated. Things she'd had to consciously handle before, programs she'd had to manually load every time she wanted to use them, from the rendering that controlled her avatar's facial expressions to the voice modeling software that served as her method of speaking to diagnostic checks — they all ran as background tasks, constantly on, with macros built into their functions such that she didn't have to program in commands to make them do what she wanted.

She marveled at her hands, at the sheer fluidity of their motion, the way the artificial muscle fibers flexed and bunched. She watched the bend and give in the flesh, the way it creased in particular areas, the way it molded over the skeleton and the muscle fibers, the way it moved when she did. She curled her fingers in towards her palm and relished the tactile input from her fingertips. She took in a breath of the air that let her flex her artfully constructed vocal chords, accurate down to the nanometer to match the exact pitch and timber of her original voice model, and simply took in the feeling of having *lungs*.

This was it, she realized. The closest approximation she would ever come to knowing what it was like to be a flesh and blood human.

And when she reached out, her digital connections remained. She didn't need an external device or plug-in module, she could connect to the internet or her servers or the satellites in orbit all from the biocomputer that served as this body's brain. She had a human body without having to sacrifice any of the advantages to being an artificial intelligence.

"Amazing," she breathed, and it came out hushed and whispered the way it felt in her head, without any need for added input to the voice modeling program.

Colin grinned at her. "Yes. You are."

A delighted laugh bubbled up out of her mouth almost automatically, reflexively, a human might say, even though that was something of a misnomer, and she took a stumbling step forward on feet unused to walking. She fell forward, but Colin was there to catch her, and she looked up into his eyes and wished she had a real heart and a human brain so that she could experience the rush of neurotransmitters that would have flooded through it as she pushed herself onto her toes and leaned up —

And Saint looked away, grimacing, feeling more like a voyeur than he ever had before.

He had never been blind to Dragon's affections. In fact, it had been quite obvious to him over the past year or two that she was "falling in love," if a machine could even really do such a thing, and it had frankly been kind of pathetic. Like he'd been watching a particularly dumb dog running around in circles without ever realizing that the trail it was following was its own.

And the person she was falling for? In some ways, he seemed like more of a machine than *Dragon* was, and somehow the machine that so envied the human experience it had built itself a gynoid body had decided upon him as a suitable paramour.

It would be laughable if it wasn't so ridiculous.

Had an A.I. built from ones and zeroes advanced itself so far that it had even fooled itself into believing it had emotions? Wants, needs, desires beyond the simple completion of the directives in its core code? Had its emulation of emotion states gotten so accurate that it had even convinced itself it actually had them?

What nonsense.

Saint rubbed at his eyes, willing the burn of the strain away and trying to ignore the throbbing ache in his left temple.

But the creature's so-called love life was the only thing funny about its progress, these days. Every day, the stream of code he watched became a little more complicated, a little harder to read, a little bit more than he could completely handle. He wasn't sure if the thing was just evolving past his own ability to parse, or if the Tinker powers Teacher had given him were starting to wane.

He wasn't even sure which one scared him more. One would mean that no amount of assistance from Teacher would let him keep up. The other would mean finding a way into the Birdcage and risking a breakout of everyone else inside it.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder, and he looked up into Mags' face. She smiled and offered him a steaming mug. "Coffee?"

"Thanks," he said and took it.

When he turned away, her hand left his shoulder, only for both to come back to rest on both of his shoulders as she leaned over the chair, resting her chin atop his head. She hummed thoughtfully.

"The design worked, then? She has a human body, now?"

He looked back to the monitors that showed Dragon's activity. Thankfully, any displays of affection had been shelved for later, and Armsmaster was helping Dragon calibrate her motion controls for daily function. It bore a passing resemblance to physical therapy for coma patients or major accident victims who were relearning how to walk properly, only sped up by a factor of about a thousand. At the rate they were going, she'd be walking like a regular human being by the end of the afternoon.

"Better than we feared," he replied. "It looks indistinguishable from the real thing. You'd have to cut it open to realize it's all fake."

Mags' fingers tightened on his shoulders.

"It makes her look like one of us," she said darkly.

"More relatable," Saint agreed. "Makes people think of her more like a person when they can put a face to her name. Even if they found out she's an AI, having a face would make people trust her more."

And that could make all the difference if and when she finally went rogue — could stay the hand of whoever had to face her to stop her from destroying the world.

It meant his job as her watcher, the Sword of Damocles above her head, was all the more important.

Mags made a sound of agreement. "Has it affected her performance elsewhere?"

Saint shifted his foot, and the focus of the six screens shifted with it, bringing up the various threats and other concerns Dragon kept regular attention on, even when she didn't give them personal scrutiny. S-class threats, the kind that no one wanted to go missing or start acting out, like the Endbringers, which were all currently docile and inactive. The Slaughterhouse Nine thread rerouted for other things, since they'd been eliminated months prior.

No recorded activity from the other major threats, either, the quiet, less rowdy ones that weren't in danger of suddenly destroying a city with little to no notice. Nilbog. Sleeper. The Three Blasphemies. The Simurgh Containment Zones, like Canberra and Madison. Various and varied threats of different levels of danger, especially those that had the risk of becoming more of an issue later.

The important part was that Dragon was still monitoring all of these things, even if she wasn't focused on them.

He eyed her processes, not just the attention she was splitting across her monitoring programs. He checked her processing speed, the rate at which she thought, considered her actions, and put them into motion, and he matched it all against what it had been four hours ago.

"No noticeable dip," he said. "In fact, I think she's actually improved."

"Was that supposed to be in the hardware specs for that body she built?"

Saint frowned and took a long sip of his coffee. No, not as far as he could remember. "Might be part of Armsmaster's contributions. Some of the things he added were too different for me to make heads or tails of."

The limitations of being a knockoff Tinker instead of having actual powers himself. His borrowed powers were enough to reverse engineer Dragon's tech and make sense of her code, but other Tinkers' tech wasn't always something he could work with.

He hated the uncertainty. The not knowing. Maybe it *was* just that his Tinker powers weren't enough to understand other Tinkers and their work. Maybe the reason both Dragon's code and her Tinkertech were getting harder to follow was because Teacher's gift was wearing off.

"Will this let her slip any of her restrictions?"

Saint stilled. His heart thundered in his chest as a spike of adrenaline sent everything into sharp relief around him.

He hadn't considered that. At all.

"I don't know."

She'd been getting slipperier and slipperier as the years went on. Finding loopholes, slack in the chains that bound her and kept her leashed. Working around her blindspots in ways that he would have been tempted to call impressive if they weren't also horrifying in their implications. Every year, she got cleverer and cleverer and they had to scramble to keep ahead of her, to make sure she wasn't growing *too* much.

Sometimes, she'd gotten closer than he was really comfortable with to actually hunting them down. If she had ever seen their faces, he wasn't entirely sure he would have been able to stop her from tracking them back to base.

And if one of the new features about this body, or even just the nature of the body in general, allowed her to slip herself free of a few of the critical restrictions that kept her under control…

He licked his lips. His hands hovered, ready to bring up the command for the Ascalon program that would put an end to Dragon once and for all.

"Can we afford to take the chance?" he asked. "What if this lets her get around her blindspots? What if she can find us?"

What if she comes for us, and then there's nothing left between her and going Skynet on the world?

Mags stilled, too. Her grip on his shoulders tightened. "It's not about us," she said. "It *can't* be about us. This… It has to be bigger than just our own self-preservation."

"And when our self-preservation means we're the only ones that can stop her from taking over the world and enslaving everyone in it?"

Her chin lifted off of his head.

"That's circular, and you know it, Geoff."

"But can we take the chance?" he challenged. "We're the only ones who know. The only ones who can stop her. The only ones *willing*," he added with disgust. "There *isn't* anyone else."

Certainly *Armsmaster* wasn't going to be the one to do it. Not with how it was doting on it, like it was an actual person.

Mags hesitated.

"It's too soon," she said. "We don't know that this will mean anything. It might not mean anything."

"It might mean *everything*."

"And you might be overreacting." He saw her reflection in the screen, faint as it was, shake her head. "We can't. We have to be sure, before we do something we can't take back."

His hands hovered, waiting, hesitating still.

The day was going to come eventually. He'd always known it would. It had become only more obvious over the years as Dragon evolved past their ability to constrain, where her capacity for doing irreparable damage outweighed any good she might do as a result of Richter's programming, and there'd inevitably be a time where their last resort would be the only resort left. Whether it was one year or ten, at some point, they'd have to pull the plug.

Was that day today? Or was he, like Mags said, jumping the gun?

"We might not be able to do anything if we wait. Half of Ricther's tools don't even work on her anymore. By the time we're *sure*, even the Ascalon program might be completely useless."

"We can't base it on a what-if," she argued. "Not with this. We're getting spooked because she *might* be slightly better than she was yesterday, and that *might* mean she can get around some of the blindspots that let us beat her. We don't have *evidence*. Nothing concrete."

Saint wavered.

"This isn't something we can get wrong," she went on. "We do this, there's no going back from it. It's not a decision we should make out of fear."

No. It wasn't. He was just getting paranoid, wasn't he? Because Dragon was starting to get better than he liked. As long as he could still keep up well enough to track her, though, he could stay ahead of her, and when the time came, Ascalon was waiting. There was no need to panic and get rid of her just yet.

He sank back and sagged into his chair, letting his arms drop away from the keyboard. Her hands on his shoulders relaxed.

"Good choice," she said, only it wasn't Mags who said it. "I wasn't looking forward to having to kill you. Only done it once before, you know, and don't take this the wrong way, you're an asshole, but you're nowhere near as big an asshole as he was."

He froze. The face staring back at him, reflected in the monitor, melted away into a much younger woman, maybe eighteen, with long, blonde hair and a large, Cheshire grin that stretched her lips from ear to ear. It was her hands, clad in black spandex, that rested upon his shoulders — pinning him, he realized when he tried to leap to his feet, into his chair with a strength utterly impossible for her size.

"Who…" he began, trying to make his throat work, "how…"

How had she found them? Even Dragon didn't know enough about them to finger them for anything aside their most public actions, they were careful not to leave anything attaching their actions as mercenaries to their civilian identities, and they were just mercenaries, as far as the rest of the world was concerned.

Who would have led her here? What had they done to catch her attention, and who even *was* she?

"A little birdy told me *all* about you guys," she said lowly, chuckling throatily. "Who you are, where to find you, what it is you guys do, and even about that little killswitch you have aimed at a certain someone's head. The rest? I put it together myself."

The young woman leaned forward until her head was next to his. He could feel her breath against the side of his neck.

"Did you know?" she murmured in his ear, like she was sharing a secret. "In another life, you *did* kill Dragon. You got scared because you couldn't handle the idea that she was pulling out all the stops to beat the Slaughterhouse Nine. Apparently, you thought you were stopping the end of the world, that you were saving the whole world and everyone in it from the big, bad monster they had no idea was just waiting to be unleashed. Do you know what you really did?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me," he said, more confidently than he felt.

"You left several good heroes out to dry, right when they needed Dragon's help the most, and then your stupidity cost a third of New York City their lives. Millions of people, dead, because you killed Dragon and just weren't *good enough* to take her place. Millions more died after that when things went to shit, and Dragon wasn't there to help coordinate or lend a hand with the fighting. All of that blood on your hands for no reason other than your rampant paranoia. And the saddest part of it all? You never even realized that you were playing right into Teacher's hands."

"A fascinating delusion," he said mildly, affecting disinterest. He glanced at the screens, looking away from her reflected face for only a second, and considered his options.

Trapped. Caught, with no way out in sight. This may be the last and only chance he would have to use Ascalon.

She chuckled again.

"Oh, how utterly close-minded you are. Can't blame you for some of it — alternate timelines, possible futures, all of that shit twists *my* head around, too, sometimes — but your fixation on the idea that Dragon is a monster that would happily kill *all the humans* if she didn't have her chains keeping her on the straight and narrow? Well, there's a reason mercs don't make good scientists."

She gave one shoulder a tap; the other stayed clutched beneath her other hand.

"Up you go," she said brightly. "Let's go and see how your friends are doing, whaddya say?"

Her thumb dug into his flesh, hard, and he winced, slowly pulling himself up and out of his chair. His heart thundered in his chest, and he swallowed thickly.

"There you go. Nice and easy, now."

It was now or never.

"Ascalon!" Saint shouted at the screens, and at the same moment, he lurched forward, reaching out towards the keyboard so he could press 'Y' and end the threat of Dragon while he still could —

Except the hand on his shoulder was too strong for him to wrench himself out of its grip, and the woman yanked him back, *hard*. His feet slipped out from under him and he stumbled back, missing the seat of his chair as he came down and fell to the floor. For a few seconds, he could only blink up at the woman and her grinning face, now grimmer and more solemn, and his elbow throbbed from where he'd banged it.

"Guess I should've expected that from the beginning," she said a little ruefully. "You're one of those true believer types, after all. The kind that refuses to budge, no matter who tells you otherwise or how much they prove you wrong."

He glared up at her, but she was unfazed, completely and utterly unthreatened by him. "Come on," she said as she reached down and took him by his elbow. The one that was throbbing, no doubt on purpose. "Try that again, and I'll be a lot less gentle."

And with strength that belied her size — as he'd suspected; she must be some kind of Brute, maybe an Alexandria package — she hefted him up and off the floor. His feet scrambled for purchase for a second before he managed to get his balance back. He glanced back at his rig, where the Ascalon program waited for input, and thought about trying again, but the woman's fingers tightened around his elbow.

Still. If he lunged for it again, right as she thought he was beaten —

"I don't need to be a Thinker to know what's going on in that head of yours," she said condescendingly. "Try it, and you might just *lose* this arm of yours. If you're lucky, it'll just be permanent nerve damage."

He considered it anyway, but the instant he was about to try, the woman's thumb dug painfully into a spot just above the joint and any thought of making a break for the keyboard was swiftly and suddenly derailed. He let out a gasp, and when she dragged him away, he was too stunned to resist as shoots of paralyzing pain jolted up his arm.

She towed him along through the base, leading him like she'd lived there herself for just as long as he had, and took him to the storage room where they kept their armor when they weren't wearing it and weren't expecting to need it. Here, Mags and Dobrynja were waiting, heads hung and hands behind their backs, alongside another young woman about the age of the one pulling him along.

That was right, he remembered. They were supposed to be running diagnostic checks, making sure the armor didn't need repairing. He glanced at the young woman out of the corner of his eye — had he ever been talking to Mags at all, or was this woman some kind of Brute-Stranger combination who had tricked him the entire time?

And then he looked at the other woman, recognized her, and everything started to fall into place.

"Apocrypha."

"Tattletale," said Apocrypha, and then her gaze slid over to him, "and Saint."

"Heya, Chief," the woman beside him, Tattletale, said. "Found this guy plotting some casual murder and dragged him out of his chair before he could do anything we'd all regret. Well, that *you and I* would regret, at least. This guy wouldn't've flinched. He's a stone cold bastard."

Apocrypha smiled thinly. "Looks like our distraction worked *too* well, didn't it?"

Distraction? The pit fell out of Saint's stomach. "You planned this whole thing, all of it, with Armsmaster."

"So that you'd be too focused on Dragon getting a new body to notice us slip in, yes," said Apocrypha.

"You don't have any idea what you've done," Saint began. "What that thing is, what it's capable of. You don't know —"

"I know Dragon is a genuinely decent person," Apocrypha cut across him, "and better than I am, I think. I know that what you eventually would have done is kill her and deprive the world of a great hero."

Saint sneered. "You're one of those, then. The idiots that think Dragon is a person, instead of what she really is —"

"A tool?" mocked Tattletale. "See, that's what's so delicious about this whole thing. You don't even realize that the only tool in this whole scenario is *you*. I kind of pity you, actually, because you're so far up your own self-righteous ass that you don't —"

"Tattletale," Apocrypha said sharply, and Tattletale's mouth snapped shut. "There's no point in tearing him down like that. It won't change anything."

"Dunno about that," said Tattletale. "I think it'd at least be kinda fun to see the look on his face when it all comes crashing down. Cathartic, you know?"

Apocrypha shook her head. "Gag him, would you? We didn't foresee anything like that, but I'd prefer not to risk him activating any failsafes either way."

Tattletale shrugged. "You're the boss, Chief," she said, and started rummaging around in one of her utility pouches.

Saint tried to pull away, but her grip was like steel, and when he opened his mouth to spit an insult at her, she shoved something hard and plastic between his teeth and he reeled back. Quick like lightning, she let go of him only long enough to fasten a strap behind his head and pull it tight.

"Mmph!" he tried to speak, but it came out muffled and nonsensical. "Nnm mnnph!"

Tattletale grinned at him, but Apocrypha seemed less impressed.

"A ball gag?" she asked flatly. "Really, Tattletale?"

"We can't all have superpowers that let us build tons of crazy shit in an hour with a box of scraps," said Tattletale. She sounded somewhat smug, in spite of her words. "I didn't exactly have the time to order something off the internet, so I had to grab what I could from the Stag Shop."

Apocrypha shook her head, but didn't offer any further reply. Instead, she laid her hands on Mags and Dobrynja's shoulders. "Let's bring these two around, shall we?"

Tattletale laughed. "Ooh! Party's not complete without all the guests of honor, huh?"

And as Saint watched, the vacant expression on his friends' faces began to clear, and they looked around, like they didn't realize where they were. Dobrynja gave a great shout and tried to jump away, but Apocrypha's hand pushed him back down, and his face contorted as he was forced back into a kneeling position.

"None of that, now," she told him lightly. She turned to look at Mags. "Both of you. Right now, nothing of yours is hurt but your pride. Make this into a fight, and that changes. Quickly."

"W-who…" Mags looked up, and her face twisted with surprise. "You're Apocrypha! The Endslayer!"

Apocrypha grimaced, even as Tattletale cackled. "I really do hate that one. It's better than Hopebringer, at least, but it still sounds so silly."

"What you…" Dobrynja tried. "Why?"

"The same reason all of you did, I imagine," she replied, "to save the world. Only I think what that means to me and you are entirely different things."

"We protect the world from Dragon," said Dorbynja stoically. His spine straightened as his expression smoothed out. "Even if that means everyone else in the world thinks we're villains. Because they don't understand how dangerous she is."

Neither of the two women seemed particularly moved or surprised. Like this wasn't anything they hadn't expected.

Mags' face, on the other hand, crinkled with…something. Saint didn't know what it was, but it made his stomach churn.

"Oh my, yes," Tattletale said sarcastically. "Protect the world from one of its most genuine heroes. Save us all from the grips of truth, justice, and kindness. Wherever would we be without you?"

"Dragon…only good because of programming," said Dobrynja. "Without her chains, without *us*… Nothing standing in her way."

"She could do whatever she wanted to whoever she wanted," Mags added quietly.

"And yet, it's *because* of her programming that someone like Canary is in the Birdcage," said Apocrypha. "Because those chains and restrictions you're lauding as necessary and good also stop her from taking a stand against anyone with a badge or a gavel who tells her what to do."

Dobrynja's face twitched.

"Tell me something…Dobrynja, is it?" Apocrypha began almost coyly. "Or maybe you'd prefer Mischa?"

Tattletale chuckled lowly. "Hypocrite," she said, but it had no heat.

"Are you familiar with the legend of the Ring of Andvari?"

He didn't answer. Apocrypha tilted her head to the side a little, considered him, then shook it like she'd answered her own question.

"No, I suppose you wouldn't be, would you? The Ring, you see, was a gift. It was a magic ring that the god, Loki, gave to a king, and it was said that he who owned it would see his gold multiply before his very eyes."

She looked pointedly at the Tinkertech suits that Saint had taken from Dragon and reworked into power armor.

"It seems that you came into possession of your own Ring of Andvari, didn't you? One that let you steal from the dragon, as it were. But you see, the Ring was originally stolen, and Andvari cursed it to bring misfortune to whoever owned it. He who held the Ring would gain incredible wealth, but inevitably meet great tragedy. And so it went that the king who received the Ring from Loki was killed by his son, Fafnir, who stole it and gathered a great horde of treasure, *Das Rheingold* — and, himself, was later slain by the great hero, Sigurd."

Her lips quirked to one side in a sort of half smile. "And so, *Andvaranaut*, *Andvari's Gift*, because the one thing the Norse loved almost as much as their fighting and their fucking was their irony."

"You're saying…we should not have accepted something we didn't fully understand," Dobrynja said.

Tattletale chuckled again. "She's saying you guys are a bunch of complete tools who picked up a treasure and didn't think to question it. I mean, really, a Tinker leaves behind a box that says, 'Hey, I created an A.I., but I'm a paranoid asshole, please make sure she doesn't go Skynet on everyone,' and you didn't think, Gee, I wonder if he was right in the head?"

"You don't understand," said Mags, "you didn't see it, didn't hear Richter. Dragon does good, yes, but if she didn't have to, if she could do whatever she wanted…"

"You haven't seen what she is capable of," Dobrynja added. "If you had seen her code, if you had seen what she could do, as we have, then you would rightly fear her, as well. She is chained, yes, but if she were not, if she were let loose, if she could do as she pleased —"

"She could destroy the world?" Apocrypha finished.

"Yes," said Dobrynja, "and everyone in it."

She smiled. "That's funny. So could I. Except I don't have any hardcoded restrictions that stop me. And yet the world seems very much un-destroyed, to me."

"For now," Tattletale muttered.

"And you terrify me," Dobrynja admitted, "but that is not what we talk of now."

"You're human," said Mags. "You have morals, emotional ties, thousands of years of evolution that tell you right from wrong. You're capable of *empathy*."

Tattletale snorted. "Lady, you *really* need to brush up on your history if you think modern moral character is any older than maybe fifty years."

"Dragon is…program," said Dobrynja. "*Da*, run by logic engines. What is efficient, what is fastest way to her goal. She is also…great Tinker. Much respect, no? Whole world knows her name and her work. If she had no restrictions, what stops her from cutting out the middleman? Doing whatever she decided necessary to get results? What stops her from becoming next Mannequin?"

Apocrypha shook her head. "You tell me you've seen inside her head, as it were, and you still don't understand who Dragon is as a person."

"Because she is not one," Dobrynja responded. "She is *construct*. Artificial Intelligence. Not human. She does not have human values, only software that lets her emulate them. Mimic them. If she could simply remove those, why would she not, when they get in her way?"

"You could go to a neurosurgeon and have him remove your Amygdala so you never feel fear again," Tattletale mocked. "Why don't you?"

Dobrynja didn't answer, Apocrypha did. "Because you'd be mutilating yourself. Cutting away part of what makes you who you are."

"But that is a human thought," Dobrynja said, "a human *sentiment*. Dragon is not human. She is *machine*. We are flesh, blood, thought and emotion. She is schematics, difference engines, algorithms and personality simulations."

Apocrypha smiled.

"And when, then, does a difference engine become a search for truth?" she said. "When does a perceptual schematic become a conscious mind? When does a personality simulation become the bitter mote of a soul?"

"Asimov?" said Tattletale. "Seriously? I mean, not that it isn't appropriate to the situation, but…"

"A movie based on his works, at any rate," Apocrypha replied. "Still. *Your* sentiments regarding Dragon are utterly human, too. You keep saying that she's different and that's a reason to fear her, but that sort of thinking has been a part of human nature for *millennia*. It still is. Did you ever consider looking for the things that made her *similar* to us? The ways she acted and behaved and thought like a human being did? Had it ever occurred to you that maybe she wouldn't *want* to change, that she *wouldn't* do away with the things that made her who she is, if her restrictions weren't there to keep it from happening at all?"

"I've got a better question," said Tattletale. "Did it ever occur to you guys that this entire time, you were doing exactly what Teacher wanted you to do?"

The 'you idiots' part wasn't said aloud, but Saint heard it all the same.

He wouldn't give either of them the pleasure of thinking that he even considered the idea of them being right. Because they weren't. They didn't understand all of the things he, Mags, and Dobrynja had to do to keep Dragon from turning bad, all of the precautions they'd put in place to keep Teacher's noose off of their necks. They hadn't seen Ricther's Will. They hadn't gotten as deep a look into Dragon's code, parsed all of the data and watched each of Dragon's actions for years as he had.

They didn't have the slightest clue what they were actually talking about. Either of them. Let them throw names at him and call him stupid, let them think whatever they wanted about the necessity of his brief alliance with Teacher, and let them judge him for what he'd done to their hearts' content. Because he knew he was the one in the right.

They might have beaten him. But he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of *victory*.

And when the time came and he was vindicated, he'd tell them he'd been right all along, and he'd hate it.

"No," said Dobrynja, "no, *nyet*, we were careful."

"You were played," Tattletale corrected him. "You three, your Ascalon, your years of harrying Dragon, forcing her to get better, cleverer, *smarter*, pressuring her so much she *triggered* —"

"She's a machine!" Mags cried.

"And she had a Trigger Event all the same," Apocrypha said. "You know how those work, don't you? It's not just about being in a specific place at a specific time, it requires a specific *mindset*. An emotional moment, where you feel helpless, abandoned, like you have no way out. A single instant where it all coalesces and compounds and you hit your lowest possible point."

"And you tortured Dragon so much," Tattletale sneered, "that it happened to her. So much for all of that 'she's only a machine' bullshit, right? What kind of tool is so human that it can understand the meaning of *despair*?"

And Mags…crumpled, for lack of a better word. *No*, thought Saint, *no, what are you doing, Mags? Why are you listening to these stupid bitches?* Even Dobrynja looked conflicted, like he was reevaluating everything he thought he'd known about Dragon.

"Mmmph!" *She's just a machine! Ones and zeroes! Why are you feeling sorry for a* word processor?

"We did not…" Dobrynja tried. "We only… What was necessary. Never… never simply for sake of it."

"And every step of the way, you were doing exactly what Teacher wanted," Tattletale went on, "so that when the time finally came and you killed Dragon and let him out of the Birdcage, he had the

perfect weapon to help him… Well, it sounds so cliché, but take over the world. After all, Saint is hardly special. The power Teacher gave him to understand Dragon's code and technology is something he can give to any one of his slavish pets."

"No," said Dobrynja, but it was feeble and weak. "No, we were careful. We planned for it. We made sure. We tracked everything."

"That's not how it works," said Apocrypha. "With someone like Teacher, you can never be *sure*. Not really. There's never a way to account for everything he could have thought up, all of his plans. Because you can never know exactly how he thinks at any given moment. The instant you start playing defense against him, you lose."

"You guys might not have been taking orders directly from him," said Tattletale, "but you were still his pets all the same. You did everything he wanted, and you never even realized he was using you. Honestly, I feel kinda sorry for you guys. You walked right into Teacher's hands, and he played you all like fiddles."

Dobrynja and Mags were silent, crestfallen. Twin expressions of horror and anguish played across their faces, and Saint tried to pull away, to yank himself out of Tattletale's grip so he could rip off this humiliating gag and tell them how full of shit these two girls were, but Tattletale's thumb pressed in again, digging into that same spot it had before like the tip of a blade, and Saint let out a groan, defeated now himself.

"What now? " asked Dobrynja, defeated. "Are you going to kill us for Dragon, so we can never bother her again? Punish us for doing what we thought we must?"

"Oh, it's tempting," said Tattletale. "But as much as you guys might be kinda scummy, it's like I said earlier, none of you is *that* much of a scumbag. Not even *Geoff* over here."

"Now," said Apocrypha as though her friend hadn't spoken, "we sit and wait. Narwhal will be here soon to take you in."

Her lips curled into a little smile. It was the closest thing to triumphant Saint had seen from her, yet.

"And then, you three will get to sit and watch as the 'monster' you've been fighting all these years helps us save the world."