

Enlaced

By: Sebastian Piccinini

Vivien and I were with older teenagers that were Drone-hopping on that Tuesday. The kids would often use the increased altitude of Drones to get as high as possible, for a dare or for the rush, as they were now. Of course, it was illegal, but even the strictest cop was lenient on this law. Vivien and I decided to tag along with people younger than us, since we blended in well enough; both of us fell on the short side of grown women, and our slight frames made us go even less noticed. The Drones around the city were designed as thick chrome discs with guns or grapple claws attached to the bottom. They would never use them unless cops or Salvo Bots commanded them to, so we knew we were safe. Every kid and their brother were out that day, hitting this cig replacement called widget and Drone-hopping themselves. Chosm was sunny that day, one of the rare few that come... well, ever. Viv and I stayed on the ground, since we didn't look like we had exoskeletons, and Drones seeing our faces may have ended badly for everyone involved. Besides, why would cops worry about two little girls?

Unless, of course, they knew just who those little girls were.

All the kids that were hopping were about two stories up, using lower Drones to reach that height. This was normal for fun while looking risky, but Viv and I knew that this was nothing. Most of the kids had exos around their legs—metal braces that allowed for artificial strengthening and durability for the human body. Many didn't have exos when we arrived, but the few that did were generous and shared with those that didn't. This guy, Hai, was talking to Viv and I. He was scrawny but wore no shirt and had this red knit cap despite the humid heat. He never jumped, instead chatting us up, which we obliged sarcastically. He still thought he had a chance.

“Watch this.” He said to us conspiratorially. Without an exo, he hopped up on the vent that everyone else was launching off of, and clumsily landed on the lowest Drone without issue.

“Hey, cowards,” he called down to everyone watching, “bet nunna you would do this!” Some “oohs” rose from the crowd, and a wave of silence fell over everyone in the concrete square. Viv and I looked at each other now and laughed, both of us wondering what would happen if they saw just how high *we* could go.

Hai jumped up another Drone, windmilling his arms to gain balance, then jumped one higher, grabbing the disc’s rim and pulling himself up. Some of the people in the crowd were biting their nails or running nervous hands through their hair now. He was at a height of about one story in the air when he tried to jump for a far Drone and missed completely, crashing to the ground and probably ending up with a few broken bones. A group of five rushed forward to check on him, and even I felt myself take a step forward until I noticed Viv’s look. I knew it well: that look of distaste mixed with anticipation—I knew that she was ready to burst out of her own skin with adrenaline.

I saw Vivien take a few steps forward, and I reluctantly followed. Somewhere in my subconscious, my mind told my body to activate my Lace, and the two of us leapt up to the highest Drone. We could only dare to do this now, as we were making our exit. It wasn’t very often that people saw others with Laces, and that kind of wonder could have gotten the wrong attention on us. We landed lithely on a pair of Drone’s flat chrome head, and as Viv continued, I turned around and waved, thanking the gawking teens. She almost forgot to do the same, and turned around from four stories up, giving the kids a flick of her head. I joined her up at the fourth story, and we continued higher, hopping assuredly on moving Drones that were making their way out of the square we just came from. Eventually, as we got to speed, it took all I had to keep up with Vivien, who was starting to look like a blonde blur going between Drones.

This kind of speed was fine for Viv, having been much more physical in our previous life. I still had yet to be used to using a Lace, three years later, while Viv had taken to it like a duck to water. She moved further from me, but I already knew by trajectory where we were heading: the heart of the city. Having been on the northern edge by the lake, we had quite a bit to travel, but Viv didn't care—she loved seeing the concrete, metal, and glass buildings, as well as swarms of people below.

The more we sped up, the more worried I got as well. Drone-hopping wasn't terribly illegal, but seeing people daring to be high up without exos, moving as fast as we were, would definitely arouse suspicion. On the ground, Viv and I could easily blend in. We could hide our faces if we had to, but we could mostly just walk through the crowd without attracting attention in most neighborhoods. This high, in broad daylight? I wasn't so sure.

"Viv, we should get down soon. Two girls without exos up here will get the cops on us," I called over the whipping wind when I caught up to her.

"Yeah, soon. I just need to cut loose on a day nice as this," she said back without looking at me.

Following her, she took us higher to a building and landed on its roof. It had a raised edge, thankfully, which afforded cover from anyone who saw us below.

"Had your fun with the kids, Jazmin?" She asked playfully.

"It's not a crime to have a little innocent fun once in a while, Viv," I replied defensively.

She rolled her eyes before saying, "Yeah, but there's more fun that doesn't involve some low Drone-hopping. Just gotta know where to look," she leaned over the lip of the roof, looking over Chosm upside-down and enjoying the breeze. She was probably watching a scrolling electric billboard on one of the many skyscrapers nearby.

“Vivien,” I said seriously, to which she looked at me slowly, “We’re getting away from that life. Trying to getting away from the addictions, getting away from the risk, getting away from anything that can pull us back.”

She regarded me for another second, then leaned back to how she was. She knew I was right, but couldn’t shake that feeling that everything outside of the Illest was lacking. That’s just how it haunted her, I guess. Of course, I haven’t gotten over that either. I still get cravings for stim, so much so that I claw my skin in my sleep dreaming of the rush and... him.

“We’re trying so hard to get back to a normal life, but we still got that record, Jazmin. Hard to live normal when Drones and cops are waiting to pop you for jaywalking, even,” she said from her position.

Now it was her turn to be right. It was hard living with our record, getting decent jobs and avoiding police at the same time. “We’ll find a way,” was all I could offer. I leaned onto the ledge and studied Chosm. No matter how many times I got this high, the city still amazed me. It was a skeleton of concrete and steel, with neon skin. Every building around us was set high, and I knew that only residential areas had low-set buildings. On most of the walls, giant screens with bright advertisements and images brightened the scene. At night, those same lights would make the city glow like a light bulb. The one area that never seemed to get light was the Tower. It dwarfed the skyscrapers around it, and was a pure black obelisk of a prison. The higher someone was put, the more dangerous they were.

I pulled the band out of my hair, letting my dark curls blow free. Watching the Drones and people from rooftops was always fun, no matter what situation I was in. Day and night, Chosm’s crowds looked like thick snakes crawling over each other, with the shining chrome tops of the Drones along the top, ready for anything the cops may get them to do.

“Look out!” Viv yells, and I flipped back onto the roof without thinking as a Drone whizzed by. No guns, just a claw for capture. Immediately, her and I stood back-to-back as more Drones peeked over the roof. Two came up in front of me, and a quick glance back looked like just the first one was on Viv.

“Alright Jazmin, you got those two?” She asked without looking back.

“Of course,” I replied with a smile. I activated my Lace again, expanding the muscles in my leg, kicking off it to shoot towards one of the Drones. Seeing me coming, it bobbed to the left, but I grabbed its front with expanded arm muscles, driving my fingers into the metal. As my momentum brought me around it, I whipped the whole Drone towards the one approaching Viv, taking it out. I landed on the roof’s ledge and saw more machines rising over the edge. I heard a louder propulsion sound and looked to the sun to see three human-shaped black dots moving incredibly fast towards us. They looped and circled each other, and as they came closer, I realized that we were facing Salvo Bots.

Salvo Bots, skeletal robots with a smooth chrome face, were the most dangerous thing for any thug (or ex-thug) to see. No one that wasn’t in the cops could figure out how they were made, and no one part of the force would tell. They were made to take out even the most experienced fighters by studying any recordings that were available, then coming up with counters with their supercomputer minds. Seeing three of them against two of us was a terrifying prospect. Knowing that only the Commissioner would send Bots was even more so.

“We need to get out of here, Viv,” I said nervously. I heard a shooting sound and jumped just before a claw sailed under me. I threw it at the three Drones approaching Viv, destroying one.

“You’re right,” she said, turning her body towards me and bouncing on the balls of her feet, ready to run. Just as she expanded her leg muscles, though, two of them were on her. They shot their hands out by thick cords, trying to grab her. She managed to step back just in time, but still got tripped up by one of the hands that scraped her. As they pulled towards her, they both kicked out in perfect sync, hitting her square in the chest. She fell back, and the third Salvo made the two Drones converge to grab her. Thinking as fast as I could, I leaped high up and came back down spinning wildly, ripping through the pair of drones with my strengthened leg and steel-toed boots. Before I could kick a Salvo in the head, it grabbed my leg with both hands. It was tall, and I dangled for a moment, staring up at it’s face. The skull face stared back with those dark pits of eyes. Vivien slid around me to punch the Salvo through it’s face, but was stopped by the second one. My captor’s head snapped back up to face her, and it before throwing me off the roof completely.

The last thing I saw before falling below the lip was Viv’s face screaming, getting grabbed by all three Salvos.

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I came to maybe a half hour later, judging by the sunset painting the sky. I saw Viv getting pulled away by only two Salvo Bots, and even they looked like they’ve seen better days. For her to put up that much of a fight for a long stretch reminded me why she was one to be feared. I cleaned off all the gunk and trash from the dumpster and hopped out, landing on wobbly legs.

I heard a loud cracking sound behind me, and my head whipped to see a Salvo with one arm facing me. It took two steps forward and I prepared for a fight, but it fell face first, dying in front of me. Both the experience of a Salvo taking that much of a beating and the fact that Vivien

took three in a fight on her own sent a shiver down my spine. I picked up the Salvo and tossed it in the dumpster I came from, and I stealthily made my way out to meet with Chosm's constant crowd.

My mind was already busy with plans to get her back. Where would I even start? Breaking in with my Lace was out of the question; too loud, too hard, too impossible. Could I even be sure she would be in the Tower? Considering Viv's Illest reputation, I figured she'd be near the Block, which was perched atop the Tower itself.

The Illest. Was I seriously considering this? Was there no one I could get for this? Since I left, people I've met haven't been up to breaking friends out of prison, I don't think. Nearly everyone in Chosm had dirty hands somehow, but this was on a whole new level. I had to go to the Illest.

I made my way back home to wait until night fell, then waited some more before heading out. It was more difficult than I would've liked, with Salvos flying above crowds looking for anyone suspicious, and Drones angling downwards for once, studying the same throngs of people. Luckily, I made it, and a few hours later, there I was, standing outside the Illest territory, late night, rain pouring. I had to lay low for a few hours, avoiding cops and other Salvos that had sent word out that the Black Cat was in the area. Traveling from the rich northwest side of Chosm with towering buildings, to a residential area just south of the heart of the city took longer than I would've liked with all the detours, but here I was, at midnight. Stark shadows created by the squat buildings were complemented by the piercing white street lamps, reflected in puddles all around me. I knew once I entered the square in front of me, I'd be getting the Illest toughs interrogating me to find out what someone was doing sulking around the street closest to their headquarters. Steeling myself, I breathed in the air heavy with moisture, and watched as a white



plume left my mouth. I wore a thermal, increasing its heat to compensate for the outside cold that my face still felt. After the plume disappeared in a gust of wind, I stepped forward.

“Hey sugar, what’s a bee gotta do to get some hon—,” one of the toughs started to say before I grabbed his huge gut, hard. His stomach fat poked through my fingers, and I stepped to face him.

“Jazmin has come to howl at the moon,” I said seriously. I always hated that greeting that Hound came up with, but I knew the effect it would have. His eyes widened at this, and he looked from his buddy to me. I let go of him and he stepped back right away.

“The Cat is—,” he started to call to someone up the street.

“Jazmin,” I snapped, stepping towards him.

The big tough winced, then looked back up the street and quickly said, “Jazmin is back!”

Immediately, three muscular Illest officers came from the side streets that emanated out of this square. One of them had the top of his finger popped off, revealing a literal finger gun that he had trained on me the whole way, keeping it pressed to my back on our entire silent trip through the neighborhood.

We reached the Illest building, decked out in the center of the neighborhood with neon lights lining the roof, and graffiti covering every wall in bright colors. He was able to afford this ostentation because of what he did for the neighborhood; he used the gang’s funds to provide for the people around him... as long as they offered one family member to his cause. If that member deserted or if the family didn’t offer one of their own, he’d send his harder toughs to make them more agreeable.

The smell of smoke, alcohol, and sex hung thick in the Illest house. The building pulsed with music, and under it, moans and creaks came from adjacent rooms. The room we entered

from as well as the one next to it had people gathered around pipes with multiple mouth pieces, puffing widget. As we walked picked our way between sitting groups, we came across a group that was performing their ritual stim taking. Highly addictive, highly desirable, and highly paid for, this drug really did make anyone feel like they were on top of the world—I would know. This group I eyed for a little too long, earning me a hard nudge in the back with the officer’s finger gun. We made our way through the room, entering a double- doored waiting area that was soundproof.

“We’ll get Hound,” one of the officers said. He headed through the next door into Hound’s meeting room, and I heard muffled speaking, punctuated once by Hound’s obvious shock. The officer came back a moment later, nodding to me. This time, when the officer poked me in the back, I still stood for a moment, gathering myself to face him. After the second jab, I began stepping slowly forward. The square room seemed to stretch before me, and eternity was found in the few seconds that it took to reach the door. It slid up quickly, making me eye to eye with Hound.

Hound always wore a stylized plague doctor’s mask, in the shape of a wolf’s snout. He had clear, olive skin that was stretched over every feature: accented cheekbones, sharp jawline, and powerful muscles. He looked small, but I knew more than anybody that he carried a lot of power, even when he didn’t activate his Lace. He sat at a semicircular desk on a chair with an extremely high back, and had the other two officers flanking him, staring straight ahead. My kind guide went to join them, flipping up the end of his finger to close off the finger gun.

“So, my Black Cat is back,” he said, resting his chin on a fist. Immediately, I felt goosebumps rise on my skin, but I suppressed the shiver. I wouldn’t let him dominate me, not

again. Instead, I made my way to the chair in front of him, positioned slightly lower than his, of course.

“I’m not here to stay, Hound,” I spat, “I’m here to bargain,” He raised his eyebrows at this, but kept the rest of his body perfectly still.

“Vivien was taken today,” I continued, “we were out Drone-hopping and got carried away. First came some capture Drones, then... Salvos,” This caused Hound to lean back in his chair, biting his lower lip and studying me.

“Which one was Vivien again?” He asked after a moment. His voice didn’t rise at the end as if asking a question, instead staying even throughout the statement. My nerves felt like they were scraping against each other as his quiet, slight rasp of a voice crept into my ears. He knew exactly what he was doing, exactly what to do to get to me. On the outside, I must have given some indication of the fear I was feeling feeling, since his lip curled up slightly into a half-smile.

He played his lead, leaning almost completely over his desk to speak. “She’s obviously important to you, kitty, but you know just how important you were to me. Didn’t we have something?” He summoned pity into his voice, and I felt its pull.

I was his when I was in the Illest. He always loved my dark brown skin. He called my curls perfect. He called me perfect. His kisses meant he still loved me. Everything else meant I was wanted. I resented my family in those early years, and he gave me more of a family that I could come home to. Since I left, what was there? Jobs that wouldn’t take me. Cops that wanted me for less wholesome reasons. And Vivien.

Vivien.

“We had nothing, Dog,” he winced when I called him that. Good, “You used a fifteen-year-old girl that was just left by her family for sex for five years, and *then* you killed them when

I misbehaved. No other family, no other Illest member got what I got, not even the deserters. I am here to make my request, and if you don't take it, I'll give all of the info I have about you straight to the cops."

His eyes widened at this prospect. Being as close as I was to him during my time in the gang, I heard more secrets than any one person. More secrets that could tear down his entire empire. Secrets like where he kept his family all this time, his Lace access code, as well as every dealer, every supplier, and every member's true identity.

"Cat," he said with a shaky voice, "I can use your access code to shut off your Lace, beat you to a pulp, and take you back if I really wanted to. What's stopping me?" Anger was evident now, and from what I knew of Hound, he didn't resort to violence unless there was no other option. I had him in a corner.

What he said was true, as well. I got my Lace installed because I thought I could combat Hound. It was a painful process, having underground surgeons cut open my back in order to install a computer system onto my spine that would allow me to strengthen parts of my body beyond what even an exo could accomplish. Better than an exo, as well as more inconspicuous, with nothing ever showing on the outside beyond muscles expanding upon activation.

I was riding the excitement of getting it installed, of my dream of freedom finally being a reality the second night I had it. I tried to take him out when I thought his guard would be down the most, when we were having our time. Of course, I knew he had his own Lace installed years before I was even a member of the Illest, and he had much more practice with expanding the right muscles and singling out what needed to be done without putting incredible strain on his body. He turned the tables quickly and forced me to give him my own access code, which would shut down my own Lace for ten minutes. It was months after that night when I heard his own

access code by accident, when he shut it off himself because of the stress he was putting on his body. The next night, Viv and I escaped.

“Hound,” I said now, knowing how to strike fear in him, “Vivien got her own Lace installed after we left. If Lion hears that you touched me like you did before, she will come after you with a vengeance.” After hearing Viv’s Illest name, Hound took a step back. She had been in the gang for five years before me, and we were the same age, and was already one of the most skilled enforcers. Once she got the Lace with me, she had to try hard to not kill the people she had to rough up with a single punch. We kept each other sane in that time; she taught me what it meant to actually be cared for after a particularly harsh beating from Hound, and I taught her compassion when she was sent to beat up a single grandmother.

Hound made his way back around his desk and sat down slowly, fingers interlocked in front of him.

“What did you come here to ask for?”

Now we were down to business. I rose from the chair and planted my hands on the desk, “Two members, decked out with some cybernetics to help with a breakout, as well as information about where she would be... then I need you to clear our names.”

He thought for a moment, then said, “Well I can tell you where she probably is. She’ll be in the Block. With how much the cops are trying to weed out my own agents as well as bringing down the Illest, scoring someone with a rank like her will get her a one-way ticket to the Block.”

The Block was the Tower’s interrogative branch, a black slap perched right on top. That meant a lot of climbing.

“As for the two members... that’s a risk. You know that if Salvo Bots came for you two that the Commissioner is involved. I got nothing on that guy, and I’d rather not step on his toes.”

My anger flared. I knew I'd need backup, and his hesitation wasn't gonna slide. Before I could stop myself, I screamed, "FUCK IT, DOG! LIFE'S A RISK!"

The three officers whipped out guns and touched them to my head quickly, but I kept my eyes trained on Hound. He sighed and said, "If you would've let me finish, I would've told you I can give you one. This one should serve your purpose pretty well," He pressed a button under the table and the mirrored closet to my right slid open. As the officers pulled their guns away, I was eye-to-eye with a Salvo Bot, pure black instead of that shimmering white.

"That'll work," I said assuredly.

"As for the clearing of your names..." He said mysteriously. I recognized the twirling of his fingers on the table, as well as that smile and glassy look in his eyes. That was the face he made when he was about to win with all the odds against him.

I took a deep breath and said, "Shoot."

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The Tower loomed before me, and my neck ached from staring straight up to look at the Block on top, sticking out on all sides of the pure black obelisk. The Salvo Bot hung on my back, in a backpack-type form with its legs and arms curled to make it appear like an oval. I spent the last day at my house, resting and figuring out everything that the Salvo could do using the wrist module Hound gave me. It was an all-purpose control device on the inner part of my forearm with submenu after submenu of functions. I managed to make the three necessary functions hotkeys that I could access easily: voice command, windblast, and attachment. I searched the submenus, and commanded the Salvo to retract the bands around my arms. It fell to the concrete with a loud CLANG! I clicked the "attachment" icon, which had the Salvo unfold and wrap itself around my body, creating a snug skeletal armor that stopped at my neck. While my Lace gave

me the power to put holes in metal with my bare hands, I needed momentum for that. The metal reinforcement that this Salvo exo offered was far better than the climbing gear I had planned on using.

Activating the Lace to expand my legs and get as much added momentum as possible, I began running towards the gates surrounding the Tower. I leaped over the gates, landing on a guard that had noticed me during the jump. I quickly knocked him out with a punch and threw his body over me fireman-style, continuing to bound towards the Tower. With my hands behind my head, I activated the voice commands.

“Windblast on feet in five seconds,” I said between breaths. I counted in my head, listening as some inner machinery whirred to life. At three, I dashed over to a dumpster and tossed the guard’s body. At four, I heard a metal boom and knew I scored. At five, I leaped with my expanded leg muscles and, with the windblast, shot up. The wind whipped my face and threatened to pull my hair free from its tie. Quickly, the bright lights of the city dimmed as we went above even the highest of local buildings. Our ascent slowed as I grew closer to the Tower, and I expanded my hand muscles specifically. With help from the exo, I dug my fingers into the walls once I reached the apex of my jump. Looking down now, I estimated that I was seventy stories up. I dislodged one hand and tapped the wrist module, causing the tips of the Salvo’s feet and its fingers to become sharp, making it easier to climb. The surface was still slick from yesterday’s rain, as the cloudy day we had didn’t do much to evaporate what was left behind.

I began my slow climb up the remainder of the Tower. While the height I gained from the leap was great, I was only about halfway up. At what I guessed to be ninety stories up, there was the odd Drone surveying the wall as well. From some breakout attempts I heard about while I was in the Illest, I knew that these Drones were using thermal scanners to spot any climbers.

The Lace was an amazing device in this case, since it gave me full manual control over bodily functions if I wanted to, while also keeping me alive if I made a drastic change to those systems that would otherwise kill a normal person. I used this to my advantage, so that anytime I heard a Drone whirring closer to me, I would lower my body temperature to match the air around me while staying perfectly still. Just because the Lace let me do this didn't mean I wasn't fatigued from those changes, and by the time I was at roughly a hundred stories, I tried my best to avoid Drones rather than changing my body.

The climb took me the greater part of an hour, including my breaks and close calls, and finally, I reached the Block. Now it got truly difficult, since the Block stuck out from the rest of the Tower. I dislodged one of my hands and prepared to shoot the hook from the Salvo. There was a lever on my palm that, when squeezed, would shoot the hook. I used my left and...

It stuck.

Thinking that it was some fluke, I grabbed the wall again and used my right hand. Nothing again. I felt my breath grow more rapid, and looked at my reflection in the slick surface. I would have to jump from here to the edge of the Block, then climb the rest of the way up. I took some deep breaths. This design was intentional, of course, discouraging nearly any criminal from doing what I was about to. Activating my Lace to expand both my arm and leg muscles, I leaped for the edge. I shot true, heading straight towards it.

Then I hit my head and fell unconscious.

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In an out of body experience, I felt my body being dragged through hallways. My toes scraped the floor as hands under my arms held me tightly. Time was an unknown mistress to me in my daze, but eventually, I felt myself thrown unceremoniously into a chair, and my hands



were bound in cold metal shackles behind the chair. I slumped forward and closed my eyes, taking stock of my body.

My head throbbed for obvious reasons, so I commanded the Lace to dull my pain and heal that area quicker. It would still probably take a day, but that was better than normal healing. I checked my binds without extra lace power, and they wouldn't budge. I expanded my muscles and tried again, but this time, was met with a powerful shock through my body that left me laying my head on the counter, drool leaking out of my mouth. I realized in that moment that these were cuffs made to handle Laced. We were especially vulnerable to electricity, due to the machine itself running through our bodies. The door to the room opened, disguised as a part of the wall with no handle on this side, and I lifted myself from my sorry state, meeting eyes with an old man, built unnaturally large for his age.

“So, did the Black Cat finally find a home?” The face asked me with an icy smile.

“Commissioner,” I said with a curt nod. Behind my cool exterior, I was terrified. The Commissioner was an enigma to everyone on the streets, and even the Illest's best hacker couldn't uncover his identity. The name itself struck fear into any sorry criminal in the city.

“Your friend knew me as well, Black Cat. I believe her name was... Lion?” He pressed a button on a controller he held, and the wall to the right of me became transparent, revealing Vivien, bruised and bloodied with the same binds on her hand, laying in a cell with only a bucket and a bed that she laid on. I immediately pulled towards her, but my binds caught on the back of the chair.

“Lion has proven very difficult to break. Will you be the same?” The Commissioner sneered.

“Whatever you want, we probably don’t know. It’s been almost three years since we were part of the Illest,” I told him.

“Liar,” He roared, slamming his hand on the table before glaring at me, “That Salvo Bot had markings of the gang written all over it. You had their help in this operation.”

“It was a favor I—”

“And there you go, lying for them,” The Commissioner interrupted, meeting me at eye level, “You criminals all think that your code makes you redeemable, but it doesn’t. You’re still scum, and I will lock every last one of you away.”

In anger, I leaned forward and bit him with help from the Lace. A quick shock brought an end to that, and I fell forward again, and the Commissioner steady himself on the table as well. He grabbed a tuft of hair and met my eyes again before smacking me across the face and sending me sliding into the transparent wall.

“You’re... Laced?” I asked incredulously. No person could send someone that far with just a slap.

“I was the first to become Laced, Black Cat. My body has become an exo, just like yours. Reinforced bones and muscles have made me above the normal citizen, and my training brings me above even you.”

“The Lace doesn’t reinforce anything.” I thought, but then realized that the first Lace was unveiled thirty years ago, on an up-and-coming cop. If he had the first, then mine was of a different, evolved design. I had a plan now.

“Maybe you can use a Lace better than I can, Commissioner,” I said as I sidled up the wall, “And maybe you really are above the normal citizen because of what you can do,” I said as I faced him, “But you should absolutely not underestimate the underground.”

I dashed and shoved him to the opposite wall, resisting his efforts to shove me off. I expanded every muscle in my body at once, earning a shock that I could barely stand, but one that I knew was far worse for him. If metal reinforced every bone in his body, then his old hardware was a far better conductor than mine. When I commanded the Lace to heal my body, the shock grew even greater. After less than a minute, the Commissioner stopped yelling, and I stopped my Lace.

Woozy from the shock, I sat down hard as the Commissioner's body slumped to the side. The shock caught up with me, and I vomited onto the clean floor between my legs. In my bile, I noticed the black dots of nanobots. My breathing came rapidly as I realized that the loss of these would mean the loss of my Lace's usage. While there were not nearly enough there to leave me as a normal person, the loss of any could cause some abilities to be lost to me.

"Unlaced," a tinny voice said. The shackles then popped open now, freeing me. The sharp decrease in nanobots must have made me seem as someone without a Lace to whatever AI worked in them. If the binds were programmed to identify when a Laced person lost theirs, that also meant there was a way to remove a Lace from someone. That was terrifying to think, given the Commissioner's cold attitude towards the world.

I turned to face the transparent wall, seeing Vivien only a foot away. A Laced person would even have a hard time going through a wall with just their body, but the metal table was a good tool for the job. I expanded both arm muscles and lifted the table with a struggle. If picking this up was difficult, I must have lost more nanobots than I thought. Pushing that thought aside, I brought the table back and swung with all my might at the wall, smashing it completely. A hum began outside the room as Viv woke up, flinging her covers off and getting to her feet. She

peeked into the room and her eye-- the other one was swollen shut-- widened at the sight of me, and she ran into my open arms.

“Jaz, I didn’t tell them anything. I didn’t want to ruin what we made,” she said desperately.

“I know Viv, I know,” I cooed, “We need to leave. That was definitely not the quietest of escapes, so we need to go.” She released me and regarded the hole in the wall over her shoulder.

“Yes, please,” she said to it.

I ran to where I knew the door was, kicking it open from the wrong side, throwing it to the floor with the hinges broken off. Outside, the hum revealed itself to be an alarm, and the entire Block was alternating between a blood red light and total darkness. Viv and I made our way out, rushing directly to the right towards a window at the end of the hall. There was not a soul on this floor, and my annoyance of anxiety turned into an itch before it was answered.

Only a few feet before we reached the window, a Salvo Bot rose into view. Before I could think, I had leaped out the window and met it in the air. Vivien came up behind me, meeting with another Bot in the air. Looking around in shock, I saw that we were surrounded by four other Bots. Vivien and I began punching our captors, but that earned little more than bloody knuckles and wasted energy. Another Bot grabbed my other arm and both pulled me back towards the open window.

With a loud crunching sound, the Salvo holding my right hand was split in two, cut through by Hound’s black Bot with a blade protruding from its wrist. In a vain attempt at staying powered, the Bot holding me jerked for a few seconds before falling from the sky. The two free Salvo Bots engaged the Illest bot in an airborne battle, but I didn’t have time to watch. I dangled

from the hand of the lone Salvo Bot holding me. I looked up to see the second hand of my lone Captor reaching for me. I quickly glanced at Vivien and decided to take a chance.

I punched the hand reaching towards me, activating the lever that shot out the grapple hook. It launched out straight through the heads of both Bots holding Vivien, killing them instantly. They both released her and all three of them fell. The hook remained through the heads of the Bots, weighing down my own. The hook wasn't able to be retracted through two heads of metal. I heard a louder whirring sound coming from the one holding me, but it couldn't hold up five bodies; Vivien had grabbed the chain attached to the hook as she fell.

We made a slow descent as the Bot holding me desperately tried to stay airborne, but eventually, we reached the ground. My left wrist was still in a tight grip, and was hurting with the lack of blood.

“DUCK!” I heard yelled behind me. I obliged, and an ear-piercing metal-on-metal sound came next to me, then my hand was freed. I looked down to see the Bot holding me, crushed underneath two Salvos with a hook through their head.

Vivien came next to me and grabbed my hand.

“We need to leave.” She said. The black arm of a Salvo Bot crashed down next to us, and I nodded. We rushed across the prison yard, pieces of Salvos raining down around us.

#

Three days later, Vivien and I were lounging back at the house. We had to ditch the last one to shake the cops that were searching every database for us. We used a less reputable salesman to buy this one, and he promised that every payment would be done under the table, in solid crypto. I had a cast on my wrist as I laid on a hot-pink couch, and Viv was applying cream all over her body for the wounds in the bathroom.

“Still can’t believe that after all this, we got off scot-free,” Viv mused to herself. I had told her about me going to the Illest for our agreement, and that we were both cleared in whatever way they had managed.

A knock on the door made my stomach drop for the third time today. If it was the cops or... them, I didn’t want Viv to see them first. I rose and went to the door, but saw Vivien already standing frozen in the doorway.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” She growled. I let out a slow exhale as Hound stepped in like he owned the house.

“So, she didn’t give you the full story?” He said to Viv while staring through me. I dulled my sense of touch as I stood up, breaking the cast with my expanded arm muscles. Vivien looked at me as I walked towards Hound, moving past him.

“I wasn’t cleared, exactly,” I explained, “instead, Hound and the Illest got me to disappear completely. The perfect member: someone with no record, no previous life. Of course, that means this will be the only job I can take,” I hadn’t wanted to see Vivien’s eyes, and when I met them now, I didn’t see sadness. I saw rage.

“We didn’t originally agree on the Salvo being wrecked though, Cat,” He said, distracted by something on his fingernails, “I may have to add some... extra caveats.”

“I swear to God, Hound,” Viv said, rounding on him with a shaking voice, “if I hear that you lay a single finger on her, I will tear apart Chosm to take you out.”

He just stared at her, but I knew him enough to see the fear. Slightly widened eyes, perfect stillness. He had to be in control of himself completely to keep his fear from showing.

He brushed past me quickly and made his way down our trashy street. I went to follow him until Vivien grabbed my wrist.

“Jazmin,” She said with fire, “I swear we will get you out of this.”

I gave her a wide smile and said, “I know, Viv. We’ll tear his empire apart.”