

The Epic

((... or The Epic Saga of how the Brave Members of the Illuminati Defeated the Second Sorcerer of Synthetic Biology's Insidious Attempt to Invade and Destroy the City of Edinburgh.))

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Prologue

"A-T-G..."

The voice echoed ominously across the night-darkened seas, resounding like peals of blasphemous thunder from the deck of the cruising yacht moored dangerously close to the rocky shoreline. The *Jac *Governer* Hint* was an unassuming vessel of whitewashed fibreglass and luxuriously smoothed teak, but the figure that stood like a proud figurehead upon its very prow was altogether far more sinister.

"G-C-T-G-G-C-A-C-A-T-G-A..."

The scenery shuddered violently with every shouted syllable, twisting and warping in tune to the cacophonous crescendo. Gale-force winds whipped and howled in sustained fury, while the fragile yacht tossed and turned at the mercy of the crashing waves. Heavy grey clouds roiled like undulating serpents overhead, driven as pack-beasts before the lash towards the sheer heather-lined bluffs upon the shoreline and the rolling hills that lay beyond.

A thousand warriors clad in tartan kilt and plaid met them there, bellowing battlecries to the encroaching sky. Long of hair and muscled of body, armed with broadsword and dirk, claymore and halberd, the massed clans gathered once again to repel those invaders that dared to threaten their highland home. Over the long years they had successfully defended themselves against all comers, against the Vikings of ancient times and the English of the Middle Ages, the Spanish Armada and the French Napoleon, and more recently Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. But it was no mere warcraft, not even base magic, that the sorcerous figure wrought. It was something else entirely. It was synthetic biology...

The Toff

The air is crisp, slightly cold, and I hang there. Just for an instant suspended weightless, almost flying, that perfect sensation of flight, out away from the mass of stone and rock, the edifice that time has created. Then gravity catches me, and the wind begins to whip past my face and I'm falling. Plummeting down, turning my body as I fall, accelerating my descent and it is glorious too. My eyes stream as the wind plucks at them, hair raging in the air, ground getting closer and closer. A slab of solid unyielding earth rushing towards me with all the speed and certainty of a rifle bullet, closer and closer, faster, stretching out so now it's all I can see, moments away, instants, fractions. A sickening crunch, a wet popping sound, echoing off the bare stone. Damn it hurts, the pain is like fire, the old adage true as my bones re-align, coming together, fragments fusing back into a whole, pulped skin and organs pressing out against my shattered torso, pushing the ribs even as a cracking sound heralds their own regeneration. I'm getting better, faster. The fall should have killed me, but it hasn't, already I can move again, slowly, painfully, but my legs are whole and I can draw myself to my feet, spine screeching unhappily as it takes the weight it isn't ready for. A new burst of pain, a crack as my jaw sets itself, and my vision clears, darkness receding as the optical nerve extends into the socket, pushing out small pieces of gravel as humours fill the cup of bone. I've made one hell of a mess. I hope it rains soon, or else this bloodstained piece of ground is going to lead to some worrying questions. If it makes the papers the others will be unhappy, maybe I should stop in at the St Leonards Police station on the way home. No, I'll go home and change first. If I appear in these blood-soaked, torn things they'll either arrest me or hospitalise me before I can explain and my testimony won't become valid anymore. No, a quiet word to one of the higher ups should deal with the problem. I've stopped, I run my hands over the skin of my chest and back, feeling for any surface scratches still closing. My scalp feels fine too, a bit sticky but that's to be expected, you can't make an omelet and all that, and I did break one size-able human egg. God the air feels good, cool, but with the promise of warmth when the sun reaches this part of the slope. The view at the top was fantastic, hmmm perhaps I have time to go up again. Run one final test. I look at my watch, thankful that it was sturdy enough to need only a small amount of

padding to survive the fall, no. The rounded digital numerals read as clearly as any tolling bell, not today, I'm going to be rushed as it is if I want to be on time for work. Got to get home, wash - blood is a real bugger once it starts to cake & dry - grab some new clothes and then go. Police station will have to wait til this evening, fingers crossed for rain. I smile, remembering, I think I should be alright, a small localised rainstorm should be easy enough for him, even if he's busy. I grab my overcoat from where I'd stashed it, pulling it close, pleased that the cling film seems to be working, stopping my ruining every single piece of clothing I own, well the ones I care about at least. It sits a bit strangely with the layer of thin plastic between me and it, but it's a small price to pay. I look up to the hill once more, my eyes searching for the place where I'd taken my dive. My 'Launch Point' for my experiments as I like to call it. There it is, the sun's moved higher in the sky now, so it's rays reach beyond my spot, slowly warming the old earth and stone of Arthur's Seat. I smile, I like this hill. I raise a hand to it, a half salute as if to a friend seen far off, then I turn and go.

The Terminator

"Going to be late, fell off a roof and thought best to regenerate in an alley to not *some text missing* phone not *some text missing*"

That's the third time this week! Just because he can regenerate shouldn't entitle him to pull crazy stunts every other minute. Practicing is good, but surely this is one time too many. Oh well, it's not worth fighting about. I sigh and quickly text, "No worries. See you soon," before ducking behind a building. I'm always wary of transforming in case some nosey neighbor is peering out the kitchen window...

Emptying my mind completely, I focus on the graceful shape of a pearly white swan, and slowly, with every nerve in my body tingling, my neck begins to lengthen, my legs shrinking. Pain, like I've never felt. Concentrate. Head shrinking, beak lengthening from nowhere. Feet contorting, toes growing, becoming webbed. Everything contracting, distorting, mutating...pain in every part of my body. I want to cry out, but I mustn't stop focusing on the shape of the swan. And then, just when I can't stand it, it stops. A sudden stillness, peace, quiet. As I stretch my wings, I catch a momentary glance of my reflection in a puddle. Without stopping to confront the beady eyes (to be perfectly honest, I'm still slightly frightened by my reflection when I'm in a different form), I begin my journey, soaring over Edinburgh, round the castle, over the meadows, and directly towards the tower on top of Swann. There is a lot of moisture in the low ceiling of clouds, and I can tell the rain will start soon. Thank goodness my feathers are water resistant! Hopefully the others won't get too wet. I land among the pigeons and seagulls, and look towards our windows. It seems John hasn't arrived yet, but fortunately, we left the window open the night before. I change back into my normal form, causing chaos among the nesting birds, and immediately morph into a finch to flit over the gap between Swann and Darwin and in through the open window.

Once I had regained my normal form, I walked over to the sink to fill up the kettle for tea. Soon everyone will start arriving, tea will be made, biscuits passed around, laughter and chat, but for just a minute the room is quiet. I enjoy these few minutes of solitude before work begins. Walking back to the window I admire Edinburgh. To my right, the Craggs and Arthur's Seat tower imposingly over the city; the castle, in the center of the scene, with the little flag on top will soon disappear, as the mist comes rolling off the Firth of Forth. Fife, which should be on the opposite bank, has already vanished from view. As I watch, more and more of Edinburgh is swallowed up; the fog seems to bring a sound blanket with it, and soon it's hard to even make out KB house.

I think back over the last few weeks. It wasn't that long ago that I was on the plane from New York to Edinburgh, knowing I needed to find a job, dreading how long the summer could seem...but now it's six weeks later, and I'm not sure where the time has gone.

I hadn't noticed that the kettle had boiled and switched itself off until the rattling of the elevator suddenly broke the peacefulness of the scene. I turn around, expecting John, but it's just Damien going to his little office. I flip the switch on the kettle again, and busy myself making tea. Maria, Richard, Will, Marta, and I will all have tea - 5 mugs. Lu will want hot water. Coffee for Sarah - so 6 mugs! By the time I'm finished, the other's are bound to be here.

While the tea steeps, I think back to that fateful afternoon when everything changed. As the tea mistress, I made the tea and offered around the biscuits. It had to be the biscuits, didn't it? While I do make an excellent cup of tea, even if I do say so myself, not everyone drinks it...but we all eat the biscuits! Given my post, I would be the obvious culprit. I won't deny my involvement too quickly...that would be a certain admission of guilt. But similarly, you don't find me pleading guilty. (Using the handle of the fork, I fish out Will's and Marta's tea bags) Regardless, I'm not sure it was a good idea. Of course, I'm not complaining; having a superpower is definitely very cool, but somehow it seems to have changed the score. Among ourselves, life goes on much as usual, except for the obvious added bonuses in the lab! But our relationship with the outside world seems to have shifted. (Gripping the fork, I absentmindedly beat Maria's tea bag against the side of the mug.) We've closed in, together, in an "us vs. them" situation. We've been set apart, but also intrinsically linked. And although none of us have said anything yet, I think we all feel the sense of foreboding; the feeling that eventually we'll have to take responsibility and decide how to use our powers. (As I remove the rest of the teabags, the lift once again clatters into life.) Ah well, it's not worth dwelling on it. Perhaps we've made up that feeling, hopefully. (Has someone remembered to bring in more milk?) I won't say anything about my thoughts to them. I wonder how much of my fears Sarah has already seen... As the lift shudders to a halt, I hear chatter in the hall. I turn to say good morning and ask about the milk.

The Headmistress

The BRIDGE Protocol

"Yes! We actually got something working!"

"BRIDGE?"

"BRIDGE!"

Various euphoric cries filled the Honours room. We finally had BRIDGE working and could begin demonstrating its advantages over traditional BioBricking methods. This was all we had that we could claim was ours, and no one else's, so it was more than vital that we prove its usefulness.

"Chris says you can start working on it properly now; there's protocols down in the lab, and it looks fairly straight forward."

"Do you need a hand?"

"No, I'll manage, thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely, there's nothing you'll need help with?"

"It's my project, get on with your own."

A disappointed worker returns to their computer and continues to type, slightly sullen and hitting the keys harder than ought to be necessary. The other leaves the room.

The lab is empty; the PhD students are busy drafting their theses and Chris is away on an early lunch. The lambda red protocol is lying on the iGEM bench. A quick skim through the first few steps and then off to the freezer to pull out the relevant tubes - the BRIDGE construct with the correct up and downstream sequences, the lambda red plasmid, the novel gene that we needed to introduce to the genome...that would change the genome...that would alter the organism...there are a lot of genes in this freezer...

A quick glance to either end of the lab, intensely listening for sounds of PhD students, other iGEM members, a returning Chris French, anything that might foil this brilliant, yet slightly insane idea. It wouldn't work anyway, so it can't be that dangerous, they don't have the right up and down stream sequences for the homologous recombination. Still, it's worth a shot. Just a bit of PCR and mix the solutions together with BRIDGE and lambda red and... yeah, let's do it.

They're all engrossed in work. The Fox's Crunch Creams are sat, open on top of the microwave. No one notices as they are quietly removed from the room. As they are returned, the kettle is already boiling...

"Tea?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah, please."

"Mm-hmm."

"What are you looking at me for?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Lady Grey, please!"

"Err...yes, Green tea, thank you."

"Yes please."

"Nah, not for me thanks."

"How did it go? Any major problems?"

"No, all fine."

Hovering near the kettle. Everyone will be having biscuits...this couldn't be easier really.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

"Excuse me, could you please get out of my Tea Square!?"

"I'm just getting the biscuits!"

"Biscuit?"

A general consensus to biscuits. Good, good. The sugar should hide the taste of the solution.

"This tastes funny."

Damn.

"Who's trying to poison my tea again?"

Some shifty looks, some laughs. We've conditioned ourselves to always mistrust each other and hence no one notices when one actually can't be trusted. If I weren't so scared of being arrested I'd be laughing maniacally. No one else says anything, they all eat. I return to my computer and continue working. This might work, it might not. Either way, I got to feel like a mad scientist for a day. And it was worth it. ...Mwahahahaha.

The Next Morning...

"...So...we all have superpowers. Wait a minute. "

Matt walks in as though nothing has happened.

"Does he have a power? He doesn't seem surprised at what's going on."

"No, but then, he has spent over a month with us now, and us talking about superpowers is far from surprising..."

"Has nothing strange happened to you over the last 20 hours or so?" Richard asked Matt.

"Not that I've noticed, why?" Matt replies.

The atmosphere in the honours room felt unfamiliar, which was hardly surprising given the events of the previous evening. Until they had arrived that morning each of the iGEM team had believed they were experiencing something unique, random, scary, and kind of awesome. And

since no member of the team was really inclined to keeping something so cool a secret, each had naturally discovered similar things were happening to each of their team mates. This made it slightly less special, but in no way less incredible.

"Well," said Richard, "to summarise, we've got a telepath, a shapeshifter, a telekinetic, a teleporter, a pyrokinesist, someone who can control the electromagnetic spectrum, someone who can move at inhuman speeds, I can regenerate and whatever you & Donal may have... so what do we do now?"

"Well, clearly we need outfits," stated Maria in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Outfits?" John wasn't quite sold on the idea, and looking about him he could see that a couple of the others felt the same way. On the other hand, he realised very quickly that he wasn't going to be able to out-argue the ladies on the team, which meant...

"Does this mean we'll be having secret identities then?" Richard asked the room with a wry smile.

"Well, technically," Maria corrected, "we already have secret identities and we need to make up aliases. But that's fine, 'cause we already have our Illuminati names."

"I want a cool outfit and I want to be called the Cooler, because I am the coolest one here!"

"Can someone throw something at Marta?" exclaimed an exasperated Will.

"Actually, yes," grinned Maria.

Gilbert McGuinness, the team's pet rugby ball, pelted across the room of his own accord and stopped centimetres in front of Marta. The room fell silent for a brief instant before bursting into laughter.

"That's not funny, guys!" Marta cried.

"Yeah, it kind of is."

The rest of the group nodded in agreement with Matt, trying to stifle further laughter at Marta's reaction.

"We need to find out whether Donal's got any powers. Not that he really needs them," John added when at last the mirth died down.

"I'll get him on MSN," said Richard, sliding back over to his computer.

As the group turned towards the computers, there was a flicker in the sky over Edinburgh, a brief flash of something bright arcing momentarily through the air.

"What was that?" Hannah asked, wide eyed.

They stared out over the city. There came a second flash, and a single seagull dropped from the air onto the houses of Old Town.

"Ah...well I think that solves the mystery of Donal's superpower."

"Quite." Richard paused for a moment before continuing, "seagulls aren't pivotal to the local ecosystem are they?"

"Bit too late really, isn't it?" Maria said, as John shrugged before shaking his head, the sky lighting up in a display of myriad streaks of crackling electricity rending the blue, black shapes dropping left and right.

"You know, I think he's being a little indiscriminate. I've seen at least two pigeons and a sparrow get taken out too," Maria mused.

"... eagle eyes..." John muttered beneath his breath, distinctly jealous. They had confirmed, only a week earlier, that Maria's eyes were the only pair in the room still functioning at anything near a hundred percent.

"If it bothers you that much you can always get Marta to perform laser eye surgery on you," she retorted.

There was another brief pause as John weighed up his options, peering at them from over the rims of his over-sized glasses as he did so.

"Not just yet, thanks," he finally replied, leaving unspoken the implication that he didn't quite trust her control over her powers just yet. "Some other time, perhaps."

"When I get better she can practice on me... shame I can't let it stick though," Richard adds without turning back. "Speaking of which, I wonder whether our powers will improve. How quickly if they do and what sort of upper limits we might find." He pauses again, obviously deep in thought, "we should practice, train them, exercise of sorts, experiment like the proper scientists we are."

"Wow, Richard, you sound like you're setting up the plot for a long journey of self-discovery. You're making it sound like we're in a science fiction story...written by...well...us."

"Maybe this is all a dream." Richard suggested, waving his hands theatrically. Several members of the group raised an eyebrow, but no one commented.

"Maybe the other world was a dream, and we've finally woken up," continued John, sarcastically.

"Maybe we should stop referencing the Matrix and Inception and get on with lab work," said Will.

"NEVER!" cried Maria. Then, "... okay, yeah, we probably should."

The Professor

The sun rises early in Edinburgh in July; three o'clock on a Saturday morning and already the horizon smoulders with a streak of crimson flame. The view from the window of my flat is rather spectacular, past the looming mass of Arthur's Seat and the crags, down to the riding lights of the container ships berthed in the Firth and the lighthouse in the distance. Spectacular enough, in fact, that it would be worth waking up just to see the sun rise, even if it wasn't necessary for me to be up and about in time to make it into my weekend Tesco job. On the other hand, the constant clamour from the pubs below ruins the effect somewhat with discordant song and incoherent swearing. I try to tune out the cacophony by maintaining the focus and control that I've striven for ever since that fateful day in the lab.

I guess that one advantage of living alone is that there's no flatmate to stumble in drunk at this time of the morning, needing looking after. Another such advantage is that there's no competition for the bathroom. Washing four hours of sleep from my eyes is a task that I've grown used to over the past few years, and it's only slightly complicated by the fact that I've now gone a few weeks without a proper day off. As I try to avoid meeting the eyes of the ugly mug in the mirror, I wonder idly if like so many things previously, I've grown desensitised to

this as well. Over the years, I seem to have developed quite the knack for burying such responses beneath a facade of whatever I think passes for 'normality'. How could I have realised that such conditioned restraint would come in so handy now?

I enjoy both of my jobs, I really do... else, I don't doubt that I would have given up a long time ago. Some people have tried to convince me that I'm wasting my 'talents' stacking shelves at the local supermarket over the weekend, but despite my muttered complaints about insensitive and self-centred customers, there really is a sense of satisfaction to be gained from a well-stocked department or after helping someone with an errand. Not to mention that it pays rather well - far better than I'm used to from Japan at least, and enough to survive on and set something aside for tuition.

Weekdays, on the other hand, are what I truly look forward to. They involve working with a like-minded team of biologists, engineers, a designer, and a fellow informatician, doing something known as synthetic biology. This in turn involves trying to impose some form of engineering structure upon the rather chaotic nature of biological science: the principles of design and planning, the application of standards and characterised parts, the use of modelling and prototypes, and so forth. My place in it seems to be as modeller and resident techie, but the guys and gals that I work with make me feel welcome and somewhat useful, and for a bloke like me who really doesn't get out much, workplace relationships such as these are the closest thing I have to true friendships. They're all great people, they really are... although one or two of their quirks have me raising an eyebrow once in a while. Maybe (or most likely) it's just me.

Still, even I was surprised when I learnt of their plan that day... and after the events that occurred in Appleton Tower that very same evening, I think I can be forgiven for being rather tight-lipped about what happened. Suffice it to say that we're bound together now by something far stronger than a mere job, and that if the fire brigade had not been quite so prompt in their response, I would have had a lot more explaining to do.

By the time I've washed my hair, brushed my teeth, and downed a token breakfast, the hour already presses upon me to leave; half-an-hour early is on time in my personal book, and it never hurts to get a jump start on the day's work, even if I technically won't be paid for it. There's a long day ahead... I'll be lucky if I get out of the workplace before two in the afternoon, and after that there's a website to look at and perturbation analyses to be run. Tomorrow is an even longer day in Tesco's produce aisle, and on Monday the entire cycle begins anew... although, on the plus side, I get to meet everybody once more, and then perhaps our shared secret won't press down quite so heavily upon my chest.

One last glance at the framed picture on my desk and I'm out the door, nagging at the creases on my uniform and wondering yet again if it's a good idea to wear my name-badge to work. The streets are alive with the antics of late night revelers, and I'll have to be both quick and determined to avoid them safely. One day perhaps, I'll be able to relax like them; one day perhaps, I might even be able to utilise that spark within me to reach out, and like a phoenix reborn, reinvent myself completely.

Until then, however, it's once more unto the breach for this battered peon.

The Dancer

Okay, I don't really like doing this kind of thing...the only diary I've ever kept is a dream diary, and if anyone read that they'd have me committed. I never tell people what I'm genuinely thinking about them or myself, and that's the way it's always been, so this is going to be difficult for me. If I could ask for one favour, it would be for no one to discuss this with me. I'll write what you've asked me write just don't ask me to follow up on it; if possible don't even acknowledge it.

I'm still not comfortable writing what I think of the rest of you (which doesn't mean you should assume anything), but I can give you a brief summary of how this summer has made me feel about myself.

For a while I thought this would be a mistake, and that I wouldn't enjoy it or get anything useful from it. Well, that changed fairly quickly, as you might imagine. But one of my problems is that I'm very good at seeing both sides of a situation, i.e. I can see the good things that come from it, but I can also focus on the slightly less good implications. For example, I love the fact that I'm getting some good lab experience, but mostly what keeps coming back to me is that I didn't get this experience last summer and just spent 3 months playing Guitar Hero and watching Battlestar, and I can't help but feel that that is going to come back and bite me in the arse one day.

The scariest thing, though, had to be these powers that we all gained. To be honest, I wasn't sure whether they would ground me or end me. I manage to take every little thing too far (the incident at Newcastle being a prime example, which, believe me, will haunt me for a long long time), so imagine how terrified I was of going that little bit too far with this power I had. Obviously, at first, I really enjoyed the novelty, but then I began to worry. What if I hit another one of those moods where I didn't think about the consequences of my actions, or even worse, did think about them, and carried them out anyway. The only way I can control that is to be solitary and quiet and just keep my head down - I've considered this so many times; leaving when my work is finished, eating alone, staying out of group discussions lest I get carried away - but I know fine well that will get me no where...and, also, it would probably kill me. I need to find the balance and make sure this never gets out of control, because I might not just get stupid, I might get dangerous.

Maybe I'm over-exaggerating. Maybe I'm not dangerous. But if I can be over the top and annoying and embarrassing without realising it until several hours later, then...

It's not an excuse to give up my life and go into hiding, but it's enough to give pause to thought, and change the way I think and act a little. And who knows, perhaps I'll be a better/wiser/slightly-less-annoying person for it.

...God, that's bleak. Wouldn't it be awful to feel like that all the time? Luckily, I have a tiiiny touch of DID. I LOVE my new power! Have you ever flown a broomstick? It's awesome. I found

one in the costume shop over the road from me. It's a bit rickety looking but it serves. I practised levitating it in my room all last week (well, whenever I wasn't working or moping about the "danger" I was putting everyone in with my newfound abilities...miserable cow). Then I tried sitting on it. After the first few topples off, I tried sitting on it over my bed. The bruises are fading now. I couldn't perfect the traditional method of sitting on it (took too much work in my thighs and so much concentration I unwittingly nudded the ceiling) but I have managed side-straddle! Go me! So once I found I could stay on it for more than thirty seconds I figured I was good enough to try it outside. For the first time since moving in almost eleven months ago I went into the little patch of garden behind our building. There I levitated the broom (I still can't resist the temptation to say "up!" or "hover" when I do that...too much Harry Potter and Worst Witch), and sat on it. Once I had my balance I raised the broom upwards, sticking close to the back wall of my building. It was quite windy and it was taking quite a lot of effort to keep from falling off. I eventually steadied it and grinning, looked up to see where I was. My flat mate was staring at me through her bedroom window, mouth open, a cup of tea half way to her lips. I stopped grinning, gave an apologetic smile and a small shrug, then gently lowered the broom back to the ground.

The next morning I felt I could achieve anything. I packed my things, pulled my bag onto my back and went out into the garden with my broomstick. Usually I would dress lightly for such a sunny day (the walk to KB gets quite warm even when it's snowing), but today I felt it prudent to wrap up warm. Hence I was wearing jeans, long thick socks and two tops over which I had pulled my black EUBDS hoodie. I then levitated the broom (using "hover", because it meant I didn't first have to lie it on the floor), mounted it, then (with, I hate to admit it, an "up, up and away!") rose up, this time above the buildings. I didn't care who saw me, to be honest. This was too good an opportunity to miss. If Hannah could fly into work, so could I. I floated up to about fifty feet then headed in the KB direction, humming the Worst Witch theme tune to myself. As I drifted over the church on Mayfield road I started feeling more adventurous and picked up speed. And then picked up more speed, so that now I was zooming towards Darwin tower at a rate of knots. (I still don't know why people still use that phrase). As I neared the tower I caught a glimpse of the Honours room. John was already at his computer and behind him, Hannah was halfway between finch and human. I swerved upwards and over the tower, then looped back around and down to the car park on the Rutherford side of the building. I hailed Sarah good morning and she turned away from her bike to watch me ease down onto the ground and slide off the broom. She congratulated me on my new mode of travel and together we entered Darwin.

See...I told you it was awesome.

The Fool

The Routine

I am going to be late, damn. The lift's somewhere else in the building, taking its time to descend to where I'm waiting, impatiently pacing around in front of the double pairs of doors. I've texted ahead at least, the others know I'm going to be late, but still. Damn lift. What would have been a minute of delay now stretches on, ticking second by second, I should have taken the stairs when I first arrived. Maybe there's something in that, Marta would be pleased at least. Finally, the doors open and I'm inside the little metal box, ascending to the 'office'. I roll my shoulders and stretch, joints popping comfortably, I'm glad I didn't lose that, one of a few things I can't regenerate, like my eyes. Damn eyes.

The lift doors open in front of me and I'm already broadcasting, thinking as loudly as I can, repeating a single word over and over again as I walk towards the 'office'. It's good for us all to test & practice our powers, this helps Sarah. I hear the response as I reach the threshold of the Honours room, she's getting better. Good. I greet the others in a more conventional fashion, and start focusing my thoughts, it's one thing to help train your telepath, it's another to give her free reign inside your head. I'm sure we all have things we'd rather not have her see, though I bet she's got some and getting more. One day we might need to do something about that. Worth remembering and keeping an eye on. My view out over the city is already starting to fade, the clouds had been coalescing as I was walking in and now piece by piece Edinburgh is falling behind a curtain of mist. My 'Launch Point' is already gone, I wonder if they could have seen me, possibly, another thing worth remembering. Lots to do and lots to remember. The incubation's better have worked last night or we're going to be back at stage one, again. I'm in charge of the red light sensor parts and they just aren't working, I think we're all getting close to paranoid that there's some kind of conspiracy there, well certain people may already be paranoid and getting worse fast. This is the unfortunate truth of biology, transformations fail far too often, let alone the more complicated procedures, but there's logic in that too, cells & genomes are hardy little buggers and we're probably better for it.

"Accio biscuits!"

A packet of custard creams drifts lazily past to both giggles and facepalms from the others, and I grasp the packet, extricating one before letting Maria pass them on. I'm glad she's practicing, catching things is more difficult, requires precise timing, especially if she's having to feel for the falling object. It's nice that I don't need to encourage everyone to practice, then again with some of us it's not surprising. I'm waiting again, seems to be the default situation at the moment, waiting for transformants, incubations, responses from other teams, a comment to get me killed, I like that. It amuses me that due to my power peoples default reaction is to cause grievous bodily harm where before a look or retort would do. I'm not complaining mind, it fits perfectly with my desire to train & improve my power and my pain tolerance is increasing exponentially, but it does bespeak of the change that's come over us all. There's probably a

moral in there somewhere, something suitably deep & indicative of the human condition, there's also probably something amusing and Freudian too but that's a different kettle of fish entirely....woof. I pause for a moment, waiting, ears pricked, no my mental loop must be keeping Sarah out, or she's ignoring me, otherwise I'm sure she would have responded and someone would have come up with a suitably interesting & violent way to show me how it's not funny. I disagree, Flashheart's always funny, like Blackadder in general to be honest. Perhaps in a few years I'll be able to grow a proper moustache, it would be amusing to sport something along those lines... assuming I age properly now. Hmmmm, I wonder, that would be.... interesting. I chuckle to myself, understating my feelings even in my own head. Gaining a power was one thing, to be able to get back up after falling from a building, being hit by a car, hell being flash irradiated or having my heart telekinetically crushed that's just fantastic, I can truly do anything, well try anything and if it goes wrong then oh well, it hurts, but I come back and then I can try again until I either succeed or it's proved to be impossible. To have the possibility of being able to do that forever... well it's everything I could want. I could have time, all of it, no need to worry about wasting time, I could get another degree, hell I could get three, I could read everything, learn everything, see everything I want to see. Or just sit on a bench for one hour every day for a century and watch the world change. I could do that as well as everything else. Well, we'll see what happens, worst comes to worst and I have a normal human lifespan I'll still be able to do more, and if it's increased in any way then.... fingers crossed, everything to see and all the time in the world to see it. Until the world ends.... that might be more difficult to deal with... hmmmm, well a billion years of madness and solitude after millennia of everything, seems like a fair trade.

The Lemon

If I didn't keep waking up to lonely nightmares of being shunned and ignored casting feelings of doom and gloom over my head, I might be a happier person overall. If I didn't feel such kinship with lyrics like 'my sorrows have been so plentiful, it's difficult to accept the feelings of belonging and joy that friendship brings', it might be easier for me to fit in to life as a whole, and then maybe I wouldn't feel so alone.

I've always considered myself to be a bit of a failure, to be honest. Sure, I've fought my way through self-schooling to the point where I'll soon be starting a PhD at one of the most prestigious Computer Science departments in the world, but that's come at the price of so many other aspects of my life that I feel ridiculously lop-sided. I used to be a more interesting person - I learnt both cello and guitar, sang in the school choir, won an art prize, wrote short stories like nobody's business, was a member of a fledgling drama club, played baseball and football on the school team, and so forth. Okay, so I was never the most socially adept - I could blame that on a host of reasons, mostly myself - but I was a *tad* more outgoing, once.

Now, I'm caught up in a cycle of long days packed with 'things I have to do', day in day out for weeks and months on end. Don't get me wrong, I fully enjoy most of what I'm doing, and the last thing I want to be caught doing is complaining about my lot in life. Still, it does result in a rather one-dimensional character, somebody who 'has' to do everything and thus isn't left with time to do anything he might 'want' to do... a failure, if I may.

Although there's been more than one time when these self-defeating negative emotions have nearly overwhelmed me, I've always tried to use them as stimulation, as an incentive to keep barrelling blindly forward as I try to tear down the walls around myself. Limits and barriers only exist to be torn down, after all, and if I keep stumbling onwards, no matter how pathetically, maybe there's a bit of light at the end of the tunnel. However, at the very back of my mind, I guess that I've always feared that I wouldn't be able to stop even if do manage to stagger into some small patch of illumination; not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't know how. And before I knew it, I'd be flailing around in the dark once more, stubbornly trying to keep going because it's the only thing I know how to do.

Gaining these superpowers has granted me a slightly new perspective on such matters.

It's not that my powers are the most useful in everyday life... they're by nature destructive rather than constructive, and thus I fervently hope that the day in which I have to use them in earnest never comes. But it's difficult not to be infected by the enthusiasm with which the others are applying themselves to exploring their new abilities, and small as they are, there are some ways in which I can make myself useful now. For example, by keeping tea warm no matter how long after it has left the kettle, which pleases Maria, Richard, and Hannah no end. The flip side of the coin, of course, is that we're all legitimate pawns to each other's abilities now as well. Sarah's telepathy is perhaps the one that we have to look out for the most, and although I'd like to trust that she won't spill the beans on everybody's innermost secrets, I doubt not that some of what she's seen has scarred her already. Matt's prankster spirit has been given full rein by his recently acquired powers, and many are the times now that we've all been caught up in his distorted realities before noticing the elusive Lady in Red that gives them away. Lu and Hannah have each found new ways of travelling to work in the morning, which means they usually arrive even quicker than usual (and thus are beginning to dominate the unofficial competition in who arrives first each morning, much to my own dismay), and even Will isn't as late as usual nowadays, given that all he has to do is quite literally will himself into the lab. Richard's sense of the dramatic, or rather his shameless quoting of 'Flashheart', has resulted in repeated cases of grievous bodily harm being enacted upon his person... and heavens help the poor person who deliberately provokes Maria - or even more dangerously, Marta - nowadays, for they are not reluctant to demonstrate the full breadth of their newfound strength.

All in all, a place that I thought could become no livelier has indeed evolved thus so.

Ultimately, I suppose, there's no harm in developing my powers along with the others. Who knows... perhaps, in a dozen years or so, I might even actually be able to have confidence in it. At the very least, it'll help to focus and hone my concentration and control, which may or may not have results in other areas of my life. The risk exists that we might abuse our abilities or drown in our power and greed, but I've always been a firm believer that it's not the knowledge

itself that is the danger, but the manner in which we use it. In which case, hopefully, I'll be able to keep a cool head in the midst of this all.

... well, relatively speaking, of course. The sensation of creating flame from nothingness is mildly intoxicating, to say the least. I said before that my ability is rather useless in everyday life, but only now am I beginning to realise just how much I could do with it, if I really was of the mindset to. Maybe I should be thankful that such an ability came to me, as opposed to somebody of a more... impulsive... mindset.

I promise not to abuse this power. I swear.

The Artist

The Investigator

The Ghost

I chain my bike up and ready myself to climb yet another munro. As I climb I listen to everyone's thoughts in the office... *morning Maria, morning Lu, MORNING MARTA!!* I then hear the chilling sounds of *'je ne regrette rien'* echo through the stairwell. Damn. John's getting too good for me. Maybe I should ask him to think of a different song.. perhaps something with a little more bounce for the morning. Any suggestions?

The Mercenary

Donal is just far too awesome to have any of this written for him. We apologise... not really.

The Beacon

"There's a weird fire out in the Firth."

"What is it, an oil refinery?"

"Yeah, probably."

The Focus

Never reveal the full extent of your plans to your enemy, even if he's at your mercy and you're about to deal the final blow. Always, always, have something up your sleeve. It's a mantra that I learned early in my childhood and has stuck with me since, whether it be during my chess-playing days, or when I became M:TG Edinburgh city champion, or even within the odd strategy game that I sometimes find time to indulge in.

It seems like there's more to my power than I first thought.

It's somewhat difficult to explain. But I suppose it makes sense in the larger context of things. After all, supposedly, fire or heat is simply the result of increasing the speed of individual atoms. Ice or cold comes from slowing down atoms, and lightning comes from rubbing atoms together. In which case, what if my ability isn't simply pyrokinesis, but rather control over the more basic physics that would govern such a result? Theoretically, it's possible then that...

There's only one way to find out. And that's to try.

I've scrounged three pieces of metal from Tesco, a long pole that's broken off one of the roll-cages and two brackets from discarded shelving. They lie in front of me now, innocent pawns in the hazardous game that I'm now about to play. I've taken greater precautions this time - only a fool doesn't learn from his mistakes, after all - but there's no telling just how disastrous this could possibly end up.

If it's one thing that has been impressed upon me in the last few days, it's that some of our powers have the capacity for rather more danger than I'd care to contemplate. To err on the side of caution would be wise, to say the least.

Taking a deep breath, I sit down on my knees in front of the pieces of metal. As I concentrate, the long bar glows red hot; then, just as quickly, the glow is gone. Beads of sweat trickling down my brow, I dare not relax for even a moment as I repeat a quick mantra to myself.

Focus... and control...

This is going to be a long, long night.

The Blaze

"Is that smoke... yeah it is, something's on fire at the bottom of the crags!" Richard exclaimed, as he rose to his feet and pointed out of the window.

"Cool!"

"No, Marta, it's not cool."

"Has that just started since I came in?" asked Maria, staring, fixated, out of the window.

"Hang on... It's the Crag! You can see the flames!"

"Somebody should get that man in white off the Crag."

"What the hell is he doing there? Move, you idiot!"

"He's taking fucking photos!"

"Did you honestly just see his camera flash from here! Bloody hell, you had powers to begin with!"

"It's spreading, it's spreading up along the crags."

"It's OK, it can't get all the way along, there's a gap in the heather."

"It's a really orange flame - it looks like accelerants."

"Someone actually set the crags on fire?!"

"I doubt it... can we keep an eye on this while go back to the lab?"

"Yeah, of course we will."

Half an hour later...

"It seems to be dying out."

"Yeah, they got it under control quite quickly."

"It's really quite blackened, isn't it?"

"That was quite random and a little bit scary. Too much excitement for one day."

"I wonder if we'll ever find out what caused it..."

The Afternoon of the Thunderstorm

"Did I just see lighting?" Hannah leapt up!

Everyone waited, with baited breath, listening hard.

"That was thunder! So yes!" said Maria excitedly.

Everyone crowded around the windows, looking towards the clouds behind Arthur's Seat.

"So, if I went to the top of Arthur's Seat, and held a long metal pole in the air..." John left his sentence hanging,.

"Then we wouldn't have a modeler, so don't you fucking dare!" retorted Maria, much to every one's amusement.

"Ooh, I love thunderstorms!" cried Hannah and Maria in unison. John turned to them with a look of concern in his eyes and shook his head.

"Oh no, I left my window open," he said, leaving confusion over whether his look of concern was towards Hannah and Maria's love of thunderstorms or the open window.

"The real question," Maria carried on, ignoring this, "is which way the clouds are moving. Are they coming in from sea or going out to sea?"

"Well, I think the wind might have changed." remarked John, confusing both girls

"Which way are the planes taking off?" asked Hannah. Maria looked at her, still confused.

"Well, airplanes always take off into the wind. So, if they are taking off to the east, then the clouds are moving in. If they are taking off to the west, then the clouds are heading out to sea."

John nodded in agreement.

The three of them turned to the window again, but no planes were in sight. Neither was any more lightning, so they sat down.

After a minute or two of silence, Maria suddenly shot backwards from her desk, with a shout!

As everyone turned to look at her, she cried, "The window is leaking!"

It was true. By this point, the rain was falling horizontally at an alarming speed, and the ancient windows in the Honours room no longer served as a protection from the elements. Hannah ran for paper towels as John attempted to catch the rain drops in a mug, but to no avail. Maria set off to alert the people who could get it sorted out.

By the time she had returned, the rain had almost stopped, and within minutes, the sun reappeared, and blue sky could be seen once more. So much for the afternoon thunderstorm...

The Battle of Arthur's Seat

"Fuckin' stop it!"

"Make me."

"Aaaargh!"

The tension in the Honours room was mounting now, and certain people's powers were itching to be exercised. Most frequently on Richard. In the last three hours he had been teleported into mid air above JCMB, thrown mysteriously out of the window, mauled by an irritated xenomorph in a red dress and been killed out of mercy after a rapid development of skin cancer from a homemade tan caused him incredible pain. Now shots were being aimed at others in the room, out of frustration and boredom and in retaliation to insults, comments and the throwing of Gilbert at the back of heads. Some were trying to calm the atmosphere to prevent things getting out of hand, but many had developed resistance to Sarah's ability to enter the mind, and John's attempts to raise the temperature to a level where the mind no longer functions were going unheeded. In fact, it seemed to be making things worse.

The shout echoed through the hallways of the 8th floor.

"Aah! Kiwi!!"

"You said you were too hot."

"You're so childish! You just emptied a bottle of water over my head."

"Are you sure I did?"

"Be careful or I give you that fake sun tan, and you won't like it."

"Nah, you won't."

Marta appealed for help. "Maria, can you throw something at him?"

Maria, feeling that her loyalties lay a little closer to Marta than to Matt, and without even turning from her computer, flicked her fingers and sent several dispensable items in Matt's general direction. He ducked.

"Missed me- ow!"

A final biscuit flew up under the table and hit him square between the eyes. Marta turned away and examined her sopping wet clothes.

"John, could you help me dry?"

"Of course."

"See, John is a gentleman, he's not childish like *some* people."

The water evaporated slowly as Marta shot further evil looks across the room and the others regained their composure. Well...most of the others.

"Hannah, stop laughing, it's serious."

"Sorry..."

The room did calm a little. Will was looking out at Arthur's Seat and frowning.

"Hey Frenchie, was' wrong?" Marta asked.

"Nah - I was wondering if I could teleport all the way to the top Arthur's Seat," Will pondered, rubbing his chin.

"Doesn't take much to distract you, does it?" asked Hannah.

"Go for it," said Maria, still without taking her eyes off her computer screen.

"Yeah, I might do." Will manoeuvred himself into the position which he, hilariously, had to take in order to activate his power. The others watched expectantly, eyes flickering between him and the distant peak.

"Here goes." He vanished. Everyone looked out of the window.

"Can't see 'im," said John, leaning over the desk and squinting out of the window.

"Shall I fly over and see if he made it?" Hannah was desperate to fly again.

"No need - there he is," Maria laughed. A tiny speck on the Western side of the peak waved.

A second later, Will reappeared on the sofa, grinning.

"That was fun. Who else wants a go?"

"Me, I do!" cried Marta, her hand shooting into the air.

"Come on then."

"Ooh," said Marta, settling next to Will on the sofa.

"Come back for me," Maria shouted as they both disappeared.

"Well if they're both going, I'm definitely flying over there," said Hannah. As Will reappeared, Hannah's shape began changing; her skin darkened, and the contours of her body merged into one another.

"Who else is coming?" asked Will. Maria immediately dived across the room and again, Will and his passenger vanished.

"You've got to wonder what makes them trust him," said Richard.

By now Hannah's form was almost completely unrecognisable. Her arms had disappeared, and wings had sprouted from her shoulder blades. Her face had sharpened and eyes had moved to the sides of her head. Clothes had become feathers and the feet, small talons. In addition to this she was also half a foot tall.

Will was once again on the sofa.

"Marta's trying to get Maria to run up to the top from the flat bit," he said. "It's not going very well."

They laughed, all apart from Hannah, who took a couple of hops along the carpet before flapping her wings and taking off. She circled the room a couple of times before reaching the only working window. Which was shut. She tapped against it a few times before turning back to the rest of the room. The others just stared at her, most of them grinning, evilly. She flapped desperately and erratically, and one could imagine that even beneath the beak and feathers and the lack of eyelids, that the eyes were widened and she was silently holding in hysterical laughter. Eventually, Richard climbed onto the desk and opened the window for her, and they all watched the little swallow flutter away towards the Seat.

"Err - it's actually quite nice up there," said Will, "We should just pick up the work and I'll take everyone else."

"Sure," Richard shrugged, "We've got no lab work to do, and we can always teleport straight back if it starts raining."

"Cool, shall we go then." Will wandered back to the sofa.

"I'll just run there," said Lu, "I'll get there before you anyway."

The others laughed.

"Nah, I'll be waiting there and just be like 'Arh', an', he he...no." said Will, rubbing his hands with that scary manic look on his face. "Go on, get going, we'll see you there."

"Okay, see you in a bit." Lu left the room.

"Just be careful on the stairs!" John shouted after him.

"Ready, John?" asked Will.

"Mmmmm..." John hesitated, clearly still unsure about the adeptness of their powers. But then, the girls seemed to be fine. "Okay, then." He joined Will on the couch. They vanished. A second later, Will was back. One by one, Sarah, Matt and Richard were each teleported over to the others.

A few seconds of silence in the honours room. Sahreena, one of the PhD students entered the room and began filling a bottle from the tap. Behind her, Will appeared on the sofa once more. He quietly picked Kenny and Gilbert up off the table, and teleported away once more. Sahreena looked around, confused, then turned off the tap and left the room.

...On Arthur's Seat...

"Awesome!" Richard exclaimed, upon his arrival.

"It is, isn't it!?" shouted Maria over the roar of the wind from the top of the peak.

"Is that Hannah?" asked John, pointing to a small shape, struggling against the wind.

"Yes," Maria answered, "hang on."

Maria raised her hand towards the swallow, and suddenly the small bird's flight path became less erratic, and it drifted down into her outstretched palms. Maria, placed Hannah on the ground and stepped back. Half a minute later, Hannah stood before them looking slightly windswept and relieved.

"Thank you, see, you love me really!" she said.

"Uh-huh."

An orange blur flew past and an instant later, Lu appeared next to Hannah.

"Ha! Beat you!" shouted Will.

Lu shrugs.

"We need Gilbert!" cried Marta, across the peak.

"And Kenny!" added Maria.

They all looked at Will, who gave an exasperated sigh and vanished again.

A few seconds later, he was back, with Gilbert, who he threw to Marta, and Kenny who-

"What the fuck happened to his leg!?!?" Maria yelled at Will.

"Err..." Will looked down at the Xenomorph, who was missing a significant portion of his left leg.

"I think I must not have been concentrating." He looked up into a less than pleased face. "I'm sorry."

"Maria, keep calm..."

"You...killed...KENNY!!!" A surge of kinetic energy flew outwards from Maria, knocking everyone off their feet.

Lu, Hannah and Will flew a short way before hitting the ground or rocks, which stopped them from rolling off the crags. Matt, Sarah and John were knocked off their feet by the shock wave. Marta was thrown off the side off the peak towards the rocks below. Richard dived forward to catch her. He landed, waited for second, slightly confused, then looked up at Lu, stood a few metres away, holding Marta.

"You okay?" he asked as Richard picked himself up, trying to act as though he meant to do that. The others all scrambled up as further minor pulses of energy indicated Maria was struggling to get a hold on herself.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked, gripping the rocks for support.

"Yeah, no thanks to you," Hannah snapped.

"I'm sorry, I don't know how that happened, I didn't even know I could do that."

"Well, clearly - ," Hannah started.

"Yeah, I know, clearly I can," Maria finished.

"Which means we probably all have that much power in us. Which is kind of scary," added John. Glancing around Maria continued, "Marta, are you okay? I'm really really sorry."

"It's fine," Marta smiled. "Lu caught me, it was very heroic."

Lu said nothing, putting Marta down next to Sarah.

"Seriously, though, what the fuck?" Will directed this at Maria.

"I genuinely don't know," she answered, "I just -"

She was cut off by a loud "OW!" A small, but from the look of it, very sharp, rock had just hit the back of Richard's head. He whipped around. There was no one there. All eyes turned to Maria again.

"That definitely wasn't me."

"How can you be sure after what just happened?" asked Hannah.

A second rock flew towards them and bounced off a rock near Sarah, who jumped backwards.

"Seriously, stop it," she snapped.

"It's not -"

More cracks as more rocks soared through the air, and everyone covered their heads and ran for the slightly more protected areas of the peak.

"Maria!" shouted Hannah.

"For the last fucking time, it isn't me!" Maria yelled back.

"Well who else could -?" John stopped, looking out over the flattened grassy surface below them. There was a woman, stood alone, watching them. She was wearing a red dress. They all turned and looked around at where, they could have sworn, Matt had been crouching only seconds before.

"Alright, game over!"

The cascade of rocks ceased and they all ventured out from their hiding places. Matt stood not too far away, watching them emerge. Richard looked at him in confusion, and shrugging said

"Why?"

Matt shrugged back. "Couldn't control myself," he said, sneering pointedly at Maria.

She didn't answer.

"That wasn't funny, Kiwi," Marta scolded, pouting.

"Was impressive though," said Sarah.

"Don't encourage him," Hannah told her.

"We really shouldn't be misusing our powers..." John attempted to bring some morality to the group.

"What," said Matt, "like this?"

A World War II Spitfire appeared above them and swept down, skimming over their heads forcing them all to dive to the ground, making a deafening noise before disappearing again.

"Yes," answered John, "that is a perfect example of how *not* to use our powers!"

"How about this one?" chuckled Matt

A large bucket of water appeared above Marta's head.

"Pfft." Marta shrugged and smiled. "Doesn't matter, it's not real, it can't really -"

SPLASH.

Marta stood, shocked and dripping from head to toe. The others were torn between exasperation, pity and laughter. And when I say torn...

"Stop laughing guys!" Marta protested. "You've done it this time Kiwi."

She raised her hand towards Matt. To the naked eye nothing happened, but within seconds his skin began to turn slightly more towards the orange persuasion.

"Marta, no! Remember what it did to Richard!"

She stopped, rather reluctantly. Then smiled again, saying "Oh well, I think he looks better in that shade anyway."

"Yeah, it's pity then," Matt's voice said from behind Marta, "that that's not me."

The orange Matt disappeared, and Marta turned to give Matt a shove. He staggered backwards, still grinning. Will laughed and called, "Come on, let's play." He held Gilbert up and aimed towards Sarah. Sarah caught him as they all spread out, ready for Gilbert should he come their way. Sarah threw to Lu, who passed it on to John, then to Hannah, who dropped him and had to scramble to pick him up. She then turned to Maria, who was shaking her head in mock disappointment and Hannah threw, wide eyed and laughing away her paranoia. Maria had to jump to catch Gilbert and smirked at Hannah before throwing back to Will. Will threw to Marta, who tried to catch it but was blocked by Matt. A struggle broke out between the two, as the others, used to this by now, waited patiently. Marta's frequent attempts to grab Matt around the middle and pull him down so that she could reach Gilbert, who was currently held out of her reach.

"Arrgh," she cried. "I'll undress you if you don't give it to me!"

The others all burst into laughter, and even Richard couldn't catch his breath to say "woof", as Matt paused for a second to confirm what he had just heard. Then he threw Gilbert back to Will. He threw him high. Too high. And too far... Nobody moved. Nobody could move. They all stood, transfixed with horror as Gilbert soared beyond the peak and down the steep face of the Seat, out of sight.

"GILBEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRT!!"

Eight pairs of eyes turned to Matt, several angry, a couple almost tearful, and all seeming to say one thing. *Kill Matt.*

"You lost Gilbert! How could you!?" cried Hannah.

"Go and get him," demanded Maria, "go and get him, right now!"

"No," Matt said, simply.

Maria flicked her arm upwards at him and a fist-sized chunk of dirt from the grass below flew towards the designer. He ducked.

"Ow!"

"Oops," Maria squeaked. "Sorry John!"

In a rare moment of retaliation, a ball of flame came flying back at her. She deflected it and it veered off towards Will, who teleported out of its way, allowing it to hit Richard. There was a moment's pause. Then his clothes burst into flame. Now used to enduring the pain that came with working with this group, Richard merely stared, clearly unimpressed, at Maria.

"Umm...sorry?" she ventured.

He continued to stare shaking his head, as John, feeling slightly guilty, extinguished the flames and cooled the burns.

Matt, gleeful at the trouble he was causing, laughed, and Marta flicked him, leaving a small burn on his arm. He examined his arm momentarily then a football plummeted from nowhere onto Marta's head. Slightly dazed, she began firing more flicks of energy at Matt, some of which missed, leaving scorches in the grass...and other things.

"Oi! I like this skirt!"

Maria fired a pulse of energy towards Marta, who stumbled backwards, just in time to be caught once again by Lu. Will, who had appeared not far from Hannah, was taking advantage of the distraction to sneak up on her.

"Aaaah!" Hannah ran forwards, turning to see who had tickled her. "Will!"

He laughed, but did not advance. With Marta now firing energy flicks at Maria, Matt had noticed the new development, and was creeping up on Hannah from the other side.

"Watch it, Hannah!" John, still tending to Richard's wounds, was keeping one eye on what was rapidly turning into a battle.

She turned, and seeing the look in Matt's eyes, immediately began transforming. He stopped, long enough to get knocked by a stray pulse of kinetic energy. He turned back to the Marta-Maria fight and quickly thought of a way to mess with both sides at the same time. Maria, just about to send another pulse wave in Marta's direction, stopped. Marta did the same. To the onlookers, it seemed strange that they should both stop.

"Where've you gone?"

"Maria, where are you, did Will teleport you away?"

Matt giggled.

"Can they not see each other?" asked a strange, inhuman voice.

Matt turned to see a half Hannah-half lioness staring at the two confused girls. Matt, raised an eyebrow, shook his head, and turned back to his victims, just in time to be blinded. A bright light emanating from Marta broke his focus and freed the two of them from his perception filter.

"Oh," Marta smiled, "there you are."

"Yep," replied Maria, "and I'll be with you in a second, I just have to do something."

She turned and fired a strong pulse at Matt, who once again ducked out of the way so that, just as his wounds were cleared, Richard was sent flying off the edge of the Seat.

"Sorry!" yelled Maria.

"I hate you!" he shouted back.

There was a distant crunch.

"You alright?" John called over the edge.

"I'm fine. Carry on."

They all turned to each other, gave various shrugs, nods and grins, then dived once more into action. Hannah, now fully lioness, launched herself towards Will, who teleported away. Hannah, landed, skidded, turned and searched once again for her prey, who was now sat on top of the peak, and began a strange chase over the whole of Arthur's Seat.

Not wanting to miss again, Maria, instead of firing at Matt, lifted him 15 feet into the air.

"Alright," he said, trying to keep calm and almost (almost) succeeding, "now what?"

She smiled, ever so slightly. He dropped suddenly, but stopped literally inches above the ground.

"Yeah, still not that impressed."

She raised her arm to take him higher again, but mid flight he disappeared.

"Nice try," she called, "but you can't manipulate my powers."

"No, but, er, Lu can get around them."

She turned in disbelief to see Lu and Matt, both stood grinning at her. Lu must have literally snatched Matt out of mid-air without her noticing. She had to admit she was impressed. With Lu, obviously.

Her shock didn't last for long. Marta had started firing indiscriminately at the three of them. Maria, unable to deflect the light emissions Marta created had to duck and dive all over the place, while Lu ran from rock to rock.

Sarah and John stood at the edge of the fray, one unable to intervene without invasion of privacy, the other unwilling to cause more damage. Behind them, faint scramblings indicated that Richard was almost at the top.

With another wave of concentration, risking several burns and shoves, Matt stopped and altered the world again.

"Okay, don't you think that's a bit much?" asked Maria.

"Ah, maybe," answered Matt unconvincingly.

The wrecking ball swung around, over the heads of Marta, Lu and Maria. Hannah and Will stopped their crazed chase to watch it. As John and Sarah dived aside, Richard pulled himself back up over the edge and... THWACK.

"Oops. Hehe, sorry Richard."

The focus now turned to Matt and his new toy as Sarah and John climbed back onto their feet.

"Guys guys guys!!"

No one listened, as they dodged, ducked and fired every which way.

"You know," said John, pointedly, "you could put a stop to this without having to talk to them."

Sarah looked slightly apprehensive.

"I know," she answered, "but I don't like the idea of interfering with people's thoughts and actions. I'm not even sure I can."

"In this case it may be for their own good," John exclaimed as they both ducked again. "And," he added as they lay, flat on their stomachs while the wrecking ball zoomed overhead with a screaming Marta clinging on for dear life, "look at what the others can do. Your power will get stronger too."

Sarah looked over at the ongoing battle. The combined powers of Marta, Maria, Lu, Will and Hannah were having no effect on the mechanical monster with no driver, and since Matt had become temporarily invisible to those present, there was no way of convincing him to help either. Hannah was morphing again, this time into something much larger. Sarah didn't recognise the shape of the animal, but if she had to describe it she would say it looked like a fifteen-foot gorilla with an elongated head, what appeared to be a reptilian tail and nine-inch, deadly sharp claws on each hand. It was almost like...

"Is she trying to turn into a xenomorph?" John asked.

"I think she might be," Sarah answered.

Hannah gave a terrible cry, which carried across the city. Down in new town the shoppers and Fringe-goers looked upwards in surprise and alarm trying to discern the source of the noise. Many of those on North bridge glimpsed the giant on top of the hill and shouted and screamed. Her body, rejecting the form which she was trying to impose on herself, was causing Hannah incredible pain. Sarah rallied. Hannah's attempts to return to her original state were failing as a

new and animalistic mind took over. She made swipes at the wrecking ball and rocked violently, forcing Will and Lu to quickly move Marta and Maria out of the way. Their powers still ineffective against the annoyingly corporeal piece of imaginary machinery, neither of the girls could prevent it from swinging right back at Hannah and knocking her sideways, making her scream once more. She turned, enraged, no longer herself, on the four stood near her. The wrecking ball vanished and all efforts were focused on calming Hannah down. Even John rushed forward, not knowing what he could do to help, but feeling that being closer must surely be a start. Maria held up both hands, restraining Hannah with her mind, whilst Marta and John stood by, ready to act if she failed.

"Hannah!" Maria was shouting, trying to reach her friend's mind buried deep inside this monstrous creature. "Hannah, can you hear me!? Please, calm down!"

Her words didn't seem to be getting through and her strength was waning as she continued to hold Hannah back from the others. Richard ran towards them, still gashed and bloody, trying to shout, but his advice or questions were drowned out by an even more ominous sound than the crying monster. A police chopper was approaching from the North, almost at the Craggs and moving at high speed.

"Matt, hide us!" shouted John.

He gave an acknowledging nod.

Maria was given a respite as Hannah, momentarily distracted by the circling helicopter, lowered her arms. The chopper hovered for a while then, apparently having seen nothing, moved away again, back towards the Firth. Hannah's attention returned in full to Maria, who was forced backwards as Hannah attempted to launch herself at her.

"Somebody help her!" Maria cried, desperately clinging to the last of her strength.

"We can't do anything without hurting her or making her even more angry!" Richard yelled back.

"Well, we can't just - "

Maria was cut off. Hannah had gained control of her tail. It whipped around, powerful and muscular, taking all of them by surprise, knocking even Lu and Will off their feet. Hannah whirled, now completely free, angrier than ever, and found her captor, attempting to scramble back to her feet. Before Maria could stand, Hannah pinned her down with one clawed hand and raised the other.

"Help would be nice!"

Everyone froze. Hannah's roars ceased, Maria remained in her grasp but no longer struggling. The others were all fixed to the spot with expressions of fear or determination. It would have been comical if it had not been so eerie. Lu was mid-run, on his way to Maria, whilst Will was already in his compulsory teleporting position. John, Matt and Marta were looking helplessly on, not knowing how to help without risking the life of either girl. Richard was at Hannah's feet, staring up at the unrecognisable eyes and mouth open in a silent plea. Not even eyes moved. A short distance away, Sarah concentrated. Slowly, Hannah released Maria, and began changing back into her normal self. As she returned to status quo, the others relaxed, most of them collapsing to the ground, gasping for breath, their lungs having been stopped as well as the rest of them.

"Wow," Sarah opened her eyes. "That was weird." She looked down at the rest of the iGEM team, still gasping for breath on the ground. "Are you guys OK?"

They all shot meaningful dirty looks. Hannah helped Maria to her feet.

"Are you alright? I'm really sorry, I couldn't help it, it was like having someone else control your body and I couldn't..." Her eyes filled with tears as she became too high pitched to hear again. Maria shook her head and hugged her.

"I'm fine, just a little shell-shocked. Promise you won't try to turn into a xenomorph again."

Hannah laughed into her shoulder.

"Everyone else alright?" asked John.

Everyone was.

"That was bloody impressive," Richard said to Sarah, "and a little scary, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I know, it was really weird, I just wanted you all to stop fighting and you did."

"Did you want to stop us all breathing as well?" asked Will.

"No," Sarah replied, regretfully, "I'm really sorry about that."

"Well, now you all know how it feels to have the life sucked from you," Richard pointed out, rather bitterly.

They all looked at him.

"And your point is...?"

"Well, I thought maybe you would stop, you know - right, yeah, didn't think so."

He walked away, burning with a pretty orange flame, looked down the side of the hill, sighed, then jump and rolled, beating out the flames as he went.

"So," said Donal, "what was all that about?"

"Oh, Matt threw Gilbert off the..." Maria paused for a second, looking confused. Then she shook her head and continued. "...off the top of the seat, so we had to make him pay, then Marta started attacking me with -"

"I was not attacking you, you attacked me first. Hannah saw, you tell them!"

"What? No, I can't remember much before the...thing."

"Yeah, so we were fighting, then Matt made a wrecking ball, then Hannah turned into a monster and then Sarah nearly killed us all."

"Yeah, I saw that bit," Donal turned to Sarah, "that was quite good."

"Didn't it affect you?" John asked.

"No," answered Donal, shrugging.

"Oh. Ok..."

"Anyway," said Donal, "have you guys seen the missiles?"

"Missiles?"

The Attack on Edinburgh

As the concussion of the blasts subsided we heard it, a great and unnatural flapping, horrendous membranous wings sweeping the smoke & air beneath it in great gusts, hidden from view, and then a screech. It pulled at the edges of our minds, tearing at our perceptions, our ears trying desperately to shut down, to blot out that terrible cry. Then, thankfully it ended, perhaps to draw breath, to fuel its hideous corpulent mass, or perhaps to relay commands to the things below. We reeled, gasping, regaining our composure, the terrible realisation dawning that our city, our home was under attack by things not human.

Our decision was made before we even needed to speak, no need for conference, our petty disputes were put aside in the face of a common enemy. Whatever had come to Edinburgh would not find it undefended any longer.

We moved quickly, trying to find a view from our vantage, looking for breaks in the smoke. Richard joined us at the Northern side of the peak, still singed but non-the-less alive. We needed to see the thing, take stock of the situation, gain an idea of our foe.

"Here." Lu's voice rang out, he stood on the edge of the summit, pointing out across the city. We joined him peering through the clouds, thinner here, and saw them. Hundreds of men - or things like men - pouring out of the surf, climbing out of strange craft that looked almost alive, moving in strange inhuman ways, marching through the streets.

"Oh my God." An exclamation echoed silently by us all.

The thing in the air made its presence known again, fists and jaws clenched in pain, we saw it, God I wish we hadn't seen it, not then, perhaps when we were ready, but not then, tired from our own battle, with our first sighting of the destruction of our city, the things that now stalked its streets. Our decision wavered for a moment, the thought of just running, leaving it all behind, escape, must have flashed through all of our heads, but as that thing bore down on us for the first time, we held our ground, looking left and right and seeing the others all around us, we held.

Its head was the first thing to emerge from the smoke, a great vermine jaw, snarled, twisted teeth, mismatched tusk-like canines with rows of needle incisors and a pair of curling bone horns twisting up from beneath the fevered miasma of its exhalation. Rows of eyes pock-marked the rising bone and sickly pale flesh of its skull, each twisting obscenely in their sockets, individually picking us out from where we stood atop Arthur's Seat. Then a great movement from the obscured body, a shake of its wings and the smoke was brushed away curling into vortices from the power of the down-stroke revealing its full blasphemous form to our terrified eyes. Two pairs of veined, leathery wings, strange dark feathers sprouting from the clawed protrusions at intervals along their lengths, held the beast aloft with an ease that belied its size. Its body sagged in places, hanging as that of an obese man, but as it shifted in the air the ripples of movement through its body removed any idea that they were not muscle. Bone shards rose like barbs across its back, a line of such thorns progressed over its spine, each tearing at the sky, and behind it all a long sinuous, scaled tail. Small, backward pointing, translucent spines protruded from tufts of fur along its length and at its end a large jagged blade terminating in a wicked hook.

It twisted in the air, wings beating once, before locking, holding their shape as it screamed down towards us, its immense bulk threatening to crush us all, assuming we avoided its jaws. We scattered, some of us leaping in any direction, trusting to our powers or those of others to save us from the fall, others ran, flew, teleported, anything to escape. There was a vicious scraping noise as its tail lacerated the surface of the stone and it shrieked in anger before moving on, leaving us to cower below hidden from its gaze.

"We need to get rid of that thing or we're never going to get down from here!" shouted John to Maria and Sarah who were closest. Donal, Marta and Matt were crouched somewhere on the other side of the rocks, while Lu, Hannah, Will and Richard sheltered in an alcove half way down the craggy side of the seat.

"Can you hold it down!?" Sarah asked Maria.

She shook her head. "Not yet. I'm not strong enough, I need more time to recover from the fight with Hannah. But Hannah might be able to bring it down, damage it a bit, then the rest of us have a better chance."

"Call her," John told Sarah.

Sarah focused, reaching out to the other minds on Arthur's Seat.

Guys, are you alright?

A few *yes's*, slightly louder than they needed to be. Sarah flinched.

Not so loud, please, I'm not deaf.

Well, technically this isn't to do with hearing-

Shut up, Richard! Hannah, are you there?

Yes.

We need you to change, we need something that can take that thing down.

I don't think I can, nothing real is that big, and I can't turn into anything that isn't real.

You can Hannah, Maria thought, it just needs to be something you know or understand better than a xenomorph. You can do it.

Outside of the telepathy field, Richard turned to Hannah.

"You're the only one who can get that thing down here. Once you do, the others can finish it off, but we need you right now."

Hannah looked at him, apprehensive but understanding.

"Okay," she said. *What do I need to become?*

I think you already know, Maria answered.

Hannah looked around at Richard, Donal and Will, then stood up and walked some distance away.

Matt, cover me?

Of course, he 'said', looking her in the eyes attempting to give her a feeling of support, knowing she was terrified.

Invisible to the rest of the world, Hannah stopped, stood, and concentrated. They watched her grow and change shape, limbs becoming strong, muscular, her legs bending the wrong way. Her torso expanded, multiplied to many times its normal size. Clothes dissolved into scaly blue-black skin. From her shoulders and backbone, tremendous new limbs sprouted, stretching to

extreme lengths. Her neck extended, her mouth grew outwards into a long snout and her teeth sharpened, each to a deadly point. Within minutes, the colossal beast beat its wings, whipped its tail and roared at the sky.

The Thing swooping over Edinburgh turned. Seeing a new threat it changed tack and headed back to the seat and the formidable dark shape hunched on top of it. As it passed over the city, more missiles came soaring over from the direction of the Firth, hitting the Pentland hills and the empty areas of Holyrood. Warning shots.

Hannah turned, positioning herself to take off.

Wait, Maria called, I'll come with you. I might be able to help.

John grabbed Maria's ankle before she could run to Hannah.

You'd be better off here trying to divert those missiles, he told her. Marta or Donal should go with Hannah. And Richard as well, since he's dispensable.

Oh, thanks.

Maria climbed back down into the covered area, looking disappointed.

Cool, Hannah, here I come, don't throw me off if I accidentally tickle you, okay? Marta ventured out.

Richard approached Hannah from the other side. Carefully, both climbed up on Hannah's strong back.

Ready? Even Hannah's thoughts sounded mystical.

Yes.

Uh-huh.

The dragon flapped its great wings and pushed off from the top of the hill. Majestically, menacingly, it soared towards the Thing. The Thing, slightly smaller and more agile, swooped suddenly and dived towards the rest of the group still huddled together on the seat.

"RUN!!"

They all ran for cover once more, as Hannah, with her passengers, swerved in midair to follow their quarry. It had spotted Sarah and Maria, trying to get across the flattened grass land to the path down the Western side. As it extended its murderous talons forward, an unseen instinctive force field surrounded the two of them, and it scratched and scabbled to get inside. Its repetitive hits were doing further damage to Maria's energy levels and she held her arms out in an attempt to keep the Thing away from her and Sarah. John, having seen the trouble the two girls had found themselves in, fired a ball of fire at the Thing's flank. It gave a horrid scream and tumbled to the ground, beating and clawing at the burn marks on its side. When it had fought its way back to its feet, the girls had vanished to the relatively safety of the other side of the peak with Lu and Will. Matt and John soon came scrambling down and they all crouched, listening to the fray beyond.

Hannah had mastered the art of maneuvering such a large mass and was bearing down once again on the Thing. It looked up at her and, knowing it wouldn't get off the ground before she reached it, raised its claws, ready to fight. The dragon opened its mouth and bellowed out a streak of flame. The Thing, leaped aside, surprisingly nimble, and scratched Hannah down her left side as she passed. Roaring in anger, she swung her heavily barbed tail around and caught the Thing in the chest, lifting it off the ground and throwing it down the sloping Southern side

of the hill. It rolled and scrambled, catching pieces of turf and pulling itself back up. A reverberating blast, rocked the seat. Another missile had hit the far side of the crags. *Hannah, you need to take the fight away from us! I have to stop those missiles!* Maria's thoughts echoed through the reverberations.

Putting more power behind her wings, Hannah pulled herself skywards. With another piercing cry, the Thing followed. As the sound of beating wings receded, Maria left the cover of the rocks and climbed to the top of the seat.

"Will, I need to get to the Crags. Whatever's firing these missiles is out in the Firth, and I have to be able to see it."

"Okay."

Maria turned to the others.

"Keep an eye on Hannah. If she gets into trouble call her back and throw everything you've got at the Thing."

They all nodded. Will took Maria's arm and they vanished. The remainder turned back to the battle in the air.

"What can we do?" asked Lu.

"Some of us need to stay here in case Hannah needs us," replied John, "but it would be useful to know what's going on down in the city as well."

If they strained their ears they could hear the screams and yells of tourists running through the streets of Edinburgh. All of them fought to hold back a guilty smile.

"I'll go," Lu said. "I'll find out how many there are and how big they are."

"Do you want one of us to come with you?" asked Matt.

"No, you'll only slow me down."

Lu zipped off, running down the hillside. They could follow his progress. He was moving at a slow enough speed so as to conserve energy in case of the need for a quick get away. John turned to the others.

"Right, we need to rally and prepare to kill this thing. If Hannah brings it back we have to be able to get rid of it straight away before it hurts someone."

Matt and Sarah nodded.

"Okay," said Donal, "I'm going to head off then. See you guys later."

"Okay, bye."

"See you later."

"See you."

"So how are we going to do this?" Matt asked.

"Well," said John, "you can hide us, or even distract it with something, although I'm not sure how well the perception alteration thing will work on it. Sarah, you can try to control it - again, not sure it'll work - and keep the lines of communication open. Marta will be coming back with them and between us we can probably incinerate it. Might be a bit risky, but if you lot hide under cover again, then you shouldn't get too hurt."

Matt paused for a moment, slightly taken aback by the speed at which the new plan had been formed.

"Okay, then, let's get to it."

In the air, some way above the meadows, Hannah was struggling to lock sights on her opponent. Too quick for her, it darted around scratching at her sides and limbs, and at the screaming students on her back. She lashed out again and again with her long, barbed tail, finally hitting it, sending it, screeching, downwards. She began climbing higher, trying to draw it further up, so that if she dealt it a semi-lethal blow, the impact with the ground would finish it off.

Clinging to the rough spines on the dragon's back, nails digging into the scaly skin, knees gripping the muscly backbone, crying from fear and excitement, Marta held one eye open, watching the world spin and soar by. Behind her, Richard whooped with excitement. She wanted to kick him, but feared for her life should she relax a single muscle.

"Hannah!" Richard shouted, "try to get above the Thing!"

Why?

"Oh yeah." *I can jump onto it, try and distract it.*

"What are you, crazy!?" Marta shouted.

Possibly.

On your own head be it.

Hannah stopped her ascent and turned back towards the ground. The Thing was already on its way towards them, its smaller wings preventing it from climbing as fast as Hannah had done. Hannah swooped slightly and then, keeping herself level, positioned her body in mid air.

Go now!

Richard swung his left leg over to the right flank and slid down the gap between the fore and hind legs. He plummeted, straight towards the Thing. He collided with its outstretched neck, and grasped at the curled horns to steady himself while razor-sharp spines scratched his legs and torso. The weight of this impact threw the Thing off course and it struggled to keep itself airborne. Above them, yellow eyes with slit pupils followed their progress, ready to intervene. Still holding the two horns, Richard swung himself into a more stable, but more (a lot more) painful position.

Yeah. This was a bad idea.

On top of the crags, Maria looked out over the Firth. There was a glinting white ship, which remained motionless while the city below them screamed in turmoil. As she stared, two white shapes rose upwards from the ship and arched to the South-West. Will and Maria stood, watching them curve ominously through the air, listening to the dull roar of the rockets.

"They're going to hit the city," said Will.

"No they're not."

Maria raised both hands, targeting both missiles at once. This was going to be tricky. With her left hand she tried to slow the missile which looked like it was heading for the central campus area. With her right she concentrated on the one headed for Princes Street Gardens. The second missile began to swerve violently, running off course, swooping upwards and back and side to side, the rocket still powering it on, so that it kept slipping out of her control.

"Careful," warned Will.

"I know."

Holding it steady wasn't working. She caught it, and with as much strength as she could muster without losing her hold on the other missile, she threw it up and away from the city, towards the Pentland hills. Out of her reach now, she watched it in anticipation as it soared over Edinburgh.

"Please don't hit the observatory, please don't hit the observatory, please don't hit the observatory."

Its downward curve becoming more prominent, it glided down, almost beyond the horizon. It landed, with a blast still very audible, about half a kilometre from the dry ski slope in the distance.

"Nice," said Will appreciatively, but Maria's attention was back on the first missile. Her attempts to slow it down had worked, but she was now weaker and it was gaining its speed again. Focusing all of her remaining energy, she forced the missile to brake. It slowed, and wobbled and soared gently... towards Appleton Tower.

"Come on..." she muttered.

With a few last splutterings and jerks, the missile slowed right down, petered out and fell with a dull "clunk" onto the roof of Appleton Tower. Maria relaxed and gave a great exhale of relief. A distant cry of "NO! WHYYYYYY!" was heard from Arthur's Seat. She and Will raised their eyebrows at each other and began to laugh. Then the missile exploded.

It was an interesting sight, Sarah thought. It wasn't every day you saw Appleton Tower collapse from the top floor down, all buildings around it left unscathed. The experience was heightened somewhat by the small whisper of "Yusss!" and the little jig of joy that John didn't think anyone saw. She did hope everyone had gotten out alright, but couldn't bring herself to mourn the actual building any more than generations of Computing and Informatics students would. The cityscape had already been much improved.

"Damn telekinetic not doing her job properly," said Matt.

Damn telekinetic getting a large box of Thornton's Continental when this is over, thought John. The other two turned and looked at him.

Oh, yeah. Keep forgetting about that.

They stared out over the city for a while. The crumbling tower had almost reached ground zero, and the smoke from the other missile was fading. The screams were still heard over the roar of a multitude of traffic which inevitably forms during times like these. Bloody tourists.

"Is Richard riding that Thing?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"Fair enough. Where's Lu gotten to?"

"I'll find him." Sarah reached out into the city. It was difficult to discern voices amongst all the background noise. She would just have to ask.

Lu!? Lu, are you down there? Lu!?

Lu!?

Yes?

Where are you? Can you see anything?

A lot of buildings and people. I think that is what is expected in Edinburgh during the festival.

Yeah, I kinda meant in terms of invaders.

Oh. No, no invaders. I will let you know if I see any.

Um, OK. Thanks?

Sarah's voice disappeared. He carried on running. At the corner of Pleasance and Cowgate, he paused. A few straggling tourists hurried past, chasing a single taxi, already full of people. He glanced left and right. So far his path from the base of the Seat had taken him past Pollock and along East and West Preston Street, to the Meadows via the Royal Dick Vet School for Veterinary Medicine, in a loop across the park that took him to the University's central buildings in Bristo Place, on to Nicolson Street, affording him a good view of the crumbling heap of rubble that had recently been Appleton Tower, and along Richmond Street to Pleasance. Now he turned left onto Cowgate. Abandoned Fringe venues lined the edges of this lower part of the city. Thirty seconds later he stopped again, gazing around at an eerily empty Grassmarket. This was no good. He would need a high vantage point. He turned and made his way back up Candlemaker Row.

As Lu left Grassmarket, a loud, unfamiliar scraping noise followed from behind him.

*"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA..."...AA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!*

Richard! Are you OK?

AAHHH!!

Oh good, just checking.

Her joke at his expense went unheeded. Richard was in pain. The spikes on the back of the Thing were gouging deep holes in his legs and abdomen, his clothes were soaked in blood, and every time his wounds healed they were ripped open again by a sudden swerve or jolt. His very bones were being pried apart.

Richard?

Hannah's voice sounded distant. He was starting to black out.

You have to jump. Richard, can you hear me?

He clung to the Thing's neck as it writhed in the air, shaking his head, consumed by the pain. It had never been this sharp for so long before.

Marta, you'll have to do it. He can't hear us anymore.

Are you sure?

I think it's the best thing we can do for him now.

Marta concentrated. She had to be precise. If she wasn't careful she could hurt Hannah and the two of them would plummet to a death from which neither would return. Gingerly, she removed her hands from Hannah's back, where she had been holding on for dear life. She raised her hands out in front of her, eyes screwed shut, concentrating hard. Hannah swerved. Marta screamed, and scrabbled for her former grip as Hannah tacked to follow the Thing.

Sorry.

It's OK.

She raised her hands once more, determined to do this before she was nearly thrown off again. Hand held close together, she concentrated. She felt the energy surging up inside her. She opened her eyes, targeted the Thing, and fired. A huge, highly concentrated stream of white light, infra-red and gamma radiation shone from her hands for a few seconds. They heard another scream from Richard, which ended abruptly. The Thing, however, shrieked and twisted in the air. Marta had missed. Richard - most of him, anyway - had been incinerated by the blast. What was left had been shaken loose and was falling towards the Meadows below. Where he had been, a large chunk had been taken out of the Thing's back.

Still moaning in pain, the Thing turned and headed for the nearest high ground, where three iGEM team members were waiting to finish it. Hannah followed, Marta leaning over to gaze at the ground where Richard had fallen. As they retreated, a dull mechanical sound could be heard over the roaring wind.

"They're coming back!"

The three of them backed up to their agreed positions.

"Did you see what happened?" Matt asked.

"I think Richard was killed by Marta's radiation blast," replied Sarah, "and she caught a bit of the Thing, which just pissed it off."

"Oh good."

The two monstrous shapes drew closer. The Thing pulled short and landed somewhere lower on the hill. Hannah soared over it to land near the others. She lay down, exhausted and Marta slid off her back.

"You two OK?" asked Sarah.

"We're fine, just tired," answered Marta.

"Right, let's go finish this thing." A movement in the corner of his eye caught John's attention. Carried on the wind towards them came a strange scraping and clunking.

"What the...?"

Still recovering, Maria looked up from where she had dropped to the ground on top of the crags.

"Can you see anymore?"

"No," Will answered, not taking his eyes off the ship in the Firth.

"Good," she said. She stared at a tuft of grass for a while. Will looked down.

"There won't have been anyone in there. They're all getting out of Edinburgh. Which is probably a good idea," he added.

"Yeah, possibly."

They stayed in silence for a while. Presently, they heard shrieks from the distance. They could see the Thing heading back to the others on Arthur's Seat, followed by the dragon.

"Incoming!" Will warned.

Out in the Firth, two more ominous white shapes were rising. Maria jumped to her feet. She was tired, but she couldn't afford to not try.

"Be careful, just deflect them, don't - Holy Shit!"

"What?" Maria followed his gaze. "Oh. Holy Shit."

With the wind rushing past his ears from George IV, down the Royal Mile to Cockburn Street and across Waverley Bridge to Calton Hill he hadn't heard what the others had. Even now his attention was a little more taken with the sight to the North. Leith was burning. Orange and red flames danced from every street and here and there, bursts of explosions where cars had been caught up in the blaze. Ahead of the roaring fire, advancing slowly and ominously, came what could only be described as a horde. Lit from behind, with dancing shadows only adding to their bizarre appearances. They were various shapes, sizes and colours, but all were grotesque, angry and armed. As they snarled, hissed and oozed their way towards the centre of Edinburgh, Lu saw the missiles rise out of the Firth. He turned back towards the city...and saw what the others saw.

Are you guys seeing this?

Yeah, what the fuck?

The scraping mechanical sound echoes across a silent city. Ancient stones grate across each other, weather-worn barricades opening and expanding, century-old constructions contorting into unfamiliar shapes, disrupting the skyline that had held for lifetimes. The castle is folding outwards, the old civil war keeps rising above the inner medieval buildings, and previously hidden turrets appearing along the edge of Castle Rock, pointing out into the Firth. To several members of our team it resembles a land-locked Tracy Island.

Cool, it's like Tracy Island.

I was just thinking that!

Well, you clearly weren't 'cause I didn't hear it.

Shut up!

Lol!

...you think lol?

Maybe...

As we stare, and, apparently, think, the small turrets lining the Rock fire four small tracking missiles. These home in on the two headed for the city. Seconds later the missiles are nothing but a display of fireworks descending harmlessly on New Town.

Awesome...

Now the raised civil war keeps that usually flank the castle entrance also dispatch two missiles. These are twice the size of those from the ship, and rise with a dull roar. They soar up and out to the Firth. With deadly precision, and infallible accuracy, the two mechanical nightmares reach their target.

We see the explosion before we hear it. A large mess of fire, smoke, water and flying ship-parts. It's very pretty. While we watch the aftermath dissipate, the castle returns to its normal state, having been seen by only a handful of the residents of Edinburgh.

"That was..." John looked around at the others, utterly lost for words.

"Yeah, it was," said Sarah, in agreement with the unspoken truth.

"Since when has that, you know?" asked Matt incredulously, "I mean, it must have been..." They all stood in silence for a while, Hannah breathing heavily behind them as she recovered from her air battle, not keen on enduring the painful return to her normal state until she had rested. Marta leaned against her scaly side, also tired, gazing out at the castle, which now looked exceptionally normal.

"Well," sighed John, "I suppose we should stop pondering and just be grateful they took care of that for us."

Sarah was about to reply but was cut off by a shout in her head.

LOOK OUT!!

The Thing, faster in its recuperation than its two opponents, had climbed the peak behind them as they watched the castle, surprisingly quiet for all its ungainly appeal. Now it leaped at the unsuspecting, distracted iGEM members. It took its first swing at Matt, knocking him over backwards, and its second at Sarah, who jumped aside and lost her footing, sending her skidding and scrabbling down the peak. John dived to help her but the Thing caught him and threw him, again with a force that did not match its figure, some distance away. Marta, having run forward to tackle it, was easily knocked aside as the Thing lurched after John. As it bore down on the bruised and scraped Informatician, Hannah struggled to her feet and lunged, roaring at the hideous creature. It turned, startled, but ready to fight. She landed heavily on it, enduring further scratches and gouges as it tried to shove her off. Its attempts failed and she pinned it to the rocky surface, opened her great mouth and ripped out its throat.

A spray of yellow blood splattered John and Marta. The Thing struggled and flailed for a few seconds, then its body went limp, and Hannah slid back to the ground. Matt was helping Sarah to her feet and John was examining the scrapes in his arms and legs, the result of the Thing throwing him across the Seat. Hannah began morphing, shrinking, changing back to her original self after what felt like hours.

"Honestly Hannah," scolded Marta, "you could have done that sooner."

Oh, I'm sorry, Hannah sounded mildly irritated. As she regained her human mouth, she spat more yellow liquid.

"Oh God, that tasted horrible!"

"What do you think it was?" Sarah inquired of the others.

"There's only one thing it could be, logically," replied John. "We'll need to get it back to Darwin and have the -"

"Hi guys!"

"- biologists look at it."

"Nice kill, Hannah," said Maria, grinning.

Hannah grimaced back at her.

"Any plans?" Maria asked.

"Well, we need Lu and Richard back," replied John.

"I think Richard landed somewhere in the Meadows," Marta chipped in.

"I'll go and see if I can find him," said Will, who disappeared without waiting for a reply.

"Do you think we can get this thing back to Darwin?" Sarah asked John.

"You want to take it back to Darwin?" Maria sounded slightly incredulous. "I don't think it'll fit. Where were you planning to keep it, the Honours room?"

"Yeeah, good point," John admitted. "Maybe we just take a bit of it?"

"Fine, but you're cutting it off."

On the section of the Meadows between the Quarter Mile and Marchmont Road, an interesting scene was being observed by only the inhuman inhabitants of Edinburgh. A few minutes ago a bird's eye view would have shown a mural of red on green, about two metres in diameter, with a solid central artifact, brown and blue under the stains of red. Now the solid centre-piece was growing, extending into a vaguely human shape. Closer to the original segment, there was signs of muscle tone and skin, but further out, near the new parts there was only bone, laced with scraps of flesh and neurons. It already had two legs, most of a torso and one arm. Around it, the crows and blackbirds of the Meadows were picking at the bits on the ground that the thing didn't seem to need. Skin closed up around the hips and legs as the second arm and head were formed. Before the skull closed the first inclinations of a brain could be seen, growing from the spinal cord. A few of the braver crows moved forward and began plucking at the uncovered loose bits of flesh on the strange things neck and arm. They scattered when it sat up suddenly. It looked slowly down at its arms and legs with one lidless, muscle-bound eye. The reconstruction from a single body part had taken less than five minutes. It lifted its better arm to feel the back of its head where strands of blonde hair were starting to poke through newly grafted skin.

The second eye was finished and the final bits of muscle and skin were worked into place as he felt the new hair tickle the back of his neck. Richard, still experiencing tingling while his new nerves got used to pressure, got to his feet. He looked down at the bloody mess around him and eyed the crows, which were waiting only twenty metres away to pounce on any leftover scraps. He stretched. Several bones clicked into place. Thinking carefully about what he had seen before his friend had obliterated him, he decided he probably needed a weapon. There would be more of those things out there, no doubt and he couldn't fight them the way the others could.

He headed for the Quarter Mile and home, but had not gotten more than a hundred paces when he saw a blur and Lu appeared in front of him.

"Alright man, how's it going?"

"Not good," Lu replied. "There are things, lots of them, coming towards the city."

"Ah. No you're right, not good. I definitely need a weapon then."

He set off again, with Lu at his side, but was stopped this time when Will appeared.

"There you are! John says we should go back to Darwin to figure out what that Thing was. ...you're naked."

"Er, yeah, there might be something more pressing than that," said Richard.

Lu recounted what he had seen. Will bit his lip.

"Yeah, we should probably tell the others."

"I'll go home first if you don't mind. Though we are in Scotland, so fighting stark, bollock naked is fairly culturally appropriate."

The other two stared at him. Will took hold of Richard's arm, told Lu to wait there, and vanished. Seconds later, he was back and took Lu with him.

"Maria, can't you just -?"

"Nope."

"You don't even have to touch it!"

"I don't care, it's icky."

"Woof?"

They looked up. Will and Richard were standing in front of them. Will disappeared and presently returned with Lu. Maria threw a stone at Richard, who ducked.

"We have a way bigger problem than this Thing," he said, as he stood up straight again. "Lu, tell them what you saw."

But instead of telling them, Lu showed them. He drew up the memory of the mass horde of beasts he had seen, crashing and burning their way through Leith. He then projected it into the minds of the others, using the mental network established by Sarah, what felt like hours ago. So they watched, as Lu replayed the attack on the Northern region of Edinburgh. Eyes widened, mouths dropped open (and others curled slightly at the image of a burning banner sporting the "I *heart* Leith" emblem), as all stood, stock still, staring into their own minds.

"We need a plan," Richard turned to the others as the vision faded, "and we need weapons... well those of us that don't have offensive powers at any rate. They've got a beachhead, but if what Lu saw is the same for all of them, then they're not advancing too quickly, which gives us a bit of time... hopefully."

"We should get a sample of that," said John, pointing at the rapidly cooling putrescent corpse of the Thing, "it might help us work out how we can fight them."

"Does anyone have anything sharp?"

"Hannah could you grow claws and cut a bit out?"

"What!?" she exclaimed. "Why do I have to do it?"

"Because Maria won't and you're the next best person."

"And you're a much better person than me," added Maria.

Hannah narrowed her eyes at them.

"Fine, but somebody else is making the tea when we get back."

"Aw, but nobody else makes it as well as you do."

"Oh, that's true. Alright, fine! I'll do that too!"

Hannah shook her head as she moved forwards, her arms shifting, elongating, her fingers popping and cracking as bones shifted and tendons grew. Thick hair sprouted across her exposed arms and soon her hands were large paws, complete with the long heavy claws of a Kodiak bear. She moved quickly, the weight of fatigue, from the scuffle between the team and the much more serious fight against the Thing, being pushed aside for the moment as she flexed her claws and sliced at the exposed flesh of the corpse. An upwelling of that same yellow ichor, slower this time, started to flow from the wound, and then her claws came down again, tearing a chunk of meat free before the yellow blood could completely soak her fur. Maria and

Marta crinkled their noses and several of the others took a step back as Hannah lifted the piece of flesh in two paws, trying to keep it as far away from her nose as possible.

"Now what?" she asked, her bitten off 't' indicating that she was breathing through her mouth.

"Er," replied John, "carry it back to KB?"

Hannah's eyes widened. "Are you kidding me!?"

"Or," suggested Richard, "get Will to teleport you back with it."

Hannah turned to Will, pleadingly. He backed off. "Hey, don't look at me, I'm not going anywhere near that thing. I don't even know why you want it."

"So, John," Matt asked after a few minutes silence, "why did you want to take a piece of the Thing back to the Honours room?"

"I think," John answered, pausing thoughtfully for a second, wondering how much scorn he would get for his suggestion, "that this might be a synthetic organism. And that the rest of them might be as well."

The others all looked at him for a second. Then - "Could be," said Richard.

"Yeah, that kind of makes sense," agreed Maria, "it's the only way to get something like this, besides breeding it, and to be honest it doesn't look like any living creature looks, or has ever looked." She glanced around at the other biologists, looking for confirmation and they all nodded or gave small noises of agreement.

"I don't like it," said Marta, "this is exactly the kind of thing that gives synthetic biology a bad name and gets all the crazies running at us innocent biologists with pitchforks and stuff."

They stared at her for a few moments.

"We should sequence it," Will suggested.

"And see where all the bits come from?" asked Richard.

"Yeah, I mean, they must have started with something, it would take forever to design every protein."

"True."

"OK, so we agree it's a synthetic organism," said John, "now we need to get it back to Darwin."

"Please Will?" Hannah looked desperate.

Will gave an exasperated sigh. "Ok, fine, just don't drip any of it on me."

Will walked over to Hannah and, cringing, reached out to touch a part of her back not covered in slime.

"Woah, wait, guys, look!" Sarah was pointing up above them. Her "woah" was echoed by several of the others. Jane, one of their human aspects advisors, was flying (yes, I said flying) above them, holding around the waist their other advisor, Emma. The iGEM members gaped at them as they came in to land, a few feet away from the Thing.

"Hi guys," Jane said as she let go of Emma, who staggered slightly and was steadied by Matt.

"We've er, got a problem."

None of them reacted.

"Wow..." said Richard still staring.

Jane looked around at them all and frowned.

"Oh, come on, you guys knew we had superpowers."

"Yeah, but we've never seen you use them," John replied.

"And somehow they seem cooler than ours," sulked Maria, looking down at her hands, disappointed. Emma rolled her eyes. This was the girl she'd seen flying a broomstick to KB just two days earlier, cackling at the top of her lungs.

"There's a lot of things heading this way, setting fire to stuff and shouting," she looked at Jane, "we just panned over the city and saw them coming past the Omni Centre."

"Yeah," Jane confirmed, "horrible, slimy, ugly things," she added, pulling a face.

"We know," Matt told them.

"I saw them," said Lu.

"Oh really?" asked Jane, surprisingly interested, "that must have been quick."

"Yeah, Lu is quite quick," smirked Will.

"Woo--"

"Shut up!" chorused pretty much everyone.

"Well we were thinking," said Jane, looking back at Emma again, "that, um..."

"That you'd want to know," continued Emma, "you know, about the, er..."

"The oncoming mass of horrible beasties."

"Yeah."

"Yes, of course," Maria confirmed, "we're just not sure what we're going to do about it."

"Yeah, John wants to take a bit of that Thing back to the Honours room," added Marta, waving a hand at the increasingly pungent carcass. "I don't know why he wants to make our workplace stink like dead seaweed but anyway, that's informaticians for you."

Jane gave an uncertain smile and looked at John who just shook his head.

"Yeah, we did see that thing, didn't we?" she told them, "we had no idea what it was."

"Just flying, and screeching," Emma's eyes widened at the memory, "it was just..."

"It was awful, wasn't it?" Jane finished, "absolutely horrible."

"Why do you want to take a piece of it back?" Emma asked John.

John threw his hands up in exasperation at being questioned again. "I just think it would be a good idea to have a sample of it around."

"So, what do you think we should do?" asked Will.

"Well, we should probably try and cut them off before they get into Old Town," answered Emma.

"Yeah, for some reason I think they're headed for KB," said Jane.

"Where's best then?" Maria directed this question at the group.

"We should try to stop them getting through the area between Calton Hill and Mayfield," replied John.

"So that's South Bridge, George IV Bridge...anywhere else?" Richard said, trying to map the scene in his head.

"Pleasance," added Maria. "It's not too likely but they can get through that way. Most of the traffic will be through South Bridge though."

"I don't think I can fight just yet guys, I'm too tired from trying to blast the Thing," said Marta.

"Yeah," admitted Maria, "I'm not at full strength yet either."

"And I really want to put this thing down!" moaned Hannah.

"Then why are you still holding it?" asked Maria, frowning at her.

"Because I thought I'd be going back to KB and there was no point in putting it down then having to pick it up again," Hannah replied, slightly hysterical. "But now that I know I can put it down I will."

"No, wait," interjected John. Hannah gave a loud "tsk", eyes wide and eyebrows raised again.

"Anyone who hasn't recovered from their previous fights can go back to Darwin with Will and Hannah and the rest of us can scout out the area we want to fight in.

"Okay," said Hannah, nodding. "But can we please go quickly. Please." She gave Will a pointed look. He reached out again to touch her back and they both vanished.

Maria stood up and Marta and Lu joined her.

"Don't get into a fight if you don't have to," she warned, "wait for the rest of us."

"We will," replied Richard, as Will reappeared, took hold of Marta and Maria's shoulders and, with Marta holding Lu's arm, disappeared again with all three of them.

"Emma," John said, turning to her, "could you maybe start building a barrier to slow them down a bit?"

"Sure," she answered, with a smile, "I'll make it all thorny and scratchy."

The others laughed.

"Cool, thanks," said Richard.

"Shall we set off then?" Jane asked Emma.

"Yes," she replied, moving back towards her friend so that Jane could put her arm around her waist again. "Ooh, this is always a bit scary."

Jane lifted off with ease, holding Emma as if she were as light as a single *E.coli* cell. The others waved goodbye to them.

"So, how do we get down?" Matt asked.

"Walk?" suggested John.

They looked at each other for a moment...

Will!

"Take it off me! Please!"

"Alright, calm down."

Maria levitated the piece of horrid flesh out of Hannah's sodden claws.

"Whoops!" She caught a couple of yellow drops before they hit the floor and immediately surrounded the rest of the meat in a bubble of energy, about a foot and a half across. As they watched, the drips of yellow slime splashed and collected in the bottom and dust began to settle on the top. In the absence of any other suitable name, it could be called a forcefield.

"Thanks," gasped Hannah, and ran straight for the girls toilets.

"That's cool," said Will, nodding to the bubble.

"Yeah, I've been practising it for a while," Maria replied, "I think it could come in handy at some point." She looked around at him. "I noticed you don't use your 'compulsory' teleporting position anymore."

"Yeah, I know," Will frowned thoughtfully at the table, "I stopped thinking about it and just started teleporting whenever I wanted to. It took like five times before I realised I wasn't using that stupid pose anymore."

Maria smiled. Their powers were all advancing quicker than they had thought they would. Clearly the pressure of battle was doing a lot for them. She moved the bubble around, a little unsure what to do with it.

"I suppose I'd better show this to Chris. Can't imagine what he's going to say...probably nothing. You coming?"

"Yeah," Will made to follow her towards the door.

Will!

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Go on," Maria said, "Lu can help me."

"Ok, see you later."

Will vanished.

"Away Lu," she gestured towards the door. "Somehow," she added, as they noticed frantic scrubbing sounds from the girl's toilet, "I don't think we're going to be getting any help from Lady Macbeth in there."

Marta turned back to her computer.

"Well," she muttered to herself, "if no one else is going to keep working on this project I guess I'll have to."

Matt, Sarah, Richard, John and Will looked out from the top of David Hume Tower, the tallest, and now only, tower in that part of the city. Above the roofs and chimney tops of the buildings between Potterow and the Royal Mile, snaking this way and that around Calton Hill, a mass of vines and thorns were growing and stretching in both directions, blocking off entrance to Old Town from the North-East. Still higher, surveying the plants' progress was a small figure, non-recognisable from this distance, but clearly Jane to the onlookers.

"Do we still think Bristo Square, South Bridge and Pleasance?" asked Richard. "John? ...John?" John wasn't listening. He was looking down at the wreckage that was once Appleton Tower, with a distant, serene look on his face. Richard clicked his fingers under John's nose.

"Hu? Hmm? What?" John snapped his head up. "Sorry. Yes, three points of defence."

"Even with Emma's thorns in the way?" Sarah queried, "won't that drive them further outwards?"

"I doubt it," John said, shaking his head, "it might slow them down, but the way they've been burning through Leith I'd say it won't force them off their path."

They fell silent for a while. Vaguely, they could hear sounds of crashing and the tumultuous hiss of a thousand snarling beasts.

"We need to be clever about this," Richard said in a low, burdened voice. "We can't just split up randomly or we'll never survive. I hate to say it but some people are stronger than others. They need to go on point, backed up by the less useful of us...like me."

"Agreed," said John. Then added, "no offence."

"None taken. I think you, Maria and Marta ought to take one area each."

"Yes," John nodded. "Bristo Square will probably be the hardest to defend because they can all spread out, but the majority of them will probably come through South Bridge, so we should put the strongest team there."

"Then you should take Hannah and cover South Bridge," said Richard, "and Maria can go to Bristo square. She has good range and can force them through a narrower space if she has to. That leaves Marta to guard Pleasance. She should be alright, I reckon fewer of them will try to get through there."

"What about those of us with slightly more indirect powers?" asked Matt.

"Sarah, if you can, you could try to stop them moving or breathing," Richard suggested, "preferably without doing the same to the rest of us. It would also be useful to have an open line of communication, if that won't give you too much of a headache."

Sarah nodded. "It's been OK, so far. And I can try to control them, but you'll have to warn me if I start to hurt you as well."

"Oh don't worry, we will," said Matt.

"Matt, I'm sure with your imagination you could find some way to distract them," said John.

Matt rubbed his neck thoughtfully. "Yeah, I think I can manage that."

"OK," Richard continued, "you two can decide where you think you might be most useful. Now we need the two fastest people in Bristo Square and Pleasance since there's more places for the synthetic organisms to run to. Will -"

"Let me guess," Will cut in, "you want me to be on guard ready to pull people out?"

"Actually, noo," Richard replied, "I was thinking you could teleport a synthetic organism into midair and drop it onto another synthetic organism?"

"Oh," said Will. "Yeah, I could do something like that." He smiled slightly at the thought of finally being something other than a taxi.

"Would you rather take Bristo Square or Pleasance?" John asked.

"Bristo Square, I think Marta might get a bit random with her blasts of energy when she gets into the battle," Will grinned.

"Yeah, same here," said Matt, "I'll take Bristo Square."

"And I'll go to South Bridge with John and Hannah," added Sarah. "I think I can be more useful there than, erm...than I can at Pleasance." She bit her lip and looked out of the corner of her eye at Richard who raised an eyebrow and scrutinised her over the rim of his glasses. After a few moments he replaced the glasses and said,

"So, that leaves me to go to Pleasance with Marta and Lu. Right I'm going to pop home to grab weapons for anyone who wants one, I'll be back momentarily."

"Okay, right," said John. "Now that's sorted we need the others to get here. Sarah could you...?"

Lu and Maria re-entered the Honours room to find the kettle boiling but no Hannah.

"Right," said Maria, "it's wrapped in about ten toxic waste disposal bags and stuck under the fume hood. The PhD students gave us a few funny looks but we just told them not to ask."

Lu looked around. "Hannah still in the toilets?"

"Yeah," replied Marta, frowning at the door. "She won't stop washing her arms. I swear she's nearly emptied the soap dispensers in there."

"Yeeah, can't blame her really, you can still smell it in here. Ah, here she is..."

Hannah walked slowly into the room, holding her arms in a stiff, unnatural way, a few inches away from her body. She didn't say anything, but headed straight for the kettle and, trying to ignore the last twenty minutes.

"Tea anyone?"

"Yes please," the three of them chorused.

"How long are we waiting before we go back out there?" Lu asked.

"As long as we can, I think," replied Maria. "We need to regain as much strength as we can."

"Well I'm sure tea will help with that," smiled Hannah brightly.

The others smiled as the kettle reboiled. They sat in silence for a while, speaking only to thank Hannah for their tea and to accept a biscuit from one of the four packets she offered them. Marta sat at her computer still working on her LovTAP experiment design, Lu flicked through protocols on the desk, Hannah stared at a spot on the floor and Maria gazed out of the window. After about ten minutes of slurping, munching and typing, Sarah's voice reached into their minds once more.

We're ready for you guys. Are you good to go?

Just let us finish our tea then we'll make our way over, came Maria's reply.

They all emptied their mugs and got to their feet. Hannah looked at the others.

"Is Will coming to get us?" she asked.

No.

"No, apparently," shrugged Maria. "You'll have to fly. Lu you'll have to run, Marta you can come with me on the broomstick."

Marta looked ecstatic.

"OK," said Lu, "see you there."

He left the room and they heard the door to the stairwell swinging. Maria leaned under her desk and pulled out her broomstick. This was a new one. It was larger and sturdier than the rickety bamboo one from the costume shop. She had decided that one would not last her long enough. Inevitably, she had bought this one on eBay. Hannah was already beginning to change. Maria looked up at the windows, looking disgruntled.

"We'll have to go up to the roof," she muttered, "why don't they build bigger openable windows in these buildings?"

"So that nutters with broomsticks don't try to jump out of them?" suggested Hannah, in a screechy voice.

Maria narrowed her eyes and pulled a face at her as she headed for the door. She and Marta entered the stairwell, ducked under the black and yellow chain indicating they shouldn't go upstairs and headed up to the next floor where they had never been before. There was a small landing, covered in dust and dirt from the roof, dragged down by various workers. Straight ahead was a light blue door with a warning indicating there was an equipment lift on the other side. On the adjoining wall was a dark blue door. At least, it had been originally. Now it was mainly yellow and black and practically yelling "IF YOU GO THROUGH THIS DOOR YOU WILL DIE". Maria chose to ignore this. She tried the door. Locked, obviously.

"I think we should go downstairs and take off from there," said Marta, eyeing the door warily.

"Nope!" Maria retorted, "No time."

The locks in the door clicked and it swung open to reveal a dark staircase. Maria looked around, found a light switch labelled "roof lights" and flicked it. The staircase lit up. Maria strode in and ascended, Marta following reluctantly. At the top of the stairs they met another door plastered in warning signs, which Maria also unlocked and walked through. It was windy on the roof. Maria wandered over to the Northern edge and looked down. A small bird, possibly a swallow, was fighting its way towards the central buildings.

"Are you sure you want to do this!?" Marta shouted over the gale.

"Yeah! Why, don't you!?"

Marta didn't answer.

"Come on!" Maria instructed. She swung one leg over the broom handle. Despite her previous lack of success doing it this way, she felt right now it would be safer than side saddle. Plus the new broom was more comfortable than the last. Marta did choose side saddle, her left hand gripping the broom just above the bristles, her right arm around Maria's waist.

"Hold on, this might be a bit wobbly!"

The broomstick rose into the air and drifted slowly away from the building. After about twenty seconds Maria was sure their mount wouldn't topple over and picked up speed. Marta was dealing quite well with the height, finding this flight across Edinburgh much more agreeable than her last one. At the other side of KB they caught up with the small, struggling swallow and Maria paused. Gratefully, the little bird perched on the bristles, dug in her claws and hunkered down as the broomstick moved off again.

"They're coming!"

The four on top of David Hume watched the broomstick drift over the Meadows and in towards the tower. Instead of landing Maria hovered a few feet above the roof and asked, "What's the plan?"

"You, Matt and Will are covering Bristo Square, Marta, Richard and Lu are taking Pleasance and Me, Hannah and Sarah will be going to South bridge. Richard has just gone home to fetch weapons, but if you don't want one it would be wise to head out there now and scout the place out."

OK, I'll see you out there.

The swallow released itself from the broomstick and flew off in the direction of South Bridge.

"I'll go to Pleasance now, I don't need a weapon," said Marta. "Maria, mind dropping me off?"

"No problem."

The broomstick rose up and swooped away to the East, curving downwards so that it was skimming over the rooftops of Old Town. John turned to the rest of the group, which had gained an extra member in the time they had been talking to the girls.

"Would you like a weapon, Lu?" he asked.

"Yeah," Lu replied. "Is Richard bringing them here?"

"Umm, only if anyone else wants one."

"Err," said Sarah, "I'd quite like one. Just in case I can't use my power without killing you all."

"OK," John agreed, "but if it comes to that, stay well behind me and Hannah."

"Yeah, I will."

"Matt," John continued, "do you want a weapon?"

"Yeah, actually I think this is a good time to be open to violence. I need a smallish, one-handed sword ideally."

"OK, then we can head out, and tell Richard to drop off weapons where necessary."

They all nodded, stony faced. After a seconds silence in which they all acknowledged each other's fear and determination, they turned and exited the rooftop. At the ground floor entrance, they shared a last look of camaraderie before all, including Will, began the long walk to their assigned fields of battle.

The Defence of Old Town

So...

I'm staring down the mess that's South Bridge. Lots of overturned cars, abandoned handbags, the like. It looks like some apocalypse has passed this way... except that it hasn't. It's yet to come.

Yeah... so...

There's a hint of motor fuel and burnt rubber in the wind, mixed with faint screaming and the chatter of rifle fire from the direction of Princes Street. Streaks of red in the clouds indicate that the sun is setting somewhere to the west, but thankfully there's no sign of rain. I'd hate to get soaking wet.

"... sorry. Didn't mean to take so long."

John finally reappears from behind the heavy green door, clutching a handful of hasty print-outs and with his glasses halfway down his face again. He's got two sharp-looking pieces of metal stuffed into his belt, and a longer, thinner one tied to his back with what looks like a suitcase strap. Hannah and I both give him inquisitive, slightly sceptical looks; he blinks once, owlishly, before telling us, "... don't ask."

He's embarrassed, it's easy to tell, and he quickly moves on by dumping the pile of papers he's cradling onto the cracked asphalt pavement. Before the wind can carry them away, he drops down to his knees and begins sifting through the assorted maps and photographs, most of which I see are of a side-on view of the arch over Cowgate.

"Right," he says, as both Hannah and I hunch closer to listen. His nail-bitten finger begins a quick dance over the coloured streets. "We need to protect from here to here, buying as much time as possible. I'm thinking defence in depth... multiple fallback points here, here, and here, but we'll obviously have to watch out for them getting behind us. If we get driven back this far, we won't be able to hold them any longer and we'll have to warn the others and make a break for it..."

"Do you think it'll get that bad?" I ask, mindful of the worried expression that Hannah's wearing.

"Always plan for the worst," the informatician replies, with a smile I guess he thinks is reassuring. Then it expands slightly into that playful grin that I've taken to mean that he's in

one of his cheeky moods. "Shouldn't happen that easily, though. I've a couple of tricks up my sleeve."

"So... what should we do, then?"

"I need you to start clearing a killing zone, Hannah... take the bigger lorries and buses and create enough of an obstacle with them to slow them down, while giving me a clear field of fire. Start at the Royal Mile and work your way backwards, and if you have time..."

He whispers something in Hannah's ear, and suddenly her eyes are twinkling in delight. Her transformation begins immediately afterwards, and before long she's adopted her bear form again, setting to work with a will.

"What about me?" I ask, hefting the staff that Richard left for me. I get the feeling that John's being a bit wary of it, especially when he makes a point of answering quickly.

"I... we, actually... need you in Tron Kirk," he tells me, pointing to the tall spire of the abandoned church next to where Hannah's begun to noisily shift a large Argos lorry. "Keep an eye out for them coming down North Bridge, and give us advance warning when they do."

I guess the disappointment in my face shows, for his expression softens slightly.

"You're the best person for the job, Sarah," he clarifies. "And I'm sure both Maria and Richard will appreciate the help, if you can keep the communication channels open as well..."

I sigh and relent.

"Fine... but I'm going to quickly ransack there, first."

I point to the electronics shop at the corner. It takes a moment for him to realise what I'm talking about. Then his eyes light up in approval.

Not so long later, I'm seated in the highest point of the church spire that I can get to. Decades of dust clog my feet - the climb up here was quite horrible - and probably aren't doing any good to the various mechanical devices that I'm taking apart and putting back together again. Still, it shouldn't be too much of a problem when push comes to shove. They'll work.

Every now and again, I look out through the arched window that overlooks North Bridge, scanning for signs of movement. The rifle fire is definitely closer now, and interspersed with guttural commands and the sounds of heavier weaponry. At a guess, it's coming from Waverley Gate... which means that it won't be long now.

In the past five minutes, I've been in constant communication with Richard and Maria regarding the plan and how John's setting things up here. I'm no stranger to logistics operations - the OTC saw to that - but the sheer scale of what we're trying to do here is starting to boggle me. Nine of us, against an entire army... and the whole of southern Edinburgh to defend. Wow. Still, I guess it's somewhat reassuring that we're all ourselves in the midst of all this. Marta's telling Richard off for not putting his back into it, he's replying with a woof; Will and Matt, on the other hand, aren't missing the opportunity to heckle Maria about her broomstick. Just below me, I can hear Hannah complaining vociferously that she's doing all the heavy work, and John's muffled apologies as he works up the courage to sneak underneath a car with a sharp implement of some sort. Maybe this is something that these powers have given us... I'm not too sure we would have done this before we received them.

On the other hand, maybe we're just crazy. *Yeah, that's also probably true*, I think to myself as I finish off the fifth of the contraptions that I've been working on. I can't help but grin with pride as I survey my handiwork.

Then my eye is drawn to the road below, and to the movement on it.

It's not human.

They're coming!

I'm running back and forth along the Pleasance keeping Marta & Richard aware of the slowly approaching enemy. They're a long way off, and it doesn't look like many are coming this way.

If it stays that way we'll be fine, I could go and help one of the other groups if need be.

Emma's on the ground with the others listening to Richard, he's been trying to set up defenses with her, something about ramparts and ditches, he was speaking fast and I think I missed some of it. I run back,

"Nothing yet."

They all nod and Richard turns to me,

"Lu can you give me a hand moving some cars. I want to set up a barricade to slow them at the bottom of the hill," he gestures and continues, walking over to a parked car.

"Once I take the hand brake off, we're going to need to push them. Lets hope not many of these are automatic!" He punctuates the last by turning and punching the drivers window, it smashes, glass fragments biting into his obviously broken hand even as the bones begin to reset. He reaches in, cutting himself again, and proceeds to move a few things within.

"It's a manual and it's in gear, we should be able to get it rolling to the slope," he says smiling slightly. We do get it moving, pushing it forward a little until the incline does the rest and it rolls fairly straight towards the bottom of the Pleasance hill and the junction with the Cowgate.

We do the same to a few more, Marta & Jane giving us a hand with the automatics, I run with a few steering through the windows, so we end up with a barricade of sorts of damaged cars, with their handbrakes back on. I go back to scouting, seeing how far I have to go before I can see them. A few more seem to be coming our way, they're not moving fast and I try to stay out of sight, before I run back to the others.

By the time I get back there's a line of tree stumps and raised grass, across the road at the top of the hill and the cars of the bottom smell quite obviously of petrol. I climb onto what Richard must have been meaning when he said ramparts and tell the others,

"A few, not too long now." As I speak brambles begin growing around the front of the barricade, they'll be harder to get over.

Richard nods at my look, "Emma's going to leave a small gap so we can get off the front if we need to, but if they're coming you don't need to keep going out. We've got a good view from here." They've obviously been planning as well whilst I was away as Marta chimes in,

"Stay away from the cars! They're covered in petrol and I'm going to see if I can blow them up!" she pauses before continuing with a perky grin and an air of pride, "when the things are on them obviously! And then I'll be blasting them all as they come up the hill!"

Richard cuts in at this point, "we're going to try and hold them here. Hopefully the hill will slow them down, and the platform will give us some high ground. If they start shooting though

we've not got too much solid cover, so be ready to duck! The others will hopefully stop them coming round behind us, otherwise it's going to get difficult." He turns to both of us as he continues, a serious expression replacing his previous thoughtful one, "If that happens then Lu you need to get behind Marta. Marta you've then got to blast yourself some space, don't worry if you hit me, in fact if it gets really bad fire at where I am if it's going to help you both. Once you've got a bit of space you need to get on Lu's back and then you need to run as fast as you can Lu, making sure Marta doesn't fall! I'll try to hold them up and keep them from chasing you, but..." he trails off, before looking straight at me again, "run fast."

"Okay."

They're coming!

We all hear it and turn. Nothing yet, but the angle of the buildings means we can't see all the way up the road from here and this isn't the best route for them to come. We walk down to just behind the cars so we can see up the other hill, nothing. Then one rounds the corner, its just in sight, but it sees the cars and then us. Down one hill and up another. It turns back, making a motion to its compatriots and another one joins it. The pair of them stand there for a moment, vaguely humanoid shapes with over-long arms, before beginning to lumber down the hill.

I've had an idea. I grab my sword shouting to the others,

"Right back!"

I run towards the two synthetic organism, vaulting a low point in the barrier of cars. When I reach them I slash at them both with the sword in my hand and then dash back to the others without stopping. I'm back before the pair hit the floor.

"Nice!" Richard says wide-eyed,

"Yeah! Go Lu!" shouts Marta, I smile.

"Thanks." I say, climbing back over the cars, carefully avoiding getting too much petrol on myself. Once I've reached the others I turn back towards the approaching enemy. The pair are lying half-way down the first slope, a small stream of fluid trickling towards the lowest point. Unfortunately however more have appeared over the hill, a steady stream cresting the rise and beginning their descent to the first hurdle.

A blast of bright orange light streaks past me and slams into the first line of creatures, they vanish beneath it and when Marta ends the blast it's obvious there was more to it than visible light. The heat as it passed me was obvious, but the effects show there was more to it than infra-red. The group that weren't killed outright by the heat, stagger on for a few moments, their motions strange. They begin to shake, some violently, some less, but all of them do. A few collapse, the seizures too acute to resist, and lie there spasming, limbs twitching, as the others drop around them. The furthest any of them get is ten steps from where they were hit, and by that point the one still alive is crawling on barely stable knees, digging its blade-like hands into the concrete to propel it forwards. Then it's over. For a moment, until Marta lets fly again and another group are engulfed.

For a moment Richard and I just stare, then he turns to me,

"Stay clear of the blasts! Well clear." I nod, and for a moment I remember that it's happened to him. I shudder, and turn back to the enemy, sword held tight. Richard's stringing his bow and

getting his arrows together. He's not got many so it makes sense for him to wait until they're closer.

I vault the cars again staying well clear of the areas Marta's blasted, just in case, and dash in, cutting once or twice before retreating. There are clearly more of them now. Apparently even here is to receive a proper invasion.

It becomes routine for a few brief minutes. Run in, cut, dodge, run out, stopping just behind the cars, before running in again. Then they start getting closer to the cars and we're all hurriedly backing up to the parapet. When a decent sized group have crossed that first line, and the vehicles are covered with scrambling things, Marta changes her tactic.

I can hear the tarmac sizzle, and the metal begins distorting the air around it with the heat. I back off as far as I can, just in case any shrapnel reaches me. The fuel tanks are sealed and under pressure, as the metal warms up so does the fuel, it vapourises under pressure. The fuel poured over the cars has evaporated by now too, filling the air in the dip with a fuel-air mixture ready to ignite. Which she proceeds to do. The explosion is larger than we'd anticipated, I think we all feel the heat. The organisms in front of the line are knocked forward and the ones behind backwards, most of the ones atop the conflagration are killed instantly, others hurled in random directions before impacting on assorted buildings.

I recover before the others and I'm in amongst the synthetic organisms before many of them can get to their feet. A few arrows start dropping into their ranks further down the hill, showing that Richard's taking part as well. They aren't as thick as they were so a few of the arrows go wide, but enough strike home, more and more as they begin their ascent once more.

There's something going on behind the barrier, arcing flashes and loud cracks are just noticeable through the smoke & flames. Synthetic organisms start seemingly throwing themselves into the cars, desperately trying to escape something on the other side, heedless of the flames. The electricity moves along the other side of the barricade, mostly out of view, the synthetic organisms obviously trying to escape it. There's a lull in their number, apparently they're not getting away fast enough, then it disappears down the Cowgate and they begin to increase again. A few seemingly able to withstand the heat banding together and slamming into the cars. I run in trying to slash at those on our side, but they turn, others of their number throwing themselves into the way to keep the more useful ones alive. Richard's arrows are striking a few, but it's not enough. With one last almighty push, two cars are sent crashing away, breaching our first line of defense.

There's no way I can hold that gap alone. Within moments it's full of a wave of synthetic organisms, pouring through. I run back to the others, Richard's dropped his bow, seemingly out of arrows, and picked up a spear. Marta gives me a hand onto the high ground and I turn. There are hundreds of them through now, they're running towards us. Blade-arms raised, mouths snarling, back-lit by the flames, leaping shadows playing across them. All I can hear is their screeching and the pounding of their footfalls as they rush towards us.

I'd like to say something like, "let me explain how this works", but I really can't. I don't know how it works, it just seems to. Basically what I do is visualise something, then I concentrate on

a person or a group of people, which then makes them see it. That's what I have to do every time, and it takes a lot of concentration.

Take this for instance. I have to hide the three of us from these things that are going to try and kill us. I can't just concentrate on Maria, Will and myself and make us disappear. It's not as simple as throwing a shield or an invisibility cloak over someone. I have to project the image of an empty square into the minds of everything that comes around the corner. And I'm going one step further. I'm completely removing the square itself. When they come through here they'll see a narrow street through two rows of buildings which will force them straight through the centre of the square, where Maria and Will can pick them off. This has an extra advantage in that it keeps them away from the University buildings, which, with the exception of Potterow, we would rather preserve.

I think they're ready now. Will is standing on the edge of Bristo Square, his weight on one leg and picking at his nails, apparently bored, waiting for them to flood through from George IV Bridge. We probably should have him scouting, like Lu apparently is, or have Maria fly over, but I don't think any of us can be bothered. The others sound very organised. I reckon we're just gonna wing it. Superimposed on this vision of Will is the image of a narrow street, edged by the Victorian-style tenement buildings endogenous to this area.

Maria is balanced on the angular turrets atop Teviot, her broom in her right hand, her skirt billowing around her ankles, looking like she should be covered in green paint and wearing a pointy hat. Of course, I make sure that she's aware of this. Her reply involves something about me just being jealous. Yeah... that must be it.

I'm stood back, away from what will shortly be a battlefield, at the gates next to McEwan Hall which lead into the courtyard of the Old Medical School. The dao Richard has left me is clutched in my right hand. I admit I have little idea about the technicalities of using a weapon, except talk about health and safety. I take another look around at the others before turning back in the direction of the advancing horde. I still can't see *her* anywhere.

Through the translucent haze of my projected architecture, I see the first of the synthetic organisms advancing up Bristo Place. They're varied; some walking, others crawling, jumping, squelching. There is a certain amount of conserved design, but it's obvious there have been post-production adjustments made, so that each has a different - well, I suppose style is the wrong word. When about twenty of them have rounded the corner and the first few are crossing the road towards Teviot, one of them is lifted off its feet, thrown high into the air and brought down with a force greater than gravity onto one of the chimneys in Bristo Place, resulting in a crack which I hear from the other end of the square. The other organisms pause, looking up at their broken comrade. A few of them glance at the surrounding area, warily. They begin advancing with caution, hand signals and gestures being sent to those still working their way up the street. So... they are sentient. And, it seems, organised. The commands appear to be coming from the larger variants, mainly those on two legs with less crude weaponry.

Apparently it's now someone else's turn. Will vanishes suddenly from his vantage point and, immediately one of the leading synthetic organisms disappears from the ranks. The others jump, some hoot, grunt or shriek in surprise at the loss of another member. Will reappears in his original position. A few seconds later, a long drawn out scream can be heard above us and the

missing synthetic organism impacts on the pavement in front of it's pack. Now they know they're under attack. One of the taller organisms screams and raises his weapon, a long curved scythe. The horde rushes forwards, piling into the square through the small gap I have left for them. Will gets out of their way, as more of them go flying into buildings and over rooftops. Faster than the eye can see, Will is jumping in and out of the masses. Soon it is raining synthetic organisms. One stops in a bare patch of square and looks up at his falling companion. He deftly jumps aside, and grins with no remorse at the mess of ex-synthetic organism on the floor. He laughs ferociously at avoiding Will's little trick. Then he's flattened by a lump of concrete.

I look up at Teviot and see Maria, broomstick at her feet, throwing her arms around, guiding bits of what look like Appleton Tower at the creatures below her. Well, at least it's being put to good use at last. She's grinning with satisfaction as she squashes more and more synthetic organisms.

Then I see her. She's standing behind Maria, watching the fray below, her red dress deeper than ever in the dying sunlight. As I watch her she raises her gaze to Maria and cocks her head slightly. Then she looks directly at me. Her mouth curls in a smile, which until now had always been friendly, but gives me the suddenly ominous feeling that she shouldn't be up there. She turns back to Maria, who is concentrating so intently on the battle below that she is teetering dangerously on the edge of the turrets. Still smiling, the woman in red raises her hand and, in what to me seems like slow motion, reaches for the girl's back. With her fingertips inches from Maria I feel a sudden tush of adrenaline and screw my eyes shut, emptying my mind of all the visions I have created.

I open them again. The woman in red is gone. Maria glances behind her, distracted by something she can't define, finally remembering to steady herself.

"Aah! Matt!!"

I turn and see that Will has just been lunged at by a synthetic organism, narrowly missing losing his head as he teleports away. I need to hide us again - both myself and Maria have also been spotted and the disappearance off the walls means that they are now flooding through the square en masse. Seeing that she can no longer pick them off one by one with great effect Maria grabs her broomstick and prepares to leave her high ground. Before she takes off I restore the image that none of us are there and retreat out of the way of several synthetic organisms which had been rushing to attack me. When I find a safer spot to rest I turn back to the centre of Bristo Square. She's standing in the midst of the scrabbling horde, staring directly at me, her head tilted slightly downwards, her eyes wide, her gaze like fire, no longer beautiful but terrible in her accusation, her anger at being torn from world before her fun was over. Transfixed, horrified at this thing I have created but cannot control or escape, I stay there, locked in her hold, while the battle around me rages on.

I'm enjoying this. I know I shouldn't be, but I am. The synthetic organisms - a small army of bird-faced, long-limbed, too-thin-for-their-own-good beasts that reek of rotting waste and are crowing to each other unintelligibly - are crowded behind the overturned buses arrayed across the top of South Bridge, cowering from my wrath. I can't help but giggle as I continue the

assault; it comes out as a strangely garbled sound from my shape-shifted mouth. All ten of my long writhing tentacles brandish some sort of weapon: signposts make great clubs, of course, and rubbish bins are just the right size and weight for throwing.

John gives me a strange look from where he's perched on the top of a Sainsbury's lorry, a halo of fireballs about his head awaiting their turn to let fly. I realise that he's being very conservative in their use, aiming only at those synthetic minions with dangerous looking weapons, or those that are very clearly taking charge and trying to organise a breakthrough. Sarah on the other hand is far behind us, keeping an eye on Chambers and Infirmary Streets while setting up god-knows-what with her electronic devices.

The last of the bins goes flying over the barricade and lands with a satisfying squelch. I look around for something else to throw...

"No, Hannah, not the cars!"

... and settle instead for raiding the nearby slot casino for machines. The jingle of coins drowns out John's approving grunt, before we both turn back to holding the line with fire and metal and lots of ammunition.

Soon, the synthetic organisms get inventive in response. A number of them try to use a car for cover, slowly advancing behind it as they try to close the distance between their barricade and ours without falling victim to our attacks. It succeeds for a while, at least; they're able to shelter from the worst of the slot machines falling on their heads, and the sense of anticipation from the enemies on the Royal Mile egging them on is almost palpable.

John waits until they get almost halfway across the killing zone, before squinting his eyes and concentrating. Moments later, their shield explodes in a fiery blast of shrapnel, and the cheers of encouragement dissipate into shrieks of disappointment. Splattered fuel burns furiously across the middle of the road, deterring further attempts at forcing the issue.

"I thought you said not the cars!" I gargle, rather unintelligibly, but thinking the thoughts towards him at the same time such that Sarah's telepathic network can relay my words. His response is an apologetic smile and a sheepish shrug, which doesn't do much to assuage my anger. *My* response is thus to reach out and grab five of the nearest vehicles, which soon arc their way through the evening sky and impact amongst the cobblestones with the scream of tortured metal.

John barely stands around to admire my handiwork before hastily scrambling down from his vantage point.

This isn't Hollywood, you know, I chide. Cars don't randomly explode upon impact... unless you use your superpowers on them, of course.

I know, is his quick reply. But they're bringing out the heavy guns now... and it's about time for...

John, Hannah, Sarah interrupts. They're coming down Chambers Street!

... that.

... oh.

Go on ahead, he urges, quite unnecessarily since I remember the plan that he's drilled into me four times already and am already turning back into human form. When they come down Chambers Street, abandon the first barricade and retreat to the second. Soon, I'm sprinting

down past the clothes shops that line the northern half of South Bridge, John breathing heavily behind me, the Sainsbury's lorry exploding in a display of brilliant pyrotechnics. I bet he enjoyed that more than he should have.

It's not long before the synthetic organisms realise what we're up to, and with screeches of primal fury and predatory instinct, they're coming after us. I hear the soft plop of something rancid and acidic as it lands near us, sizzling as it begins eating away into the asphalt. But by this time we're nearly at the junction of South Bridge and Chambers Street, and there's plenty of cars for cover, and if I remember correctly we have another surprise in store for them...

BOOM!

The entire bridge shudders and groans. I turn back for a moment, catching John sheltering behind a blue Toyota and peering out tentatively at a cloud of growing dust and smoke. I pause as well, long enough for him to see me waiting and start to catch up with me again.

"I think that's done it," he gasps, completely out of breath, and indeed as the initial debris clears from sight, I can see that there's a gaping gap where the bridge once spanned Cowgate. I also notice that he's sweating quite badly now, and that his face is rather pale... far paler than can be explained by the running that he's just done. For that matter, I feel rather light-headed and weak as well... I guess we might be pushing ourselves quite a bit.

"I don't think it'll hold them for long, though..." he continues ruefully, though, urging me on with a flimsy gesture. I break out into a run again, headed towards the line of cars strung from the Blackwell's bookstore on my left to Old College on my right, remembering to keep well away from the oily film that coats the majority of the road.

Hurry! Sarah's voice in our heads is very urgent now. *They're almost upon...*

She breaks off, confused, and I instinctively search for what's stumped her. Then I'm struck dumb as well, as I watch Donal casually stroll across the junction, sending random blasts of coruscating electricity over Sarah's head. He walks by the barricade of vehicles as if they're not there, before disappearing up Nicolson Street without so much as a by your leave.

... ummm...

... weird.

That's Donal for you, John summed up. *Sarah, do you mind warning Maria about the Underpass? Hannah, I think we should get a move on, before...*

This time, it's John's turn to trail off, and I realise that he's staring back at the gulf in the road behind us.

... before they manage to completely fill that gap, he finishes, unwittingly broadcasting a mental picture of a heap of synthetic organisms nearly clogging Cowgate with their bodies, allowing their comrades to travel over them. A brief pause, and then, *Nice. Forgot you could do that, Sarah.*

Sarah takes the compliment in her stride, clearly more concerned about the things advancing along Chambers Street. Only until she's forced to duck behind the ironwork lamppost do I realise just how close they must be.

I'm going to transform into something better for fighting... I tell my friends, taking a deep breath as I brace myself for the brief moments of pain that always accompanies the shapeshifting. *Cover me.*

Wait...

Not there, Hannah!

I open my eyes, but I'm not quick enough. Still partway through my transformation, something heavy and powerful catches me in the stomach. It's as if I'm being blown away by a powerful gust of wind; there's no pain, even as I'm carried in slow motion thirty feet across the road and through the open door of the electronics shop that Sarah raided earlier. I'm even aware of Sarah's shout and of John's desperate lunge as he tries to catch me.

Then there's the tinkle of cracking glass and the scream of collapsing metal, and suddenly there's no light to see anything by.

Okay so, I'm on the blockade with Lu & Richard, the synthetic organisms are coming - loads of them running up the hill, - and I am *not* a happy caterpillar. Do you know why I'm not a happy caterpillar. I'm not happy because I'm standing on a wooden wall at the top of a hill, above a sea of enemies, the sun is setting making shadows across everything like a movie, it's all perfect for Johnny Depp to come and rescue me, but he's not appearing! And to make matters worse my powers don't seem to be as effective against some of the organisms anymore. There are the large hairless gorilla things who smashed through the cars at the bottom of the hill, heat doesn't seem to bother them, which is unfair, and even the people-like ones with claws and blades seem to be less worried about it.

They've reached the brambles and are trying to climb up, Richard and Lu are holding them off with their weapons and I'm trying to blast those further away, trying to thin the numbers the boys have to deal with. I've decided to start alternating colours, it's a good distraction to what's going on, keeps my mind off the angry snarling faces snapping up at us, and the blades slicing back and forth around me. I've switched to blue, and changed the mix of different emissions, it's catching them off guard a bit at least. The first few groups I hit barely make it to within the reach of Richard's spear, let alone Lu's sword. Then something weird happens. One of the synthetic organisms reacts to the blast. It doesn't collapse like the others, it looks up at me and it's eyes glow strangely. I try again, lots of blue light striking it in the chest, and the skin where it's been hit changes, becoming darker, looking like metal almost. I try a third time, and it moves faster than before, dodging the burst of energy. That strange metal-looking stuff has spread over almost all of it's chest, it's almost as if my attack made it more powerful.... it reacted to the blast... it could be the blue light.... It could be LovTAP! Actual working LovTAP! I blast at it again, if I can get a sample of it we might be able to fix the problems we've been having with the LovTAP system!

"Guys! Try to get that one!" I point vigorously at it but the boys aren't paying attention, they're both trying to prevent a group of organisms from reaching the top of the barricade.

"Fine then! I'll do it myself!" I say discharging light and heat at the now surprisingly nimble synthetic organism. It dodges the first few beams of light, others getting incinerated in it's place, so I try to guess where it's moving to. I don't want to damage it's DNA so I can't use certain parts of my power, which is good, the higher intensity stuff still tires me out quite quickly. It's jumping towards the barricade, nearer Lu & Richard, maybe I can distract it enough for one of them to get a sample.

"Hey you! Over here!" I shout waving at it. Lu looks up for a moment, moving too fast for any of the organisms to take advantage of his surprise. "That one!" I point at it again, and Lu realises what I mean. He jumps down, faster than I can see, there's a crash and a screech as he slashes at it and then he's scrambling back onto the barricade, narrowly missing the tip of Richard's spear in his hurry. He drops something beside him, it's got a metal layer and it's oozing icky blue blood that's going to stain the wood if we're not careful. LovTAP, finally! We've got a sample! I almost forget where I am... until something large slams into the high ground and I almost fall. One of the big ape things has reached us. I start trying to channel infra-red and x-rays into it, but it's still coming. The boys have noticed, Lu & Richard exchange a look before Richard runs over, Lu dashing between various points on the ramparts holding them off in lots of places at once. Richard stabs at it with his spear, but the blade catches in its thick skin and the shaft bends and snaps. Weaponless bar the bulky leather gloves on his hands he tries punching it. For some reason it's head snaps backwards. There's a strange hum, like a disposable camera charging up and he hits it again. I join in, lighting it up again, hoping the combined attack will stop it. This time the energy leaves an obvious scar behind and when Richard slams his hand into the burn the creature roars. He pulls one hand back, to hit it again, that camera whine starts up getting louder than before, and then suddenly there's a loud crump and his hand vanishes in a puff of red mist, bone fragments impacting on the gorilla. His eyes go wide with shock & pain, so I zap it again and this time it goes down, falling back onto other smaller things. I blast the area around it and turn to Richard, his hand's almost completely regrown and there are fragments of wire and what look like batteries falling out of his wrist. He sees my gaze,

"An experiment. Not a complete failure, but..." he stops talking and waves his wrist the last bits of debris falling away and the wound closing.

I turn back towards the Lu and see creatures starting to reach the top of the palisade. I can't hit them from here without getting Lu.

"Duck!" I shout, and he does, the purple ray slicing through the first one, but two more take it's place. Richard's picked up another sword now, and some kind of wooden club and he's chopping at the ones near us. A blade stabs the air in front of me and almost instinctively I blast the organism crawling towards me. There are too many of them around the front, they're climbing onto the bodies of the others to get up to us and there are more of the larger things approaching up the hill.

Something pulls at my skirt, a strange dog-like thing has caught it between it's teeth and is pulling me away from those below.

"Let go!" I shout, kicking at it wildly, before blinding it with a flash.

As I look up however I see there are more of them pouring out of a side street, a pack of the dogs bounding ahead. They're surrounding us!

"Guys! Behind..." I start to shout before something hits the barricade, knocking my feet out from under me, and throwing me to the floor.

Ah, that fucking hurt! I touch my ear gingerly, and look down at my hand to see blood. The synthetic organism with the broadsword skimmed it as he tried to take my head off. What was

Matt playing at? I look up across the square from the top of McEwan Hall just in time to see Maria jump on her broomstick and glide into the midst of the synthetic organisms, clearing a landing space as she does so. One by one, they're thrown outwards, landing on trees and other synthetic organisms, some being impaled on upturned weapons, none of them getting within five metres of Maria. More of them are pouring in from the Potterow underpass now. Knowing I can't stay out of the fight for long, I take a last second to look for Matt, in case, in his moment of absolute stupidity, he'd gotten himself killed. I can see him standing next to Teviot, staring at the fiasco in Bristo Square, looking scared. I wonder if he's panicked in the heat of battle but I don't have time to find out.

A few synthetic organisms have branched out and begun to encircle Maria. One, a creepy furry thing with two arms, four legs and webbed feet, raises its axe and starts to charge. In a split second I'm down there. I grab hold of it, teleporting it away from Maria, and, feeling quite inventive, leave it sticking out of the Potterow Dome. It looks down at its predicament and then back up at me before starting to scream and shout, flailing its arms helplessly and cursing me. "Hehe." I chuckle for a second then I rejoin Maria on the ground.

"Anything I can do?" I ask during a moment's respite.

"Just get rid of as many of them as possible! And watch out!"

As I whip around I see a four legged wolf sort of thing with metal teeth come flying at me. Instinctively, I pull my arm back and I punch it right in the face. It disappears. I look around, a little confused, and I see it fall onto the corner of the stairs into the square. I look down at my hands.

"Cool." I turn and head into the horde, touching, hitting or slapping as many of them as I could, all of them disappearing instantly and turning up a few hundred feet above us or in other more convenient places. Within a few minutes there were about a dozen of them shouting, swearing and cursing at the top of Potterow.

After having cleared a substantial space, I pause to wait for the last few synthetic organisms to hit the ground and watch Maria fighting them for a while. Behind her, Matt is still standing close to Teviot. He isn't looking quite as transfixed anymore but his concentration is definitely breaking. Every now and then a synthetic organism catches sight of me or Maria, and tries to attack us directly. I gain more scratches and bruises as a couple of them take me by surprise.

Keep it together, Matt!

He shakes his head and as his concentration is renewed we seem to disappear again. The few synthetic organisms fighting us are taken out in their confusion. A crackle of electricity can be heard moving out of the underpass and into the square. We crane our necks to see Donal striding across the battlefield, looking straight ahead, any synthetic organism which gets within a few metres of him being fried into an ugly brown mess on the floor.

Evening.

He continues past Potterow, heading for the Informatics Forum, nodding to Maria fighting a couple of the wolves at the edge of the square. A couple more minutes pass as we dispose of small groups of the things, trickling steadily out of Bristo Place and the underpass. I hear a shout of pain behind me and I glance back at Maria, who is holding a gash on her cheek looking absolutely furious. God help the poor sod that messes up her face. With one hatred-fueled look

she tears it's head off. More catch sight of her, though thankfully none of them seem to be able to see me. Maria's clearly sick of this. She hoists up her broomstick in both hands and, holding it in front of her, starts to spin on the spot. Every synthetic organism within a twenty metre radius is thrown off it's feet with a mighty force. Some hit nearby buildings and stained them with blood, others are thrown into the road and several crash through Potterow Dome. I watch with some satisfaction as it caves inwards on itself, taking its newly acquired residents with it. "Nice."

"Thanks," Maria smiles back at me breathlessly, the blood from the cut on her cheek creeping towards her chin. This is taking a lot out of her, I'm beginning to wonder how much longer she can keep going. I can't take this lot on alone, especially not if I can be seen. If we lose anyone, we'll have to retreat. But I'm forced out of my reverie by a fresh wave of oncoming creatures. I watch them advance, weapons raised and yelling crude war cries. Then I raise my hands, index and middle fingers together and thumbs at a right angle. I grin at Maria, cock my imaginary pistols and charge into the fight.

Marta's down. The hairless ape-like things that they've been using as bulldozers to clear our defenses slammed into the wall with so much force I can see the wood's splintered from here. I've got to get to her or she's going to get overwhelmed. The strange wolf-like things are bounding up the back of our ramparts, easily gaining the top due to the lack of brambles. Their appearance isn't uniform, none of the enemy seem to be, there may be conserved parts but each one seems different from the last. The 'wolves' have mostly canine bodies but there the similarities end, strange fang-filled beaks or shark-like maws with rows of metal teeth mix with rows of serrated mandibles and silvery tusks. I cut down at the first one to reach me, the blade of the dao quivering as I wrench it out of the synthetic, stinking flesh. One of the humanoids stabs at me, the metal and bone blade that makes up its arm almost catching me, but I deflect the blow by twisting my body and arcing my guai down onto the things arm with an audible crunch. It seems my years of martial arts aren't entirely going to waste, even if I've now realised the supreme arrogance that led me to believe I could have survived anything like this before. Within minutes of the first wave joining melee I'd received at least three instantly fatal wounds, let alone the number of crippling or superficial blows I'd sustained. My power is keeping me alive, even as my training puts the enemy down.

I've almost reached her, I can see her through the crowd, she's conscious, thank god and back on her feet, the light from her blasts hidden by the press of the enemy. A few surface cuts on her legs but nothing major, good. I spin the guai down onto the skull of one of the humanoids, enjoying the extra reach it gives me over a standard tonfa. The thing's teeth gnash at air and bloody spittle leaks from its lips as it goes down, flailing limbs cutting at the pair on either side of it. That'll give Marta a bit of space, now where's Lu. There. It's got to be. A flash moving too fast for my eyes to pick up on, and an organism collapses. He's over by the first of the fallen battering-rams, the gorilla-thing Marta and I had eventually stopped. That was an experiment with mixed results. The instant camera batteries with the flash charging system had worked, at first, before what must have been a major short had blown the battery, and my hand. But it had worked however and with a bit more time and effort working out how to modify them

properly perhaps I'll have a useful fall-back weapon, nowhere near as cool as foot-long claws but it'll do in a pinch and without military funding.

The humanoids are gaining the wall in droves now, and with the canines behind and the gorillas rapidly pulling our defense apart, the situation is quickly becoming very dangerous for Lu and Marta, they're going to need to pull out very soon.

My train of thought is distracted by the appearance of one of the humanoids - more intelligent than the others or perhaps considering, less - raising something in its clawed hands, I can't quite make it out. It's got my bow. It strains against the wood, its too-long arms flexing with a strength belied by the seeming frailness their bony structure. Time almost seems to stand still as it brings its arms down in a vicious snapping motion, the wood bending, resisting, almost holding until the force is too much and it fractures, splitting and tearing. The crack fills my mind and I feel years of repressed rage crash against my consciousness. I'm moving, roaring at the thing, not thinking, my brain gone, washed away in a torrent of fury. I'm on its chest. My now empty hands wrapped around its head, my legs bent, pressed against its chest. My bare fingers move across its warped human skull, its toothy jaws snapping at me. I don't feel the pain. My fingers find its temporomandibular joint, overly exposed, bony and obvious - a small part of my mind notes that I should be sure to bridge out this defect when I have a sample of the organisms - lock behind it and pull. My shoulders tense and burn. I feel my muscles straining, pulling at my bones in ways my body shouldn't be able to. The unconscious need to limit my strength to prevent accidental damage overwritten by my subconscious. My shoulders dislocate but keep pulling. My scapulas flex, bend and fracture, reminiscent of my bow, now discarded in pieces on the ground beneath us. But my body is repairing itself. As it breaks it heals. And I'm still pulling. It gives first. Its lower jaw, barbed, serrated and fanged tearing loose in my hands, tendons and muscles snapping, that sickly yellow blood beginning to flow. I almost overbalance as my hold goes, but it's toppling first and I follow it down. Falling with it, balls of my feet pressing into its sagging ribcage as we land. Almost before the shock of impact has spread throughout my body I'm tearing at it again. My nails ragged as they slash at its throat. They gain purchase, and I wrench up and out. Gore sprays across me, red and yellow.

Three lancing spears through my abdomen bring my thoughts back. My head whips round, too fast, too hard, my neck cracks, but I seem them. Three too-human things behind me, blades embedded in my exposed back. I twist explosively, their blades still in me as I turn, slicing through flesh, their passage like worms through soil, leaving no trace of their passage but a slight dampness as I heal. One passes through my spinal cord, neatly severing it. For a moment my legs feel nothing, my entire body below the cut numb. I keep turning, the muscles unable to stop firing in time, the force of my motion inexorable. As my feet land feeling comes back, the precious nerves re-knitting, re-connecting, re-gaining control. My spine aligns with a series of vicious cracks and I shoulder charge the first organism. My turn threw them off balance their blades being drawn wide and when I hit the first one it stumbles backwards. My hands reach out for weapons and find two pieces of my bow. I grip them, anger flaring again, and come up at them. The one off balance receives a strike to its head, the second is striking out as I slam the splintered end of my bow deep into its stomach, its blade catching the side of my head.

Blood covering my remaining eye I throw myself at the third, impaling myself on its blade as I close the distance and force the fragment of wood up through its jaw and into its skull. I pull the weapon embedded in my chest free and turn, my head regenerating and my vision restoring as I look around for more enemies and weapons. A scream pulls me all the way back, iron walls of self-control snapping closed around the beast, like the jaws of a steel-trap, caging it once more, locking it away. Marta. It's got to be her. Where? Too many. Can't see her.

There.

She's surrounded. Shit. Stupid fool you left her. You left her alone and in danger. I run past a pair of organisms, heedless of the wounds they inflict upon me as I pass them. My mind screams at me. Then I spot Lu. His right arm is limp by his side. There's blood all over him. Shit. He's on his feet at least and they're together but they've been driven away from the safety of the wall and the organisms are closing the ring around them. A wolf-thing snarls and leaps at me and I kick it away, almost instinctively. There's the broken end of my spear sticking out the the first gorilla, the cracked, burned flesh sucks at the blade as I pull it free. I spin the broken shaft and throw it overarm at an organism about to grab Marta. It wobbles in the air, but flies true enough, striking the thing in the shoulder and throwing it backwards and away from her. She blasts outwards, searing white light, cutting into a few of them. Her lines of fire are limited by Lu, she can't risk hitting him. I run towards them again, gathering up my sword as I pass it, and throwing myself on the backs of the creatures threatening my friends. My impact throws the group off balance, disrupting their lines somewhat and giving the pair some space. The respite lets Lu move out of Marta's way and she blasts again, I dodge most of the blast, but it doesn't matter, the pain is so temporary now.

"Run!" I shout, "we can't hold here anymore! Lu! Can you run?"

He nods, "Then get Marta and get out of here! I'll try to stop them coming after you!"

Marta blasts again and I hear the screeching of the dying organisms, the scent of their seared, warped flesh reaching my nose moments before my own senses shut down.

"Run!" I shout again, my throat raw and bloody from the blast. I can't see, the intense light causing my pupils to screw shut, but when they return I catch a glimpse of the pair of them, Marta clinging to Lu's back as they vanish.

I gather up his discarded sword and turn back towards the enemy, the closest still reeling from blindness and pain are easily dispatched. Quick strikes killing or disabling them before they can regain their senses. There are more moving up though, the bigger ones, crossing the ramparts now, and the dogs running around them, looking to get past me and chase down their escaping prey.

I need a weapon more suited to this, something to keep the crowds of them at bay, something with reach. My eyes cast around, even as I drop into a deep stance, my swords held out in front of me, ready. The first dogs come, the pack still unsure, just the pair to test me. One leaps and I duck, lifting my blade into its belly as I lash out low at the legs of the second. They go down, the second yelping pitifully as it dies. They hold off for a moment, the pack thinking, considering, almost like a single organism, a colony of wolf-dog-things all teeth and claws, muscle and expectation. This is my chance, whilst they're thinking.

I roll to my right, tucking under the jaws of one of them and throwing my arm out to my weapon bag, discarded and open on the ground. My fingers brush against wood. I pull, curling them closed around the haft of my three-sectional-staff, swapping it for the swords I was holding, as one of the humanoids lashes out at me, trying to catch me off-balance. I turn the blow aside at the last second, the edge of its axe still slicing across my upper arm before I connect and knock its weapon away. I rise, striking out with the other end, hammering at the thing's elongate human head. It reels, falling into the pack and dispersing them for a moment. Before they can recover I strike again, a large over-arm sweep holding only one end and slamming the other sections down onto the struggling creature, and a number of others, their demise heralded by a spurt of that same tawny, red flecked fluid. Yanking the weapon back into my hands, I step back and whip it into an arc trying to bring it down again on the cluster of dog things. They were expecting it, and they split, parting like water before the blow can reach them, darting in and around it, to reach me, jaws snapping reminiscent of a school of piranhas as they tear into my exposed legs. Pain flares and then passes. Two of them pull back, shredding flesh as they do so, others hold on, using their entire body to shake their heads back and forth viciously worrying my limbs. I ignore them, the pain receding as I draw the length of the staff back to me and strike out once more, a horizontal sweep with one loose section to clear some space and to limit the numbers that can attempt to pass me in pursuit of Lu and Marta. They're trying though, some of them breaking off, or ignoring me completely to give the whirling wood and chain a wide-berth and slip past me. Shit I hope they got away. Images of Lu collapsing from blood loss leaving Marta at the mercy of the oncoming horde assault my mind. I've got to give them more time, got to hold as many back as possible. It was my damn fault they were hurt in the first place. Never should have bloody left them. The anger pushes me on, drives me to shake the wolf-things free, kicking them back, stamping on the head of one that's slower than the others. A humanoid leaps in, faster than the others, keening strangely as it slashes at my face with its serrated claws, arm-blade held back, ready to defend against my retaliation. I drop my guard, letting its claws find and hook into my ribcage, letting it use the leverage gained to plunge its bone knife through the cartilage and bone, going for my heart. I jab the three-sectional up, within the creature's guard, one end connecting with the bone of its chin, the other slightly behind stabbing at its throat. I headbutt it for good measure, thankful for my decision to wear contact lenses. Its bulk slows me down though and before I can extricate myself from its limp grasp another is reaching for me, a well placed cut severing one of my arms at the elbow, splintering bone and reducing my grip on my staff. I flail at it with the injured arm, even as it heals, my blows distracting it enough to throw off its aim and cause it to strike the arms latched onto me. My grip on the three-sectional is loose, but I try to spin it again, hoping to catch at least one, and give me some room to maneuver, to get some distance from the one beside me. It seems to predict the move and in attacking desperately, I've thrown myself off-balance again. Another brutal slice and the staff goes sailing away, my hand still gripping it. I'm heartened a little by seeing it strike and wrap around two other humanoids, throttling them and dragging them to the ground, but now I'm weaponless, and even more surrounded than before.

The weight of the body is still pulling on my chest, but thankfully my regenerating flesh is starting to push the claws free. It's giving me the freedom to move but there's still the one within reach that's been casually removing my limbs. Both arms are now almost entirely healed, the right still missing most of a hand, but close enough. I loop the left around the tattered, spindly arms in my chest and wrench upwards. Seeing what I'm trying to do the creature swings at me again, aiming for my head now, trying to disable me completely - little does it know - I duck, pulling harder, the combined force tears the claws free. Not pausing to give it a chance to recover I'm exploding upwards, casting the broken corpse aside and throwing myself at the thing, desperately scrabbling at it to keep its weapons under control. It fumbles a step as we collide and I'm able to hook one of its legs out from underneath it. It staggers and we both go down, one of its blades catching in my leg, but not enough to stop me. I punch out with both hands, gloves and weapons gone, relying on my fists to stun it. I feel the muscles tear slightly with the force, healing again almost instantly, and the blow connects with its jaw, pushing its mismatched teeth into one another, then I'm striking again, down on the pulpy thing reminiscent of a nose in the centre of its face. There's a crack and its eyes roll back.

My cheek stinging, I return Will's grin as he races off to repeat his new tactic. He's advanced very quickly in the last few hours. I regain my composure. Most of the synthetic organisms in the square were killed in the last move and I had a moment's respite as the survivors picked themselves up. I glance at Matt, who is staring in my direction but not, I realise, at me. His gaze shifts slightly to something behind me and I whip around to see a synthetic organism crouched on the stone wall of Bristo Square, on eye level with me. It's about half my height and shaped like one of the higher apes with grey and orange matte skin draped with a crude armour, and four limbs, each with a functioning hand. From the shoulder blades sprout leathery wings, which curl gargoyle-like over its hunched form, single-digit claws twitching near its face. A thin but bushy tail curls around its feet. It draws its lips back in what could be a smirk, revealing an uncharacteristic ensemble of (very large, very pointy) teeth, and draws a two-foot long sharpened metal pipe off its back.

A split second later it leaps at me, travelling nearly twenty feet before it freezes in midair. Hand raised between myself and it, I hold it for a few seconds, studying the features of its face and skeleton, examining familiar characteristics and breaking down its model organisms; chimp, fruit bat, lion...crocodile? It's glaring back me, anger and panic and it starts to shriek and yell indiscernible insults at me. Unimpressed, I give it a stern look and close my fist. The shrieking stops suddenly. The anger is replaced by pure fear and the organism's eyes widen as its organs and blood vessels contract. I watch it struggle to breathe, mercilessly. My fingers flew apart. The organism explodes, pieces of flesh and limbs and various organs flying everywhere, accompanied by a firework of red spray. I stand in a bloodstained circle, myself and my clothes as clean as before and stare at the oncoming synthetic organisms. I'm ready.

Several of them falter, having seen the fate of their companion. Amongst them are other flying monkeys, with different weapons and apparel but the same features and colours. They're almost exact clones, mass produced, evil and disposable, like pipette tips for the Devil's Gilson. I shake my head. I'm clearly spending too much time in the lab. The first of the organisms

reaches the edge of the square and also jumps towards me. I swing my broomstick like a cricket bat in both hands and, still a good distance away from me, the synthetic organism is thrown backwards into one of his comrades. But I had meant for him to fly further. This is not good. The adrenaline of battle is masking the fact that I'm running out of energy and my power is slowly waning. With some effort I push back the rest of the oncoming group and turn back towards Teviot. Several of the synthetic organisms have broken through mine and Will's defence and are heading straight for Matt. My cover and his must be down, but Will may still be avoiding detection. Perhaps Matt's power is also fading with fatigue. He's still looking in my direction, he hasn't seen the oncoming threat.

"Matt!!"

Too late, one of the synthetic organisms deals him a heavy blow to the back of the head and he collapses. I throw the others away from him into walls and onto spikes, making sure they couldn't recuperate, as behind me I hear a yell and Will suddenly appears near Matt, blood trickling from wounds on his arm and forehead.

"You have to get him out of here, we can't hold the square any longer!" I shout to Will. He pauses for second, as if wanting to ask why I wasn't coming, but remembering the broomstick in my hand he obliges. He grabs Matt's splayed arm, looks back at me and then vanishes. In the back of my mind I hear Sarah's voice.

Retreat! There are too many of them!

You don't say...

I turn back to the horde to see five or six creatures of various shapes and sizes bearing down on me, hatred and revenge filling their faces and driving them forward. Clumsily I attempt to sit on the broomstick but before I can muster the energy to lift off they have reached me. Two heavy, clawed hands grip my shoulders and pull me backwards off the broomstick. Other appendages, claws and tentacles tighten around my wrists and legs and I'm wrestled, screaming, to the floor. Panic consumes me as I struggle, my mind overcome with fear so that I cannot access the power that could save me. The broom is wrenched from my hand and thrown away and a set of jaws housing razor-sharp teeth close on my left leg, dig into my flesh causing me to scream again. The synthetic organisms are laughing in my distress as I pull at my bloodied limbs trying to free myself. Tears of fear and pain start to pour down my cheeks and I want to call for help, for Will or Lu or anyone to come, to release me, to rescue me. A biped looms over me, grinning mercilessly down into my eyes and I, terror stricken and gasping for air look back. His face was smeared with war paint, deep red and glistening black, highlighting the hideous smile and glinting black irises rimmed with blood-shot white. All down his body, stitched into every limb and knuckle were razor-edged slivers of metal. Still held down by his minions I cry out anew as he raises a long glinting spear, angling the point straight at my chest. No sound escapes me, I am beyond terror now. Why don't they know? Why have they left me? Why aren't they saving me?

"W -" "Wi -"

Will! Will! Anybody!?! The biped eyes glint.

"NO!!"

The spear descends, plunging towards me with a brutal, vengeful force and my body goes numb with the adrenaline as I contort in the grip of my captors. The sensation of life pouring away masks the pain I might have felt. In my mind's eye I see the synthetic organisms laughing and cheering over my broken, seeping body, tearing at my hair and clothes, mocking our attempts to stop them; the others unaware, in trouble of their own, suffering the same fate or worse; Edinburgh overrun with these creatures, other humans torn apart, played with, eaten; my friends and family and those of the others realising our horrible demise and cursing our stupidity for not running away; gravestones and monuments marking empty graves with nothing left to burn or bury.

I open my eyes. The biped's face is mingled shock and anger, the other creatures silenced or snarling, the spear tip...bent and mangled, two inches from my chest. Around me, a shield, a bubble like the ones I have been practising, produced by no conscious effort but instinctively protecting me. I live, I survive. The result of the BRIDGE construct is more than a superficial power. It is part of me, ensuring its survival in the genome by ensuring my survival in the world.

In the two seconds it takes the synthetic organisms to comprehend what has happened I reconnect with my power. The whole group fly away from me in a surge of energy born of a new chance at life. In a split second I jump to my feet, the pain in my left leg a distant throb. My broomstick zooms into my hand from wherever the things had thrown it. In another instant I'm away, rising out of the midst of synthetic organisms surging through Bristo Square. Several of the flying monkeys make leaps for my broom, grabbing at the bristles and my feet and the hem of my skirt, clawing at my already wounded leg. I kick them away, whether with my boot or my mind I neither know nor care. As I soar up above the buildings and the pounding of fresh blood in my ears fades I once again hear the thoughts of the others and their own battles. As I drift and listen, my mind returns momentarily to the way my power had saved me. Well...my very own selfish gene. Dawkins would love this. Protecting its carrier so that it's sure to get passed on to the next generation and persist in the human genome...hehe, sucker.

I'm cursing myself mentally as I finally regain my feet, wondering why I couldn't have moved quicker, why I let myself fall so behind her, why pyromantic powers are so useless at times like these. The concussive wave of one of the jerry-rigged mines that Sarah's been creating carried her out of sight barely before I could even react, much less do anything useful. Caught between the dark hole into which Hannah's disappeared and the advancing hordes of synthetic organisms on two sides, I hesitate for a moment, uncertain.

Then I hear an ominous rumbling from inside the shop, followed by the *clack-clack* of something I don't quite recognise. The shadow that soon makes its way out from the doorway isn't Hannah anymore, it's...

"I'm *back*."

... the Terminator.

Uhh... are you sure that you're not taking this a bit far? I ask, wondering how she managed to so accurately reproduce the crags in 'her' face. Hannah doesn't bother replying, merely deigning to toss Sarah - who's gaping at her in sheer delight - one of the smaller pistols that she's

decked out with. It doesn't reduce her arsenal that much, she's holding a massive pump-action shotgun in both hands, with rifles of various sorts strapped to her back and more pistols holstered at her waist. Obviously the electronics shop wasn't quite as benign as it made out to be.

The sounds of the advancing horde behind me intrude on my thoughts, and suddenly I'm quite sure that I don't want to be caught between Hannah and her foes. I scurry quickly out of the way, joining Sarah behind the corner of Old College.

Are you sure that...

... very sure.

The leader of the flanking forces stalks forth in challenge. It's a brutish beast, something of a cross between a wingless eagle and a gorilla, with a massive cannon strapped to its back and machine-guns held in both arms. Suddenly, Hannah's shotgun seems a bit underpowered. Until she reveals why she hadn't received even a scratch, despite having been knocked back more than ten metres and having landed heavily in the midst of glass and sharp metal. Six more hands sprout from her back, each holding a weapon of a different kind... rocket launcher, Gatling gun, a pair of assault rifles, and two basket-hilted claymores. As one they fire, and little's left of the flanking leader but a smear upon the statue halfway down the street. Sarah and I simultaneously pull a face in response.

Eww.

Hannah's not listening, and before long we're back to back in the middle of the junction, fighting off foes from all directions. Weapons fire, balls of fire, and random occurrences of telepathically-induced asphyxia and friendly fire combine to keep our enemies at bay.

The problem with standing in the middle of a junction, on the other hand, is that sooner or later the tide's going to sweep you away. When the first trickle of avian-faced foes start appearing behind us from Infirmary Street, I know it's time to fall back further.

"Get back behind the barriers, now!"

Sarah obeys without question, vaulting over the bonnet of the nearest car. Terminator-Hannah is slower to comply, or rather more reluctant to stop launching hails of lead and explosives down the length of Chambers Street. I literally have to protect her back from the growing numbers of organisms crawling up from Cowgate as we withdraw.

They're quick to take advantage of the lull, pouring forward in increasing numbers from all three directions. When they arrive at the junction, however, there's another surprise in store. Barely have they noticed the thick slick at their feet before I set it alight, and the entire petrol-soaked square goes up in fierce flames. What screams they emit are soon snuffed out, and the stench of burning oil overwhelms that of their rotting flesh. I turn away from the ghastly bonfire, paler and sweatier than its close proximity should make me.

"That might hold them for a bit," I murmur, noting that Sarah and Hannah - the latter beneath the leathery layer of skin that she's wearing in her shapeshifted form - are both just as pale and sweaty as I am. This battle is taking a lot out of us; we're giving ground only slowly and making them pay dearly for every step they take, but their numbers are almost bottomless. If we're not careful...

"Sarah, we need you back at the top of the hill. Keep an eye on South College Street, and concentrate on keeping in contact with the others. I'd rather you do that, than wear yourself out doing the dirty work."

Again, she looks slightly crestfallen, but she's quick to move out. The fact that the military trainee amongst us is happy with my orders is just about enough to restore some of my confidence.

"Hannah..."

Uh-oh.

I'm not used to her speaking in such a stilted, deep voice. The import of her message, though, is clear.

"Oh shallots. They're good."

From someplace or other, they've managed to dig up a flame-retardant strain of organism. These are now quite literally smothering the burning fuel that's blocking their path, creating a blanket of matted fur for their comrades to walk over. It won't be long before...

Double uh-oh.

Through the smoke overhead, countless shapes appear - ape-like creatures with leathery flaps of skin between their limbs, using the buildings to either side as handholds as they bypass the flames on the ground. Hannah turns towards the sky with her Gatling gun and opens fire, but barely has she done that before...

Triple uh-oh!

A swarm of baying hounds erupt out of the Old College courtyard; somebody must have left the back entrance open. Wolf-like things with avian beaks, they have us Hannah and me completely encircled in a flash of movement, and then they're growling at us menacingly, baring their metallic fangs. Suddenly, things don't look so good.

Hannah stops firing, seemingly transfixed by something other than the menacing hordes circling us. Suddenly she's not in Terminator-mode any more, oversized weaponry falling to the ground about her with cacophonous clatters; she sticks out an authoritative finger and screams, "OY!"

I follow the direction of where she's pointing, to find that a bunch of the smaller synthetic organisms have taken advantage of the chaos to break open the entrance to Blackwell's bookstore and have been caught in the act of frolicking about in the midst of torn pages and bent spines.

"OUT!" she cries hysterically, and none of them even question her. They simply obey. Even the more aggressive ones around us seem taken aback by this turn of events.

"JOHN!"

I know better than to point out that there are better ways of using my powers. As soon as the last of the gremlins leave the premises, I seal the building up behind them, fusing the glass back together before crystallising it such that it's almost impenetrable. I also know better than to attempt to do the same with the gremlins that are ransacking the Tesco Express next door; some things only work once, and are best left that way.

"THANK YOU!" Hannah huffs, breathing heavily by this point. For a moment, there's absolute silence, neither us nor the synthetic organisms daring to move.

Then one of the hounds gnashes its teeth together, as if snapping out of a daze.

Uh... maybe you'd like to get out of there?

Agreed, I think back to Sarah, who's peering at us in terror from behind the line of buses that we've set up at the top of the hill while taking careful pot-shots with the pistol that Hannah handed her earlier. Hannah's also struck dumb and motionless, perhaps having realised what she's just done. With no further ado, I grab her arm and half-drag, half-guide her up the hill, carving just enough of a fiery swathe through the ranks of the hounds that surround us to ensure our safety. The sudden flames are enough to shock them out of their surreal moment of tranquility, but before they can muster the will to pursue us, I cause the second barricade to combust explosively amongst their ranks, throwing them instantaneously into further disarray. Gas explosions are useful like that. It buys us just enough time to reach Sarah before they regroup again.

"Hannah, are you..."

"I'm... I'm fine, thank you," Hannah replies automatically to Sarah's question, although her voice is trembling and still slightly hysterical.

"Buses, please," I butt in to ask of her, feeling the world going round and round. My head is throbbing painfully with every pulse of blood, and my stomach is heaving nauseously with every breath. The adrenaline is starting to wear off now, and with it comes the realisation that I've picked up more than one scrape in the battle so far - burns on my legs, scratches on my arms, and a nasty gash on my back that I must have sustained in the last retreat. I'm also keenly aware of the fact that my powers are getting more and more difficult to call upon; that last explosion was almost too late to be of any use.

What's worse, Hannah is now sporting a number of bad cuts and bruises, and Sarah's looking distinctly pale, almost ghostly so. A deep sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me that we won't be able to hold the line much longer.

Hannah looks like she wants to object to my request, but she sees the look in my face and abruptly turns to obey. Eight heavily muscled arms sprout from her back, a pair for each of the double-decker Lothian buses - a 3, a 7, and two 47s, all headed in the same direction. With a heady sigh she begins to push; it doesn't take long until gravity and momentum take over, and then there's only a brief pause before the synthetic screams begin anew.

"We have to get out of here, now," Sarah says, and I nod in agreement. Hannah opens and closes her mouth once or twice in silent protest, then reluctantly acquiesces.

"We're not all Richard, after all..."

"Yeah..."

Hurriedly banishing the mental image that her off-the-cuff remark creates, I turn and squint at the great glass windows of Festival Theatre. A series of small controlled explosions blows out the entire front of the building, scattering shards of sharp glass across the road, makeshift caltrops to stall the pursuit. I breathe heavily, just about keeping myself from an unsteady totter, before turning back to the two women.

"Sarah, tell the others that we need to go, now... Hannah, take Sarah and get out of here." I override the protestations that I see rising in her face by not giving her the chance to voice them. "You're too tired to carry two of us, and without Sarah we don't stand a chance of

regrouping with the others. Besides, the glass might delay the ones on foot, but we've already seen that there's some who can glide over the top. Don't worry, I'll be right behind you..." A blood-curdling screech of fury distracts me, and I turn away to meet the threat.

Now go!

Hannah doesn't need any more convincing. Her back sprouts a second set of legs such that she's now a weird hybrid between a centaur and some strange eight-armed girl; I hadn't realised that she could alter parts of her body at will, and judging by the pleased expression on her face, neither had she. Sarah leaps on to the proffered back with as much nimbleness as she can manage, and as I launch a furious salvo of fireballs into the ape-like organisms swarming upon the walls above us, the two women gallop off towards safety.

I don't wait to watch as the army below hurls itself towards me. By the time they scale the final set of barricades that we've been hiding behind, I'm already halfway down the street and still running.

But there's no way that I can completely outrun them. I never was the best runner to begin with, and I'm already out of breath. It finally dawns upon me, as I watch Hannah and Sarah disappear into the distance, that I'm now alone with a whole horde of *things* on my tail, eager to tear me from limb to limb.

Oh.

I can't even feel Sarah's presence in my mind any more. Suddenly, I realise just how much I'd been relying on the connection.

Shallots.

One of the winged monkeys swoops down upon me from above, and I barely notice in time thanks to the long shadow it casts in the evening sun. Desperately I twist out of its path, only for two of its compatriots to take advantage of my stumble by joining in the assault. I meet them with enough conjured flame to deter them from coming closer... but by this time, I'm hemmed in on all sides.

That's... a bit of a bummer.

Understatement of the year, perhaps. Primeval leers surround me in every direction, tasting the instinctive fear that for a long moment is my only reaction. Metal fangs snap and gnash in anticipation; the eerie call of war hoots from the walls all around me is echoed by the snarls of the giant brutish gorillas as they force their way through the crowd. Wickedly shaped sharp implements are waved and brandished with fierce intent, accompanied by the staccato splurch of what passes as ranged weaponry amongst these organisms. The cloying stench of rotting flesh and dead skin is matched only by my own sweaty terror.

Focus and control!

But my powers refuse to obey the command. Maybe I've abused them too much, or maybe I'm just not strong enough to call upon them any more. Whatever the case, there's nothing left now between me and their merciless revenge.

I guess I can't fault them for this. I've killed so many of their comrades. Now, they're going to kill me.

The statement strikes home with cold, unfeeling finality.

There's no more options, no more hidden gambits, no more *deux ex machina* strategems. There's just me, and an army of emotionless things that have me cornered and completely outmatched.

There'll be no more tomorrow, no more future, no more hopes and dreams and unfulfilled regrets. There'll be only nothingness, an unresponsive and uncaring void where nobody will ever hear me screaming.

In that moment, I realise just how scared I am. Time slows as my mind struggles through a whole gamut of emotions: panic, terror, loss, pain, regret, loneliness, incomprehensibility, apathy, shame. I can see them reaching out for me through my wavering gaze, hear them laughing out and baying for my blood, smell their rancid pheromones of victory upon the tainted wind. My field of vision narrows until all I can make out is a pinprick of light in the distance, and the darkness pressing in oppressively from all around me. It's stifling and cold, and all so lonely, all so...

No.

There's a voice in my head. It isn't thanks to Sarah; I don't 'feel' her in my head. It's a lot more nostalgic, like a memory from long long ago. It makes me pause, makes me hold on to that light in the distance, makes me realise that I should not let it go.

John!

This time the voice is a lot closer, and it's different... less distant, somehow. I think I recognise it... it's... it's...

"Maria!"

My eyes flash open; at the edge of my peripheral vision, I can see her in the air, hovering just out of range of the organisms on the walls. Right in front of me, a bipedal organism ready to strike... the look in his eyes transforming from glee to fear as he realises what's about to happen.

Focus... and... control!

There's no focus, and precious little control. What results is nothing short of destructive. The ground explodes for fully thirty metres in all directions, bright fire welling up from beneath the asphalt before erupting into the dying twilight. For a moment a second sun blossoms on the face of the city, before fading away to leave only wasteland and a slightly charred me in its wake.

Maria doesn't hesitate, and she swoops in and allows me to jump on board the back of her broom. One final time before the synthetic organisms can recover, we manage to make it away.

"Sit still and don't disrupt the balance," she hollers at me, barely audible over the howling wind.

"It's difficult enough to control this thing when there's two of us..."

And neither you or I are in tip-top condition, I realise, recognising the tell-tale signs of exhaustion from too much use of power, blanching at the gash on her cheek and the claw-marks on her arms. I know better than to say anything out loud, though. It'd just break her concentration, and that would be disastrous to us both. Maybe... later... if I can remember through the swimming haze that clouds my reality.

I make the mistake of looking down only once, just long enough to see the Tesco Metro at which I work disintegrate beneath a barrage of heavy fire as the army regiments based south of

Edinburgh finally arrive upon the scene. From then on, however, I can only remember holding on for dear life... heights have never been my forte.

The solidness of the wood between by fingers, however, is a reminder of the reality of a single fact.

The fact that I'm still alive.