Everybody has an anchor to hold on to. Something that keeps them within their limits. Someone that keeps them human.

Taylor Hebert's is gone.
"You're saying I shouldn't take the credit," I said.

“I'm saying you have two options. Option one is to join the Wards, where you’ll have support and protection in the event of an altercation. Option two is to keep your head down. Don’t take the credit. Fly under the radar.”

My head was swimming – normally, I'd be getting up for my morning run less than four hours from now. Normally, I wouldn't be up this late. Of course, normally I didn't nearly die half a dozen times in the last thirty minutes, trying not to get eaten. Or barbequed. By a dragon, or as close as makes no difference. When I started out tonight, I wanted to... break up a mugging, maybe. Something helpful, sure, but something safe. Ish. Starting a death-feud with the whole ABB, unless I joined the Wards? That was not the plan. I'd thought about joining the Protectorate, maybe, but not nearly enough to just say 'Yes.' Being able to just... get away had kept me sane over the last few months, and Wards always had someone watching them. That might save my life, if Oni Lee went after me... but could I live that way?

For the rest of my life?

I shook my head, searching for the words, and winced as a wave of dizziness shot through me. Was it the adrenaline crash? Or had I been hit harder than I'd thought, earlier?

"I..."

Armsmaster raised a gauntleted hand, and turned slightly to the left, before turning back to face me.

"I need to go. Looks like Empire 88 is making a move on Coil again. Look — I don't think there's a good third option for you, long term. Lung can't let this slide, but he's not crazy enough to start a war with the entire Protectorate. And you're not even hinting you'd like to join the Wards."

I shrugged, and then winced as my shoulder twinged.
"It's a lifetime commitment."

He smiled, more brightly than I'd expected. It made him look friendly, and even handsome — briefly. "To those of us who take it seriously, yes." He dropped a card on the ground in front of me. "I can hold the details of the press release on Lung for 48 hours. Call in sick tomorrow, costume up, and call that number. I can arrange a ride-along. You'll do a patrol or two with some Wards. You don't have to join... but you certainly don't have to choose blindly."

He turned, and dropped out of sight. As I bent to pick up the card, I heard the soft roar of his motorcycle start up, then doppler into the distance. The card was printed on heavy stock, with a matte finish, and had nothing but a phone number printed on it.

276 762 7837

I was tired, bruised, and slightly singed.

There was at least a half-hour of jogging before I could make it home, and then I'd have to be up again in a handful of hours. But... it could have gone much, much worse. And, as I realized I wouldn't be going to school tomorrow, I even mustered a grin.

Not a bad night's work.

Chapter End Notes

The last chapter is a timeline, should there be any questions of dating events.
I never liked lying to my father.

There was a lot I didn't tell him: my lack of friends, the bullying, the way I blamed myself for my mother's death, how I'd been starting to avoid school altogether. And the superpowers. I didn't tell him about those either. Losing Mom had been... bad. For both of us. I didn't want to burden him with things he couldn't fix, but I didn't like lying to him, so I just didn't talk about some things.

A lot of things, actually.

Which is why, when I all but skipped out the door with a smile on my face and he called after me "Have a good day at school, honey!", I didn't bother to correct him, and just waved a "You too!" back.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd smiled on my way to school. And neither could he. But he hoped, desperately, that my life would get better somehow, and I could give him that hope at least. For today.

And while joining the Wards would mean talking to my Dad about most of things we never talked about, ripping the scab off of wounds that hadn't yet begun to heal, and locking myself into an organization that might combine the regimentation of a barracks with the pointless, vicious, drama of school, that wasn't a decision I had to make today. Today, today I had a good excuse to skip school. Not out of fear, or anxiety, or pain… but to be a hero. To work with other heroes.

And that was reason enough to smile.

I found a quiet alley between two abandoned warehouses, and swept the surrounding area with my bugs. No one was watching, so I changed into my costume, pulled out the card, made a call from a nearby payphone (the numbers spelled A-R-M-S-M-A-S-T-E-R — cute), listened to a recorded message stating "Your Protectorate Patrol will be with you shortly" (followed by some minimalist electronic music) and then went for high ground.

Eight minutes later, a young man in dark red and silver dropped onto the roof of the building where I was standing, followed by a neon blur that resolved into a woman in some kind of high-tech looking spandex, with computer-chip-like lines that pulsed softly, and then dimmed.
Aegis, current head of the Brockton Bay Wards, and Battery, one of the Protectorate heroes. Flight, strength, and toughness on the one hand, and invulnerability, superspeed, superstrength, and magnetism on the other. And here I was with my bugs. And pepper spray.

And... nothing to say.

Battery tilted her head toward Aegis, who spread his arms "I'm Aegis, this is Battery. Armsmaster asked us to take you along on a patrol and talk to you about life in the Wards, but he didn't exactly give us a lot of details. You're?"

I shook my head. "Hadn't picked a name yet."

Aegis whistled. "Your costume looks expensive. Usually, a cape picks a name and then builds a costume around that."

I looked down. "I made it."

He laughed. "Maybe we should call you Taylor?"

My face froze.

"I mean, unless your superpower really is making clothing, we probably won't call you Tailor." His voice lowered "That isn't your power, is it?"

I flushed, and was again grateful for my full-face mask. "No." A flood of insects surged up my legs, gathering along my arms as I raised them. "I do insects. And spiders have silk. But have you ever tried find a bug-themed name that doesn't sound villainous?"

Aegis laughed again, and there was muffled snort from Battery. "Well, maybe we'll come up with a name on the way. You have any movement tricks?"

"Mostly, I run."
He nodded, lifting slightly off the roof and drifting north at a walking pace toward the adjoining building. "We'll take it easy, then. Walk, talk about the Ward life, thwart anything we see that needs thwarting..."

I followed, Battery a silent presence at my back.

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Aegis turned out to be chatty enough for the three of us. Maybe that's just how he was, maybe he was trying to make me feel welcome.

If so, it was working.

I'd make the occasional 'mm-hmm' noise while he talked about the food (cafeteria, but good cafeteria), the salary (well, college fund), and the medical package (world-class). He was starting to discuss good lunch options in the area (and none-too-subtly trying to steer us toward a taco truck), when he paused. I focused, feeling all the disparate insects in my range that I'd been half-paying attention to, moving them about, feeling for the people in the area, looking for running, or fighting or... nothing. Normal foot traffic on the street we were paralleling, people in shops and apartments.

He waved me over, and pointed into the alley beneath where I could feel two people leaning against the concrete wall of a dilapidated apartment building, next to a badly torn chain-link fence. Another waited at the alley's mouth. As I reached the edge of the roof, I looked four floors down.

Azn Bad Boys, by the gang colors and the complexions.

He waved me back from the edge, and spoke softly. "Drug dealers. The PD can clear them out, but hey — can't exactly show you a day in the life without some action." He smiled until Battery whapped him on the back of the head.

"We'll go in first and take them down. You keep an eye out for runners. Join us afterward. We'll debrief over falafel; talk about what we did and why."

She stared at me until I nodded, and then the lines on her suit started glowing. Five long seconds they
grew brighter, while I desperately reached out my senses, identifying concentrations of bugs in the area, feeling the people within my range, trying to notice those with bugs on them, or add a bug or two to those without. Suddenly, she all but vanished, throwing herself over the side faster than I'd ever seen anyone move. From the bugs on her, I could feel her pushing off the underside of one of the fire escape landings, jumping straight down, as if falling wouldn't be fast enough. Aegis flew after her, diving to ground level. By the time he reached them, Battery was again standing still and one of the dealers was on the ground, retching, with a pistol crumpled like wastepaper beside him. The other was running for exactly as long as it took Aegis to fly by him and smack him on the back of the head. He pinwheeled down, and slumped — limp and unconscious. So fast. And strong!

So that's what the Protectorate was like in a fight.

Scary, but reassuring too.

I focused my attention again, feeling my bugs, trying to sense any of them on people who were suddenly running. As I started clambering down the fire escape, I found two. The one at the alley's mouth, probably the lookout, broke into a dead sprint. Someone else, on the dirt lot on the other side of the chain link fence had also gone from lounging to rapid movement, though in his case it was more like a slow and wheezing jog. I only had a handful of bugs on each of them, but even the sprinter would take several minutes before he could clear my range — unless there was a car waiting.

With the directions they were running... there.

A small park, with a pond, and trees carefully trimmed clear of the power lines. A drifting haze of dragonflies swept in front of the sprinter, and the double handful of spiders that was their cargo leapt onto him, skittering under his clothes and biting — no venom, not that he knew that. He shrieked, and fell to the ground, rolling about. The other saw, and then turned to cut through the space behind a restaurant. A tidal wave of cockroaches boiled out of an overstuffed dumpster in reply. He was swarmed under, and promptly fainted. As I reached the last landing before the street, I frowned.

There was someone running, in the building across the street.

And behind him, wind — coming through a door left open. Fleas and roaches swept the abandoned apartment as I turned to look: the open window was six stories directly above where the two captives lay groaning while Aegis cuffed them. I vectored more bugs onto the runner, building up a more detailed picture. A young man, with a duffel bag. And in the apartment he'd left behind, fleas and cockroaches found... dust. And small vials.

Enough to guess why he ran.
I tracked his progress, mapping the building with my insects: stairs, leading to a fire exit on another side of the building. I gathered a dense swarm above it while I dropped to the ground and walked over to Battery — Aegis was twirling a third set of handcuffs around one finger.

I should probably start carrying those.

But until then, I'd have to improvise. The one who'd passed out was easy: he didn't even notice as spiders began cocooning his hands together. The other one was a little more troublesome. I only had the spiders biting him when he moved — you'd think that'd be a clear enough message to stay still, but it wasn't. And it wasn't like I wanted to hurt him: so far, he'd gotten what was basically a dozen mosquito bites. I couldn't even be sure he'd noticed the bites — he might just be rolling around trying to get the spiders off him — and I didn't really want to escalate to using venom.

Unlike Lung, he wouldn't regenerate.

So, something that would get him to stay still, without really hurting him... I reached out. There. The buzzing of a swarm of bees the size of his head six inches from his face did make him freeze up, and after that it was easy to start webbing his hands together.

Battery turned to me. "First time out?"

"Second."

She nodded. "It takes a bit, before you can just jump in. Training helps."

I blinked.

Aegis spun the cuffs. "There was a lookout at the mouth of the alley. Could have picked him up, didn't have to — why Battery put you on him. I could have gotten him, or Battery's more than fast enough to have done all three... but she didn't want to leave you out."

I tilted my head. "He's down and bound, over there." I pointed through the building. "And the lookout for the escape through the fence is... there." I pointed again.
A piercing shriek and thud announced that the runner from the stash apartment had exited the fire door and found out what it's like to have a mass of bugs half again your weight fall on you. He managed to knock himself out by headbutting the wall trying to thrash his way clear, so I started right in on binding him and continued "And the one who was trying to escape with this place's stash is just around the corner."

The cuffs lost momentum and dropped.

Battery, as expressionless as ever, grunted "Show me."

I hunched my shoulders and began walking, sorting the swarms I'd gathered at each runner. The *useful* bugs I separated out, to join the swarm I had on me as I passed nearby; the rest I scattered. The one runner still awake did try to move, but sat right back down again, hyperventilating, after I had a single bee land on his nose.

Aegis cuffed the stash runner and opened the duffel bag, closing it and slinging it over his shoulder with a low whistle.

Battery nodded, and followed me to the next closest, the fat one behind the restaurant. "Spider silk?"

I nodded.

Aegis used his last pair to cuff him too, smiling. "Second time out? What was the first one like?"

I thought about that on the way over to the last one. "Scary."

Battery smiled as she cuffed him, the kind that didn't show teeth. "Lung was brought in last night."

Aegis' smile *did* show his teeth. "That's a story you're going to have to tell me over a drink."

Battery's glare could have chilled ice.
"A perfectly non-alcoholic beverage. Fruit juice, possibly. While we enjoy a nutritious lunch." I'm still not sure how Aegis managed to deliver that in a respectful tone and with a straight face, but he did.

Practice, probably.

I'd raised my eyes, and had even cracked a smile, secure in the knowledge that my mask would hide it.

If this is what being a Ward was like, maybe I would think about joining after all. Sure, they were probably putting their best foot forward, but I could work with Aegis. And while both Battery and Armsmaster seemed pretty serious, they also seemed... reliable. I raised my head to look at the cloudless sky, and saw a cape on a building across the street from the park we were in. She leapt down, black cloak billowing, and floated more than fell. Landing lightly, she crossed the street beneath the arch formed by branches and power lines and stood over our final prisoner. I ran through the list I'd memorized from the wiki.

From her outfit, she'd have to be... Shadow Stalker.
"All this way, and it's over before I get here?"

Aegis turned to face her. "You're off your patrol route."

"Nothing happening. Thought I'd get some action, see the fresh meat." She toed the cuffed ABB lookout at her feet. "No action left, looks like." Her mask — a woman's face, frozen in a stern frown — jerked toward me. "I'm Shadow Stalker."

There was something about her, the way she moved, the way she spoke, the way she loomed over me that made me feel nervous. Threatened. A power? She didn't have a power like that — that the wiki knew about, anyway. The ability to make herself and the things she was carrying insubstantial, and a crossbow with tranquilizer darts. Even so, I felt swarms gathering in the park, in response to my sense of threat. I had to consciously disperse them, something that was... hard.

Like trying to smile and look calm, when all you wanted to do was cry.

Or hit something.

What was she doing to me?

Aegis stepped in. "Hasn't picked a name yet. We've been using 'New girl', 'Bugs', and 'Tailor'."

"Tailor?"

"She made her own costume. Not her actual superpower."

The mask turned to me, and I hunched, looking at her feet. What was it about her? "Well, Tailor — if you do join up we'll have a locker for you. And maybe you'll even learn how to fight."

Aegis chopped his hand down.
"Right, patrol, black marks. I get it." She ghosted out and leapt, a slow floaty jump that took her four stories up and thrice that in distance, departing the park in a different direction than the one from which she'd come.

He turned to me and shrugged. "Some of the Wards are friendlier than others. She's... pretty much at the low end on that." He paused, and glanced behind him — a PRT armored vehicle had pulled up, and Battery was pointing out the locations of the other cuffed criminals. "So!" He clapped his hands. "Tacos?"

We were sitting on a roof with some benches with Battery in the middle. The tacos had been... nice. I'd eaten on the other side of the of little building that housed the stairwell — a full face mask didn't really leave me many options for eating but taking it off, and nice as they'd been, I wasn't ready for that.

Battery had taken losing the fight over what to have for lunch the same way I'd seen her take everything: without any sign of disturbance. She had, however, spent the last two minutes explaining to Aegis why a flyby punch to the head was an unnecessarily risky takedown to use on anyone not a Brute.

I shivered when she turned to me. "You're not in the Wards yet, so I'll hold off on the negative criticism." I stifled a chuckle as Aegis wiped his brow in an exaggerated fashion. "You fought as a Master fights: with your minions rather than your person. Wise. But a smart enemy will look for you, and try to bypass your swarms. Have you considered decoys? Screening off enemy vision with clouds of bugs?"

I shook my head.

"It's also worth having an option if it does come to hand to hand. Are you prepared for that?"

I pulled the can of pepper spray out. "It's not much, but..."
She nodded. "It's a start. Anything else?"

I showed her one of the EpiPens, and she nodded. "Smart. Accidents happen, and people die... but you can minimize them. Disabling — if possible — is best. Maybe a taser. Foam, if you join us. And tools: restraints, communications..."

I swallowed, remembering how much easier last night would have been if I'd had a cell phone, if I could have called in support instead of trying to take on Lung alone.

Aegis broke in "Easy there. Expert advice is just one of many benefits of joining the Wards." He dropped his voice to a stage whisper: "Whether you want it or not." His voice returned to its normal firm and open tone. "Seriously, though — you with us?"

I shook my head. "It was... nice. Patrolling. But I need to do some talking first, to my family and... Armsmaster said he could hold things 48 hours. Can I check in tomorrow?"

Aegis grinned. "There's a standard tour of the Protectorate facilities. We can at least make sure you get a private one, get to meet a few of the others."

Battery stood with a smooth, controlled movement, and faced me. "Make the best choice you can for yourself. I will say that this has given purpose to my life. Meaning. And even unexpected happiness." Her voice never wavered from the even tone that was all I'd ever heard her use, but her words seemed... heavier than usual. The circuit board lines on her suit started to glow. I searched for words, but after several seconds the lines flashed, and she was gone, cutting northeast in a blur of speed.

Aegis clapped me on the shoulder. "See you tomorrow." He rose into the sky, and then flew off in Battery's wake.

I changed in the stairwell, and started walking home. Dad... if I joined the Wards, I'd have to talk to him about it.

My steps slowed, and I drifted toward the Boardwalk. Dad wouldn't be home yet.
I spent several quiet hours walking alongside the ocean, letting the vastness of it sink in. Putting things in perspective. Joining the Wards would change my life. And... what was it about my life right now that I didn't want to change? School was a daily exercise in humiliation. Joining the Wards would mean transferring, or maybe dropping out and using tutors. Either way, I wouldn't have to deal with Emma, Sophia, or Madison on a daily basis. And it's not like I had anything I was doing out of school that I'd lose — practically all I'd been doing since I triggered, school aside, was planning on how to be a hero.

It always came back to Dad. Ever since Mom died... a lot of things had changed.

For the worse.

And if I joined the Wards... active capes died, and heroes died more often than other capes. The more you stepped up, the more you put yourself between innocents and the monsters out there, the more likely you were to die doing it. Some villains would go for the kill, others for something worse. And there were always the Endbringers. Dad would worry about me. A lot. And he wouldn't be wrong, either: this would be dangerous. And it's not like I had one of the big powers: no flight, no invulnerability, no regeneration, no force field.

I could die.

I could have died last night, against Lung, easy. One good hit, or a directed blast of flame...

I shivered. But I couldn't stand by and do nothing either. Maybe last night I'd saved one group of villains from another, but the ABB did target children — usually for induction into the gang. And they did kill people. Knowing what I did then, even with how outclassed I was, could I have snuck away?

No.

So I was going to be a hero, then.
While I lived.

If that was settled... if that was settled then I'd need to tell Dad sooner or later. And this way, maybe, I'd have some support. Maybe even some friends, in the Wards. I'd settle for not having constant bullying, anyway.

I turned toward home. I wasn't really sure how the conversation with Dad would go, but maybe that would be a good thing. We'd gone a long time without talking about anything meaningful, tiptoeing around each other's fragility. This would be another change, but maybe this change didn't have to be bad.

I approached the house as dusk fell, saw my father's silhouette in the kitchen window.

Tuna 'Surprise' again, probably.

I smiled.

Not everything needed to change.

I checked the mailbox, and found the usual junk mail, bills... and a letter addressed to Ms. Taylor Hebert in elegant calligraphy. I opened it, put the junk mail in the recycling bin, and then tucked the bills under my elbow while I started to read.

   Dear Ms. Hebert,

   You probably never wanted to be famous for the locker incident, but — in Brockton Bay at least — the name 'Taylor' and the word 'locker' will always mean you. That's lucky in a way: I wouldn't have been able to thank you so quickly otherwise. I hope you found my choice of gift appropriate!

   Yours,

   B

Battery?

She'd seemed distant, and intensely focused on the job. And... the locker incident.
Fuck.

I hadn't protested at being called 'Tailor', hadn't wanted to hint that I had any reason to care about the joke, but had I flinched? Did she have super-senses to go with the super-speed and super-strength? And I guess Shadow Stalker had mentioned lockers... had I twitched at that reference? Was that enough for her to crack my secret identity? And she just came out and wrote me? And she would have had to courier the note, or hand deliver it — three hours from posting to delivery was definitely not normal postal service.

Was... was that some kind of politeness? A friendly warning?

I was hyperventilating.

I took a deep breath and stopped. No need to scare Dad by coming in panicked. Deep breath. In... and out. She mentioned a gift... was there a package I'd missed? I turned back toward the mail box.

A sudden sense of heat and pressure behind me. Flying.

And then darkness.
Darkness.


Couldn't.

Darkness.

.....

Drifting.

Pictures, sounds, rushing by.

Focus.

"... not acceptable." A voice. Female. "She's not one of ours yet, and we're not starting a war over this."


"Director." Male? Angry.

"Think of the city as a whole. If I pull assets to hit ABB, Empire Eighty Eight will have a free hand. I'm not telling you not to make Bakuda a priority target, I'm telling you this office can't make her the sole target."
"Dragon volunteered. Give me one week..."

"There will be another Endbringer attack in about a month, and we will need every suit she can stockpile before then. You know this, and she should..."

Fuzz.

Voices, talking past each other, talking over each other.

"... scary, you know? Could have been any of us. I wouldn't blame you if..."

"... not her body. And I can't fix brains. If you'll..."

"... not break up with you over something we both knew..."

"... for the consultation. We'll revise our diagnoses and..."

"... certainly cleaned my clock. Who even robs banks..."

Cacophony.

Blurring.
Awakening? Focusing?

"... Didn't want you here, Thomas."

"Your city is about to boil over."

"The gang problem is..."

The sound dissolved into chaos and edges sharpened, spun and snapped into clarity. A tall thin man, standing next to a short stocky woman, both silhouetted against a massive window with a view of the Brockton Bay skyline.

Picture splintered.

Pain.

Darkness.

Dreams.

A voice. In the dream? Outside?
"... victim first time I met you. Trigger doesn't change that. Should've known your place. Might not have killed both your parents if you had."

Anger! Tried to sit up. Couldn't. Footsteps.

Blinked. My eyes, open!

...Sophia? Walking away. Hospital room?

"Just how the world works."

Through the door.

Too heavy to keep eyes open.

Sleep.

............

I dreamed of my parents.

With dawn, I woke.
"... may include headaches, and problems with your memory, judgement, coordination, and balance. Additionally, you..."

I tuned out the doctor.

I'd been out for a day and a half. It could have been longer — weeks or months. Or I could have never woken up, or woken up crippled. That I was up and about already was due to Panacea, who was worthy of her name. She might not be able to fix brain issues, which was why I was getting a lecture on concussion symptoms right now, but she could fix just about anything else short of death... and it was a lot easier for doctors to treat patients in otherwise perfect health. Better than perfect, actually: I felt fantastic.

Physically.

Like I could run forever, or touch the ceiling with a jump, or contort myself into those half-remembered yoga poses. I didn't even need glasses anymore.

She'd really gone all out.

I suppose a villain killing the family of a hero struck a nerve with her: Fleur's murder had destroyed any chance of the New Wave movement going national and driven her uncle into retirement. Unmasked heroes were almost nonexistent today, if you didn't count the ones like Weld who couldn't disguise themselves. It might have started out of concern about the authorities, or a sense of style, or even as a homage to the old depictions of capes before there were real capes. But today, heroes wore masks out of fear, fear for themselves... and fear for their loved ones.

Dad.

The doctor had told me that it would be perfectly normal for me to feel nothing yet, or to feel too much to function, or to swing between the two states, or to feel too little. Since that advice covered every possibility, I wasn't sure that it was even meaningful, let alone helpful. What kind of qualifications did you need to be a PRT doctor anyway? Wouldn't he have spent his education studying medicine, and not psychology? The whole lecture was probably ripped straight from the pages of a self-help book.
He'd also said that I'd probably be avoiding the subject for a while, so maybe he did know a few things about grief.

Eventually he stopped talking and left me alone to rest.

I lasted maybe five minutes before I got up — the combination of being brimful of physical energy, and badly needing something, anything, else to think about made lying in bed intolerable. There were some PRT sweats left out for me, and I was glad to get out of the hospital gown. Five minutes wandering the hallway taught me two things: the PRT base was a maze, and there were regular checkpoints. There were scanners and keypads and probably things I didn't see, but whatever criteria they had, I was confined to a short run of hallway and my room. The view was nice, at least, although probably every room on the floating base with a window also had an ocean view.

Reaching out with my power showed bugs scattered here and there: enough to map out where someone had spilled food and not cleaned it up, not enough to show the whole base. Trying to 'listen' through my bugs only brought on a blinding headache, and a brief snatch of conversation.

"... copier's broken again, so..."

I guess even heroes had paperwork. I went back to my room to get water and some tylenol, which the doctor had thoughtfully left behind, and lay down to close my eyes and wait for the pain to go away.

The few bugs in my vicinity gave warning that someone was approaching — two someones. I opened my eyes: Gallant, in his gunmetal and silver powersuit, and Clockblocker in his skin-tight white suit decorated with clocks. I sat up on the bed. Clockblocker leaned against the door by the wall, while Gallant stood just inside the room.

Gallant started it off. "I am sorry we don't have a familiar face for you to wake up to — that's just how the patrol schedules shook out, and we're the ones off duty and here. We can't quite let you have the run of the base until you actually join the Wards, but we didn't want to have you treated anywhere less secure." He shrugged, apologetically. His voice was rich and soothing, and he sounded like he actually cared. Probably why he'd been assigned this duty.

"And you're here to get me to sign up?"

"It was suggested to me. I'm not sure that's the best course of action." He spread his hands. "Please
don't misunderstand — I don't want to discourage you. You did well in what we've seen of you. But you've just been through hell. Take some time to find your balance, to grieve, to figure out who you are and who you will be. We'll be here when you're done."

Clockblocker snorted. "What he's trying to say is, join the Wards today, and you'll be confined to base and in therapy for a month. Take the same month and spend it on a beach somewhere sunny, and you'll get the same effects — but you'll enjoy it a lot more." He dropped his voice to a stage whisper. "And if Piggy ever asks, we tried really hard to get you sign up this very minute."

"Director Piggot is a woman with grave responsibilities, and deserves our courtesy and respect both." The words were stern, but laughter danced in his tone before he grew serious once more. "Hitting you with a hard sell the minute you wake up doesn't sit right with me."

Clockblocker seamlessly continued "And this goofus feels he has to live up to his name all the time." Gallant punched Clockblocker's arm.

I looked back and forth between them.

"Do I even have a choice? I mean, I'm not sure if I'm going into the foster system, or to a relative, or what?"

Gallant spoke "I do not know, and it is likely that no one yet knows. Your choice to join the Wards would give you some leverage there... but that cuts both ways."

I nodded. "Then, before I am confined to base, I'd like to visit my mother's grave. It's..." The words wouldn't come.

They glanced at each other, and Gallant nodded. He stepped to the side of the door and held it for me while Clockblocker started down the hall.
I looked down at the stone, then looked at the empty plot next to the grave.

Then I looked away.

It was a beautiful day. Blue sky, almost cloudless, not really warm yet but enough sun to make you think it was.

Better weather than we usually got in April.

Two kids my age wearing black were picnicking in front of another gravestone fifty feet away, a bright checkered blanket spread on the ground, seated as if the gravestone were the third person at the lunch. Gallant and Clockblocker were standing maybe a hundred yards away under a tree, keeping an eye on me.

Was it wrong that I still didn't feel anything? That this still didn't feel real?

I looked at the stone, and sat down.

I'm not sure how long I sat there. The world felt frozen in time, like the sun had reached its height and just... stopped. That it would never go down, that I'd be sitting there on that patch of green, green grass when the world ended, and even after, floating through the Void on a tiny chunk of rock after Behemoth shattered the Earth, or however the inevitable end went down. Like the Little Prince on his asteroid.

Mom had read me to sleep with that book.

I cried.
Some time later, a shadow fell across me and I started and looked up. The girl who'd been picknicking. Dirty blonde hair in a tight ponytail, green eyes, black sweater, and dark jeans. Carrying a lunchbox. She reached out a hand to help me up, and I stood, wiping away tears. "Sorry for your loss."

I blinked.

"I'm Lisa. And you're Taylor, of course." She held out the lunchbox to me. I took it, wondering what the hell was going on. It was surprisingly heavy.

"You saved our asses, a couple of nights back, jumping into that fight with Lung, and it cost you. A lot." My brain was slowly rebooting, running through the possibilities.... "Tattletale?"

"Sshh!" She winked, grinning. "I'm in disguise." I looked around, saw the boy who'd been eating with her talking to Clockblocker under the tree, and whirled back, reaching out to gather swarms.

"Relax. He's over there asking for an autograph."

"He what?"

"If you ever get to know his sense of humor, you'll understand why Clockblocker is his all-time favorite hero." Her grin had never wavered — a narrow, vulpine expression just this side of a smirk. "Besides, they may play for the other team, but they're not enemies."

I sat back down, bewildered.

She sat down with me. "Most of us capes, most of the time, are playing the biggest, funnest version of tag ever invented. And then when the Endbringers show up, we stop playing and get serious. Don't get me wrong, there are psychos on both sides like Shadow Stalker..." I held back a flinch. "... and Lung, but sooner or later they end up in the Birdcage. Or dead."
"So, look. Take this as a partial thanks from someone whose life you saved. Take it as proof you made a difference with what you did. And if nothing else, take it from someone else who's been there: cash is freedom for you right now." I opened the lunchbox to find banded stacks of twenties and hundreds, labeled with amounts. Ten thousand dollars?

She stood, dusting herself off. "Look, if we cross paths and you're after us — the Undersiders play hard. But if not, if you ever want to talk, just let me know."

I sat there, thinking, while she collected the young man with curly black hair and left the cemetery. I could have shouted, signaled Gallant and Clockblocker, but... I didn't want a fight here.

What did I want to do? I looked at the stone, and at the empty plot beside it again.

I could go to the Wards. Training and support, companionship, and a worthy cause... but the Protectorate wasn't quite as shining as I'd hoped. Sophia had a place there, and that was probably one of the reasons the school administration kept ignoring what she'd done to me. Gallant — and he did seem to be truly gallant — had been given orders to push me into signing up as a Ward as soon as I woke up. He hadn't liked it. I didn't either, and I liked less what it said about how they operated. Still, most of the heroes I'd met so far had seemed... decent, and that said something about their organization too.

Tattletale had all but invited me to join the Undersiders. She'd been friendly when we'd first met, and while she thought I had saved them from Lung, he would have definitely killed me if they hadn't shown up when they did. And the Undersiders, or at least Tattletale (Lisa couldn't possibly be her real name), had seemed... decent. But while the Undersiders might treat it all as a game, Lung and Bakuda weren't playing around. And besides... I'd wanted to be a hero, not a villain.

But did I have any other choices?

I tapped my fingers on the lunchbox. Freedom, Tattletale had called it. If I were free to do anything, absolutely anything, I wanted... what would I do right now?

Put like that, the answer was simple.
Adaptability was always his greatest strength.

People heard ‘Aegis,’ and thought ‘invulnerable’; saw him lift a dumpster or fly, and thought ‘yet another Alexandria package.’ The truth was that he was just as easy to hurt as anyone off the street — but he was far, far harder to cripple or kill. He could see through his skin after taking a faceful of acid, or respire through an exposed liver after his lungs had been ripped out. He’d done both before, at need, and healed up afterward in days. The same sort of total redundancy and body control enabled his feats of strength — nothing people hadn’t done before, to lift a car off their child… but nothing they could do at will, either.

He didn’t try to correct the misapprehension — it was usually good to be thought invulnerable and incredibly strong. And sometimes, the advantage worked the other way: most Alexandria package capes, once you got past the invulnerability, were all too human. Find a way to wound them, and they were out of that fight at the very least. Alexandria package capes often died in the first fight that wounded them.

Usually to an Endbringer.

More than once, the belief that if he was wounded he was out of the fight had saved Carlos’ life.

More than once it had saved his teammates’ lives.

Nor did that adaptability stop with the physical. He led the wards because he was the oldest – simple as that, with no regard to aptitude or inclination. The Protectorate had weighed the benefits of a safe — well, safer — trial leadership run for each of its Wards against the benefits of optimally led Ward teams, and had opted for the former. He couldn’t argue with the results in his own case.

Forced to lead, he had adapted to become a leader. Saddled with responsibility, he had become responsible. Charged with enforcing discipline, he had found self-discipline. Tasked with charming new recruits, he drew on memories of his more charming friends and made himself… friendly and accessible.

‘Charming’ was hard to pull off. Probably part of why he still didn’t have a girlfriend.
He’d worked hard to reshape himself into a good leader. He might not be able to match Armsmaster’s relentless focus or Miss Militia’s calm assurance, but he’d done what he could. To teach his Wards how to explore the limits of their power, find the limits of their own body, and get up again. To make a difference that was never large enough, and keep trying. To let them remain children, instead of child soldiers. And, above all, to bring them home so they could grow up to be heroes.

And now this.

He’d gone over the mission a dozen times in his head already.

If he’d known that Taylor had been involved with Lung’s capture, would he still have picked an ABB corner to hit? It had been a perfect recruitment mission, a well calculated blend of excitement and routine. Show them a fight against real villains, and you might scare them off. Show them how a Ward patrol usually went, and you’d bore them off. Should he have bantered over that cuffed but conscious thug? The Book said no; his internal simulation of Dean said yes… and right then, he’d been focused on getting her signed up for the Wards.

He sighed.

And if he’d known her name, he would never have made that joke about her tailoring her own uniforms. Too close to the truth. Too close for her to tell him not to use it, either, without drawing attention to it. Had it been his fault?

Director Piggot had said, repeatedly, that there was no proof that this was targeted at a Ward recruit, that Bakuda had had a pattern of random bombing before Lung had reined her in, and that Bakuda would have to be crazy to go after Ward families because the Protectorate would simply destroy her afterward. Carlos could see the sense in it, but logic wasn’t much help. Multiple Ward families were already planning extended ‘vacations,’ and all of them were asking for more protection.

He’d spent the last two days playing eye-in-the-sky for a relentless series of raids on ABB properties and dealers, and the sweep had yielded dregs. Nothing useful. From all that could be found on the street, none of their illegal businesses were earning. The low level members had taken off their colors and vanished into the crowd, and the lieutenants were hiding in a basement somewhere. Or a shallow grave. Maybe they were expecting the backlash from hitting a Ward recruit, maybe they were laying low while the power struggle to replace Lung got underway — impossible to know.

Carlos finished entering a report on his most recent late-night raid: three paragraphs that boiled down to ‘no result’ (not counting the 18 single-item blanks on the form), phrased in the Protectorate-
approved format. Who knows, maybe in that mass of empty detail was something one of the Thinkers could pick up on, and make tomorrow’s raids successful.

He shook his head, sent the report off, and opened the file on the girl at the center of this mess. Woke this morning, possible concussion. Signed out of the medical wing by Clockblocker.

And then, nothing.

He leaned back, fingers drumming on the desk before him. The paper trail shouldn’t stop there — officially. As a practical matter, Dennis had raised the skill of avoiding paperwork to an art. His paperwork was never on time, but never quite late enough to evoke disciplinary action. Under the circumstances, a documentation gap there was normal — expected even. Another issue, another day, and he might just have chosen to raise it at the morning briefing.

Tonight, he got up and made his way to the center of the dome that served as Ward territory deep beneath the PRT headquarters. The movable walls were currently configured to have that space as a break area, and at this hour there were only four Wards there. Missy was sitting in a chair reading a book (Nancy Drew), her feet tucked up under her, and tilted at an angle where she could see Dean over the book’s edge, or hide behind it if necessary. John was sitting on the couch, playing a game on his phone, but he too had half his focus directed at the main table, where Dean and Dennis were playing to their audience.

Carlos paused at the edge of the room, listening: a mock-serious argument about whether the Wards would settle next month’s patrol rotations with a powers-allowed game of Jenga or one of poker. He grinned. Vista knew better than to believe them, and Browbeat… needed easing into the group anyway. This kind of gentle inclusion had Dean’s fingerprints all over it.

“Dennis? A word.”

The bickering duo broke up, Dean seamlessly settling down next to John and pulling up a fighting game on the big screen. Carlos and Dennis entered a small side room, Carlos shutting the door behind them.

“I checked the file on our guest.”

Dennis smiled. “And nothing? Piggy grabbed Dean and me, asked us to rush her into the Wards. Didn’t want to do anything on comms where it’d be recorded, so I just… waited to file anything until
I could talk to you in person.”

Aegis frowned.

Dennis was next up to lead the team, and he might go very far indeed if he learned from the experience — his ability was of astounding power and flexible utility both. While it’d never been tested, it was believed that he could lock down even an Endbringer with a touch, freezing them outside time, and that same touch made for effortless nonlethal captures, or could preserve dying teammates for medical attention, or… the applications were limitless.

In the hands of someone brave and idealistic, with leadership talent, that kind of power marked you out for command of a major city’s Protectorate team. In the hands of an irreverent kid who thought rules were just noise, well — it made for an awful lot of paperwork. Most of which got dumped on his team leader.

Like now.

To be fair, learning when to stand up for your team despite pressure from above was one of the lessons that a term leading a Ward team was designed to teach. And Carlos himself would have disagreed with that decision… but he would have seen the reasoning behind it. And Dennis should have too.

“If we keep her alive, we can fix whatever wrong we do her now.” He paused, and looked at the redhead until his eyes dropped briefly.

“Not that I’ll fault you for wanting to look after her, but do understand that Director Piggot had the same goal. So tell me what you did with her.”

“She wanted to see her mother’s grave…” Carlos winced. “So Dean and I took her out there, kept watch. Just sat there, talked to some other mourners. One of them wanted my autograph.” Dennis grinned. “After that, we dropped her off at her aunt’s with the promise to pick her up tomorrow.”

The screeching noise of metal crumpling interrupted him. Aegis released the table and stood. “She doesn’t have an aunt.”
Introductions 2.1

Ten thousand in cash wasn't much money, in some ways. Not enough to leave Brockton Bay and live somewhere else. Not enough to cover college or a boarding school. Not enough to replace the things I'd lost in the house — books, a computer, clothes, furniture. Not enough to replace the house itself.

And nothing could replace Dad.

But it was enough to buy me some clothing to replace the PRT sweats I'd been wearing, a rucksack, a space blanket, a supply of trail food, some groceries, a notebook, pens, and a really large bottle of tylenol. It was enough to pay for a week at a run-down extended-stay hotel in the Docks area — the kind of place that asked your name, but didn't ask for an ID or credit card to check it. And it was enough to get an unlimited bus-pass for the rest of April.

And that was enough for what I had in mind.

Just knowing that I had an alternative to going back to the Protectorate, going into therapy and foster care, had been enough. I'd felt for an empty house with a spare key hidden under a rock or a flower pot, explained that my aunt would be home soon, waited for the Wards to leave my radius, and then gone on my shopping expedition.

In a fit of optimism, I'd picked up a new set of the straps and lenses I'd found necessary in making my old costume. The explosion had burnt it away, or perhaps it was sitting at the Protectorate headquarters, neatly folded. Either way, it was beyond my reach for now, and though assembling the spiders necessary to reweave it would take time, it wasn't as if my to-do list had much else on it right now. Practice using my power. Reweave my costume. Find a way to thank those who'd given me this chance: Panacea, Gallant, Clockblocker, and Tattletale.

And, right there at the top, end every last gang in Brockton Bay — starting with the ABB.

I wasn't going to just start a fight. I'd learned that while a head-to-head confrontation could go very badly for me, ambush was worse. Lung was far more dangerous cape than Bakuda in a fight — he'd stood off whole Protectorate teams. Had fought an Endbringer solo, once, which was once more than anyone not named Scion or Eidolon should survive trying. But dangerous as Lung was, Bakuda had done much worse to me and mine, striking from ambush.
Fine. I could learn from that. I'd find a way to do the ambushing, in the future. And for when I couldn't control that... Battery had given some good tactical criticism, on that day, and I'd take it to heart.

All of that would start with finding the ABB, though. I spared a moment of regret for the resources the Protectorate had: Thinkers, access to undercover police agents, surveillance equipment... they probably knew exactly where I needed to start. But going with them would have meant a month or more of sitting back. Of hiding behind other people. And I was done with that.

It would also have been a month with Sophia. I was pretty sure I hadn't dreamt everything of what I'd seen and heard before I woke. And while listening through my bugs gave me a blinding headache, it was definitely something I could do while awake too. But whether or not the things I thought I'd seen or heard through my bugs was real — and parts of it were pretty strange: hearing some, but not all voices in color? Was synaesthesia a concussion symptom? — I'd seen Sophia with my own eyes, heard her with my own ears. And when I'd tried to leave, I'd found the doors of the medical wing locked against anyone without the right ID, the right iris scan or handprint or whatever.

And that meant Sophia was a Ward. Too young to be anything else. And while everyone knew the Wards all went to Arcadia, I had to wonder if that was just some expert misdirection on the Protectorate's part. Were there other Wards in my school? Had they known about the bullying? Condoned it?

Participated?

I ran through the list of the other Wards in the city, but no one at Winslow leapt to mind. At least Emma and Madison weren't part of it — there were only two female Wards active, and Vista was too young and too short to be either of them.

That made Sophia Shadow Stalker.

No wonder I'd felt threatened when I talked to her.

Lisa... Lisa had helped when I needed it, badly. I owed her. I even liked her, the two times we'd met. But she thought of this as a game of cops and robbers. Maybe that's how it really was, to her. I'd lost too much to treat it as a game, and the thought of trying made me feel sick to my stomach.

I shook my head. After my afternoon shopping, I'd spent yesterday night going all over town trying
to find the ABB, starting with sitting down in a McDonald's in ABB territory, feeling out the buildings for blocks around with my bugs. Four times I'd found prospects: someone who carried a pistol stuck in their waistband, a group of young men shaking an individual down for money — petty thugs, basically. I'd tagged them with bugs, tried to follow them as they moved around the city, hoping to find their boss.

Bus routes were not designed for rapid surveillance, and I lost them every time.

On the bright side, busses were a pretty inconspicuous way to get around. Hood up, face down, wearing drab and baggy clothing, and curled in on myself, I looked like someone with nowhere to be and nothing worth taking. And if I just sat in the back of the bus, reaching out, changing routes to crisscross the part of the city claimed by the ABB as their turf, sometimes I'd recognize one of those bugs I'd set on my targets when the bus route passed by.

Once, the bug was still on the target. The other times, I'd had to reach out through the area, trying to find the same people again, see who they were with... and repeat the process of tagging and following. It was slow, uncertain, and tedious work, and at the end of it I didn't even have half a dozen locations put down in my notebook.

Three places that might be drug corners, or might just be apartments. One small business: a hole in the wall restaurant, perhaps a money-laundering front, or maybe just a place with good food. A warehouse was the biggest find: there were some innocent explanations for ABB presence in the other places — everyone had to sleep and eat. But there weren't a lot of innocent reasons for there to be a dozen mostly-naked people in a mostly empty warehouse.

Not even the obvious one: they were all standing up and working at bagging something.

_That would be the place to start today_ I thought, pushing the remnants of an omelette around my plate. Finding a cheap diner with all-day breakfast near where I was sleeping had been a godsend: the ABB did more business at night, and that meant I had to be up then too... and I liked having a hot breakfast when I woke up. Even if I was waking up mid-afternoon.

I hadn't been sleeping well — might be the concussion, or maybe it was the dreams.

The waitress bustled by, leaving the check, and I glanced up in surprise: I'd told her I'd be eating until four. The clock said 3:57 already. The way I kept spacing out probably _was_ the concussion. Thankfully, when I reached out to feel the world around me through my insects, I didn't have the same problems concentrating.
At least I thought I didn't.

If I spaced out, sitting on a bus while trying to conduct surveillance, or lying in bed setting spiders to weave a new costume before I slept, would I even notice the lost time?

Concussions sucked. And I couldn't keep munching this much tylenol forever — my liver would give out first.

Six hours later, I was wincing in pain. Careful effort had turned up a few more borderline locations for the notebook, places where people from the warehouse had gone, possibly on ABB business, possibly off the clock... and one major prospect: when the gunmen watching the warehouse had been relieved, they'd moved as a group to an auto repair garage where they'd stored any weaponry less concealable than a pistol. There were multiple sealed cases that my insects couldn't get inside, but the ones left carelessly unlatched had rifles, shotguns, and even grenades, along with a wide variety of things heavy, sharp, or both, and a staggering amount of ammunition.

My efforts at listening in had yielded a lot of boasting about whose 'bitch' was the hottest and the beginnings of a low, pulsing headache; my one abortive effort at looking in had shown me a lot of Army Surplus labels and stars. Lots of stars. I couldn't see right now through the pain, and I was fairly sure my eyes were crossed beneath my lids. Every few seconds, it felt like someone was hammering a bright white spike through one or the other of my eyes, about five inches into my brain. The angle of the spike kept changing slightly, and there wasn't any pattern to it so I couldn't even brace one side of my head for the pain.

On the upside, I could apparently use my insects to catch a bus while blind by feeling the area out, and I'd made my way back to the warehouse to try and trace another gang member to a fresh location. Slowly. With a lot of wincing.

If Bakuda were helping equip them, black market grenades would be the least of the explosives the ABB had available. Would she let them use any of her creations? Could I even tell them apart from other explosives? Or non-explosives, actually? Were the warehouse and garage booby-trapped?

I absent-mindedly caught a new bus, trying to follow in my elliptical way one of the ABB toughs who'd left the warehouse ten minutes ago. The hood was a lifesaver — no one even noticed my eyes were closed when I boarded the bus, head down, and swiped my pass. I might need to get sunglasses if I was going to regularly blind myself trying to see through my bugs. Another ice-pick stab of pain — they were down to about once a minute now, but damn if each one didn't hurt just as much as the first time. I felt through the rucksack with my bugs, past the spare water, the space blanket, the dried food and the lunchbox — if I had to abandon my rented room, I'd be ready! — before deciding
against another dose of tylenol.

One more, and I'd be risking liver damage. Advil apparently made things worse if you had a concussion, and I wasn't going to risk a serious painkiller like this. Nor would I risk talking to a doctor, and probably getting a quiet seaside vacation with the Wards.

In more immediately lethal risks, Bakuda could probably make an explosive that fit in — and tasted like — my coffee creamer. I decided that I'd assume she was prepared, and trapping everywhere the ABB had a presence to hell and gone until I knew otherwise. I was the most junior cape in Brockton Bay by a mile, the one who knew the least about how to fight, how to prepare, how to survive. I could be pretty sure she wasn't tuning her traps to explode when insects passed by by the fact that none of the places I'd found were currently smoking holes in the ground, but I'd have to be careful about using large swarms.

And I'd have to be downright paranoid about doing anything in person, instead of from a few blocks away.

There!

The one I'd been following had joined up with two other teenagers. One male, the other female. They were walking together, slowly. I got off the bus at the next stop, and started paralleling their course from two blocks away, gradually ambling closer.

They stopped beneath an underpass. I moved toward a position from which I might see them and took a look — with my eyes, not my bugs — but all I saw was another white flash.

No pain, though.

While I was trying to figure that out, I saw a woman, glowing white too brightly to look at directly, raise a hand from which shot three corkscrewing beams so bright that they left purple afterimages across my vision. I blinked, and the next image was of the three teenagers lying crumpled at the foot of a concrete wall with about half of a stylized ABB tag spraypainted on it.

Purity.
Purity was probably the strongest single cape on the Empire Eighty Eight roster: very rapid flight, some degree of toughness, and lasers that could level buildings in seconds. The fact that she hadn't killed those three punks only meant she had the fine control to match her power.

The fact that I had a clear line of sight to her meant that she could probably kill me with a thought.

I felt swarms gather, on me and in the underpass, responding reflexively to the pulse of terror I felt, and fought to control them before she noticed. She floated the six feet between her and the pile of groaning bodies, slowly enough that I had time wonder if it was an intimidation tactic, or if she just never walked anymore, or...

"Where is Bakuda?"

Her voice wasn't loud, but it carried as if I were right there next to her.

One of the thugs started stammering, another looked to be out cold, and the third was starting to crawl away when a white whip-crack flash left the asphalt beneath her spider-webbed with cracks. Make that two of them out cold — my insects could feel that she was still breathing. No idea how Purity had managed to crack pavement without killing her.

"What about Oni Lee?"

Further stammers, punctuated by another laser blast.

"Useless."

She turned, floating slowly out from the other side of the underpass. She hated the ABB — of course she hated the ABB. They were a rival gang, they were a pan-asian gang, Empire Eighty Eight were white supremacists, she had an existing personal feud with Lung and Oni Lee both... of course she was looking for them. And not finding them, if she was beating up thugs in the street for information...
I reached out, taking the swarms that had assembled in the underpass in response to my flush of fear, pulling together a swarm in front of her, to buy time to talk to her.

A blinding blast tore right through it, shattering a lamppost on the median which collapsed in a shower of sparks. The whole row of street lights flickered brightly, and then went out, leaving the street to be lit by the waxing moon above and her own cold light.


So, I wasn't going to be walking my vulnerable body out in front of *her* any time soon then, was I.

I reformed the swarm, denser, shaping it into a vague likeness of a person with their hands up. I mouthed the words, willing the swarm to follow along "You want the ABB?"

No way to make out an expression on her face when everything glowed like that, but I thought that might be her narrowing her eyes. Her right hand stayed up, glowing more brightly than the rest of her body.

"You know where to find Bakuda or Oni Lee?"

"Armory, distribution center — yes. The leaders... not yet." The words sounded odd to me, barely understandable.

"Why would you give them to me?" The hand was slightly lower, and she was facing almost directly away from my actual location, floating high enough she could almost touch the ceiling of the underpass, but I wasn't feeling much safer.

"My father."

At that her hands dropped, and she nodded. The ripple in the light of her face might have been a blink. "I am sorry for your loss. They are a cancer in the city."

I choked back hysterical laughter. For being arguably the strongest superpowered skinhead in the city, she was pretty polite about it. And it wasn't as if I could disagree with her goal of destroying the
ABB, though I seriously doubted she'd be on-board when I got around to taking on the E88.

"Where?"

I paused, debating a moment. The drug warehouse would be a bigger earner, but it could be shut down. The armory, on the other hand, almost had to be involved in any response that ABB made. If I was going to watch whichever one survived the night, trying to find new locations, new people...

"A warehouse, near the docks. I'll show you. Harbor and Pine, in half an hour?"

She nodded, and vanished upward in a streak of light.

I released my swarms, twitching with relief. E88 was on the list — but ABB came first. And while the enemy of my enemy might not be my friend, in this case? She was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

And... how had I even noticed her blinking, from here? Had the adrenaline unlocked my ability to see and hear through my bugs?

I focused, trying to look at the crumpled ABB thugs and...

Ohgod.

No, it definitely still hurt to try that. It still hurt a lot. I made my blind way back toward the bus stop, trying to make my rendezvous with Purity, trying not to pass out from the concussion or the spiky pain.

The bus ride took me back to the right part of town, and I sipped shallowly from my water bottle, trying to breathe deeply and evenly despite the pain. I didn't even have a watch — and if I had, I couldn't have checked it while I couldn't see — but I thought I wasn't too late. I found a quiet alleyway, and put a dense person-shaped swarm of bugs up on top of one of the buildings at the corner of Harbor and Pine, visible from where I huddled across the street when I opened my eyes.

A falling star resolved into Purity, who abruptly stopped, just hovering in place, one foot above the
roof surface and ten feet from my swarm-person. Insect woman. Bug clone. I was going to have to think of a better name, wasn't I?

And that kind of distractibility was probably the concussion, again. Had she said something? I shook my head, trying to clear it, and was rewarded with a nauseating sway in perspective. My swarm's head shook with it.

"Where is the warehouse?" Again, her voice carried impossibly clearly.

"Two streets over, one down — I'll show you. Ten people inside it tonight: two with shotguns, I think, on the back door. One in what I think is an office, also armed. The rest on the warehouse floor, naked, working." I extended myself, feeling my way through the building more carefully.

"Drugs with the workers, money with the manager — that would be the usual pattern."

Money? Money would matter to me, eventually. Lisa's gift couldn't last forever — might not even last long enough. And robbing from the ABB had a lot of appeal to it. I made my swarm-clone's head nod in response, then dissolve into a twisting rope of bugs flying toward the warehouse, pointing the way. Purity followed after, and I waited until she'd cleared my line of sight before walking closer to the warehouse myself. I had my bugs touch down and pool on the roof of the building next door, then form a target symbol on the front wall of the warehouse.

Apparently, that was clear enough because the front wall of the warehouse ceased to exist immediately afterward. The chunk of wall I'd put the symbol on remained intact, and that swarm reformed into a loose cloud. Others filtered in through the back.

An enormous concrete dust cloud roared up as Purity floated forward, periodically lashing out with blasts of light. I felt the locations of the people within the building, drew swarms in targeting shapes on the air before Purity, using the way I could just feel the relative positions of the bugs on the ABB members and the few I'd put on Purity to let me position the other swarm into a perpendicular disc along the line between the glowing villain and each target. Another swarm felt through the office, identifying stacks of bills, and tiny teams of bugs began ferrying them out through the chaos and across the street.

Purity caught on quickly, and less than a minute after her dramatic entrance, the ABB were all down. None dead, though falling debris had left one with a nasty headwound. The restraint was... odd. Fear of Protectorate response? A feeling that the unpowered members of the ABB weren't worth a serious effort? A simple dislike of killing?
She descended, not walking among them, but close, turning a few over and shaking her head at what she saw.

Eventually, she rose into the air again and settled on the roof of the building across the street. I formed a swarm-clone to meet her there, and pointed to the pile of bills.

"Theirs. Waste not."

She nodded. Something I thought might have been a scowl, from the tone of her voice. "I'd rather have gotten Oni Lee."

"Bakuda."

She shrugged. "Her too. The armory?"

My swarm clone shook its 'head'. "I want to watch. Find more. Tomorrow?"

She scooped up an armful of the bills as sirens began to sound in the distance. "This ought to take down most of their distribution for a few weeks: most dealers only have a few days worth of drugs on hand. It'll make a difference. Tomorrow, on top of the old Transatlantic Shipping Building, ten pm?"

"Done."
Introductions 2.3

The rest of the night had been a bust.

No one from the ABB that I could detect had come by to look at the wreckage, though an awful lot of police had. Around about two in the morning I'd given it up and gone back to my cheap little hotel room, had a hot shower, and laid myself out on the bed. I reached out to the spiders I'd been gathering in the crawlspace, and continued work on my costume. I also tried working on that 'speaking' trick: I had vivid memories of Purity putting a bar of white fire through my swarm-clone's chest, and had decided that — even after my armored costume was ready — I was going to be doing as much of business as possible remotely.

Between those two priorities, there was an hour, maybe more, of weaving while the spiders and insects in the crawlspace did their best rendition of the Disney movie songs I'd grown up with. (I'd always loved the Cinderella dress-making scene; it was just my luck that when I finally got to live the dream, it wasn't with cute woodland creatures but spiders. Spiders who couldn't reliably hit the high notes.)

Once I started yawning uncontrollably, I had them switch to lullabies.

Somewhere in the transition between 'Hush little baby' and 'Mr. Sandman' I think I spaced out and then fell asleep — when I got up around noon, I was a little further along on the costume than the last part I remembered working on.

After another breakfast at that diner, I had a few challenges to sort out. On the one hand, my rucksack was now bulging with loose money, and frankly that was more weight and bulk than I wanted to be carrying around. On the other, I'd planned — to the extent I'd planned anything — to spend a week at least mapping out the ABB before starting any fights, and that had just gone out the window.

Impulsivity was one of the symptoms of a concussion, wasn't it? I'd be glad to have this head injury over with, if only so I could stop second-guessing myself.

Regardless, that meant I needed to prepare.
A shopping expedition yielded a collapsible baton, several bottles of pepper spray, a taser and several boxes of spare cartridges, and (at the shopkeeper's advice) a combat knife that could also function as a crowbar.

It said a lot about how safe parts of Brockton Bay weren't that, when I told him I was worried about the streets lately, the storekeep didn't bat an eye at the size of my purchase. He even threw in a whistle, a book on knife fighting, and a half hour on the range with the taser and dummy ammunition. I found that while my aim was pretty bad, as long as I had a bug on the target, I could point directly to that bug and that was a pretty good substitute for actual aim. The old guy was pretty nice about the whole process, telling me how I reminded him of his grand-daughter, and offering advice on what I should do if I did get in a fight.

Rule 1: run away if possible.

Rule 2: if not possible, go all-out, and then run away.

Good advice, both parts. He also turned out to be a major fan of Dauntless. (Armsmaster was 'a good man, but Dauntless was born in the Bay, and he'll do right by us when it's his turn to lead.' ) His opinion of Miss Militia couldn't have been higher (his actual comment was that, once I grew up, I couldn't find a 'finer example of womanhood' upon which to base my conduct. I couldn't really tell (and didn't want to ask) if he admired her for her patriotism, her use of all kinds of guns, her work as a hero, or if seeing a woman in camo just worked for him.

Besides, I could let him babble a little. His granddaughter hadn't graduated high school — some turf war between Allfather and the Marquis, back in the day.

Wrong place, wrong time.

He still had the skull of the minion who'd shot up her car mounted on a plaque in the back room: the Marquis was old-fashioned about how he enforced discipline, and had strong views about involving innocents. ('A real gentleman, he was... not like the villains nowadays. A personal apology when he delivered the skeleton, and then my son won the lottery the week after — still not sure how he fixed that. Didn't make up for losing Jessica, it didn't, but he had class, he did. Still wish I'd had the guts to try and shoot him when he was standing on my porch, of course, not that it would have done any good.' )
A stop at an outdoor store yielded a fuller supply of camping equipment: a sleeping bag, a tarp, a space blanket, a water filter, some more trail food, some layered clothing... I wasn't planning on going camping, but I was acutely aware that anything I left in my room might not be there when I got back. That my room itself might not be there when I got back. Realistically, I knew the odds were low, but I felt a lot more comfortable knowing that I was carrying everything I needed with me. With that much weight loaded into my pack, I was grateful for the straps and internal frame — the rucksack I'd gotten there two days ago had been a snap purchase, but it was apparently the right tool for the job.

Another stop at a pawn shop yielded an old mechanical pocket watch — missing my appointment tonight would probably be hazardous to my health, and I needed a timekeeper I could read while functionally blind. Either that, or I needed to figure out how to reliably see through my bugs without crippling myself, and it was a lot simpler to just get a watch than solve that problem.

I even bought a couple of prepaid cell phones. I had a lot of bad memories about cell phones, but Battery was right: if I'd been able to call the Protectorate, that first night when I found Lung...

Arranging everything so that I could move and had ready access to anything I might want on short notice — the self-defense tools, water, food, phone — took a good twenty minutes back in my room.

That left the money problem.

With what I'd seized from the ABB stash-warehouse, I now had more money than I could comfortably carry around. Literally: too much loose paper, not enough space in my backpack. I reluctantly decided I could cache some of it here, some of it out in the city, and I'd definitely carry an emergency fund with me. I set my insects to sorting the bills out into piles. I had to glance over from time to time, since the bugs couldn't exactly tell bill denominations apart, but it was a pretty quick process, even with most of my attention on weaving more of my costume. I started bundling the cash into packages of approximately equal value that would fit in ziplock bags.

My bugs found something odd at the bottom of the Alexandria lunchbox: a piece of paper, ripped from a spiral-bound notebook. I reached out a hand to the cockroach-spider team ferrying it over to me, read the note, and then reread it: two telephone numbers, one labeled 'Lunch!' and the other 'Bank.'
I folded it and tucked it away into a pocket of my rucksack. Maybe once I was waking up a little earlier, I'd see about lunch. And what kind of bank could I use anyway? I wasn't technically 'wanted' — that I knew about anyway — but something told me the Protectorate would be trying to get me off the streets at the first opportunity, and opening an account would mean giving the bank my information.

Maybe after I had a good fake ID, I could do something... but then again, what bank wouldn't blink at a teenage girl bringing in a duffel bag of cash to deposit? And they wouldn't be wrong to worry: technically, taking the drug money was still theft. Not the ABB was going to file a police report over the loss, and since they'd already been trying to kill me before I took it, it wouldn't even put me in any extra danger.

With ziplock bags of cash stashed inside the air vents of my room, behind some loose brickwork on a building two streets from the diner (sensing nearby bugs was a surprisingly efficient way to find safe nooks or crannies to stash things in a city), and a couple of other places convenient to the bus routes, I made my way to the garage armory I'd refrained from hitting last night. Well, more precisely, I made my way to a coffee shop two blocks away, where I picked up some hot chocolate and quiet seat in the back while I felt through the garage.

Two hours of waiting later, the lone guard opened the door to two young men. (An exchange of "ABB forever" after the knocking suggested that either the gang had heard of passwords, but not really thought very much about how they worked, or possibly that the exchange was just how they said hello to each other.) I reached out, trying to listen in, and for my pains caught fragments of conversation and some literal pain between my ears.

"... got hit last night, so..."

".... them tonight?"

"Naw — first we gotta..."

"... like I'd argue with her."

"... extra security there anyway..."

The parts I'd missed were where I was getting a headache instead of sound; it felt like I was
somehow straining myself. Like I was doing it wrong. Maybe like I was lifting with my back instead of my legs. Or maybe like I was trying to see one of those magic eye pictures, and all I was managing to do was go cross-eyed in the process. Also, the pain might be making my analogies worse.

Regardless, I'd heard enough to know I'd like to follow these two. They were going somewhere important enough to rate extra security. If I was very, very lucky, then the female they didn't want to disobey was Bakuda. I had no illusions about how dangerous she could be in a fight: if I found her, she'd have explosives enough to fight a small war on hand. On the other hand, she hadn't exactly fought me, and turnabout would be not only fair play... but just.

And satisfying.

Absentmindedly, I bugged the two gang members, the car they were using, and the one guarding the armory just for good measure, and started walking toward the nearest bus stop.

Several hours on the bus later, I'd tracked them down to a midrise apartment complex, maybe twenty years old. Not the kind of place with a doorman that you heard about in New York, but not the kind of outright slum that the ABB tended to favor. The two thugs were sitting in the manager's office, playing cards with the door open so they could watch whoever came or went through the lobby.

By the time I had to leave to make my appointment with Purity, the puzzle had only grown, and I let my thoughts dwell on it while I caught the crosstown bus. The tenants who came and went were mostly — but not entirely — Asian, sure. But they all looked like they worked for a living.

The ABB members I'd seen at the warehouse, or the armory, or on the streets... even if they weren't wearing their colors, they fell into recognizable types: young men or women, walking down the street with more bravado than sense, looking for a fight or a customer; older men or women, in their twenties or thirties, herding the younger ones with sharp words and occasional blows to the back of the head; a handful of people so calm they looked tranquilized, with thousand-yard stares and at least three concealed weapons. The way they grouped together, the way they oriented on whomever was the big cheese in the group, the way they walked together — all distinctive, all recognizable, if you were looking.
And, for the tenants, all wrong.

They nodded to the thugs when they went out or returned, and they had the characteristic fear of the low rankers for those higher in the ABB... but otherwise, they looked like working citizens. I followed a few of them out of curiosity, and they'd led me to... businesses. A grocery clerk, a waitress, a manicurist, a gas station attendant... it didn't fit. Sweeping their apartments hadn't yielded anything either. I hadn't been able to get through all of them yet, but every one I'd found had been... relatively neat. Lived in. People with their families. No guns or weapons or drugs, just... people. A third of whom weren't Asian by any stretch of imagination! And the ABB didn't recruit non-Asians. Just didn't.

Lung had a thing about that.

Of course, Lung was in jail right now. Maybe Bakuda was branching out?

I stepped off the bus, found a quiet bench, and checked my watch. Three minutes to go. I formed a swarm on the roof of the building, shaping it into a column, and then into something like a crude imitation of a person. The legs weren't really separate, and the arms kept collapsing back into the mass when I tried to gesture, but it looked something like a modern artist's interpretation of a human sculpture. Made of living insects.

I cautiously reached into it, for hearing and then for sight, and was surprised. The strain was there; the pain... wasn't. What was different?

The question would have to wait, because that's when Purity made her entrance.

"The armory, tonight?"

I guessed whatever reservations she had about doing business with a stranger apparently made of insects had been assuaged by giving her the stash warehouse yesterday — anyone who hurt the ABB was alright in her book. I didn't really have room to criticize that, considering. I shook off the distraction, and replied.

"Yes. It's inside the closed Perfect Autobody, on seventeenth just before it crosses Clipper street. It had one guard when last I checked, but I've seen as many as five there at a time if they're cycling guards for the warehouse through."
"You're not coming?"

I'd thought about it going along, but shook my head. She had more than enough firepower for the both of us. I'd stick to surveillance.

"Maybe a lead on Bakuda. Not sure yet. Want to keep up the stakeout, see if they react. Can you give me forty minutes before you kick the doors in?"

Purity nodded.

"I'll look for you here tomorrow at nine. Good hunting."

She rapidly dwindled to a moving star among the others in the sky. Flight looked really fun.

And fast.

And convenient.

I sat down to wait for the next bus.

Fifty minutes later, I was occupying myself by sweeping through the rest of the apartments in the building. Still nothing: just people and their families. If it weren't for the two ABB thugs sitting in the manager's office, I'd have written this off entirely. Everything here felt legitimate. (And the one time I'd tried to actually 'look', I'd reintroduced my brain to irregular stabbing pains.) But whatever was here, the ABB wanted extra security here after they lost their warehouse.

Extra security? I hadn't even found any security aside from those two bozos!

The wail of sirens rose in the distance; the direction told me that Purity had just hit the armory. One of the thugs started, and then took a cell phone call (it was amazing what you could tell about what someone was doing with a fly on or around a few of their major joints — something like a wireframe animation of a person), and then headed down to the basement.
By the building directory, that was just where the mechanicals and the maintenance office were… of course. Where else would you hide a workshop in a residential building? As quickly as I’d shifted my attention downward, I felt it — a wide space, crammed with various tools and components. Bakuda’s workshop — one of them anyway.

And it was occupied.
Introductions 2.4

The insects I had could feel one person, moving about the workshop with quick, erratic, jerks.

Bakuda?

I massed swarms in the ventilation shafts, trickled them into cracks and corners, under chairs and behind equipment. It was all I could do not to drown the workshop in a tide of chitin. I’d told myself this would be surveillance alone, but if that really was her… I forced myself to unclench my fists — my knuckles were white. Instead, I stood from the bench, and stretched, and forced myself to walk toward a nearby Vietnamese restaurant. Anything to keep from jumping up and down, or grinding my teeth, or otherwise being noticed.

The thug was knocking on the workshop door downstairs; the one inside paused, then moved to a table. Then toward the door.

I took a seat in a booth in the back, and pretended to study the menu. My backpack was beside me, the tylenol already out. I had to know. I reached out to see, to hear…

A different sense of strain, a dizzying perspective, kaleidoscope spinning… settling. No pain.

An asian woman, slight, wearing glasses, straight black hair tucked back in a neat ponytail.

“‘Yes?’”

“The garage was hit, mistress — the E88, again.”

Bakuda! It had to be.

“Then we’ll get our revenge tomorrow. Don’t disturb me for anything but an attack on this building or my next guest, understand?”

The reply wasn’t so much a ‘Yes’ as a grunt, followed by a bow and backing away.
My attention followed her as she reentered her workshop and closed the doors. I looked through the room, looking for a weakness, some information, *something*. I needed to know if she’d stay here; if she’d move again soon. I sent the waiter away with a perfunctory order for tea and hot noodle soup, my mind searching all the while for a tactic, an opportunity.

Tomorrow night I could bring Purity in again, and with Lung locked up, she could face Bakuda and Oni Lee both and still be favored for victory. But I’d lucked into finding Bakuda this once — if she hadn’t requested additional security, drawn on a pool of soldiers I happened to be watching, would I have ever searched this apartment building? Would she stay in the same place tomorrow, or would she move? Would the attack on the garage force her to move? I needed to know more, and I turned my attention from the Tinker tinkering with her devices to sweep the whole workshop.

What I found was a set of tables, with various devices in various stages of assembly — I couldn’t begin to tell you what they were, but they looked less like the Hollywood version of a mad scientist’s lab and more like a metalworking shop had taken over a chemistry classroom. But on one table in the back, there was a man. Strapped down and gagged, but alive and staring in terror.

Bakuda spent a good ten minutes tweaking some of her devices, and lingering over one that resembled a vest more than anything else. Was she planning on launching a wave of suicide bombers? Eventually, she strolled back to him, caressing his face almost lovingly with her bare hand before donning a pair of surgical gloves.

“What I want you to understand is that while brain surgery like this is child’s play — I am brilliant, after all — my particular specialty is explosives. And that is exactly what I will shortly be inserting into your brain. *Usually*, I give this speech after the fact, but there’s always someone who thinks I couldn’t possibly have done… *this.*”
She plucked a small grey capsule from a tray to her right, and began inserting it into the brain, carefully shoving away brain tissue with her fingers, before getting something that looked like an enlarged dentist’s pick to poke it in a little further.

“Proving that my word is good is always satisfying, but it can be a trifle… wasteful. I’m hoping that having you awake for the procedure will make you more understanding of the fact that you have in fact just joined the ABB. It’s an organization with excellent opportunities for talent to rise, provided you do precisely… as… I… say.”

She punctuated each of those words with a twist and a shove.

“There! Now we just have to do a little calibration, and then stitch you back up.” Her voice was low and smoky, rich in tone… and wholly inappropriate to the weeping terror of the man on whom she was operating.

“You see, I’m a big believer in management by fear. What you need to know, now that you’ve joined up, is that if you fail me… you will certainly die. You also need to know that if you don’t excel, you might die. It may be fast, or it may be very slow indeed — each of the bombs I implant is just a little different. They might blow you to pieces, or liquefy you, or mutate you, or freeze you outside of time, or simply leave you alive in a wholly unresponsive body for decades! This is part of that wonderful blend of certainty and uncertainty necessary to inspiring proper fear, don’t you agree? Lung taught me so much. Oh! Don’t think too harshly of your coworkers, who invited you to dinner tonight — they already have their own bombs implanted. And don’t think about being a martyr — young Park Jihoo had his operation this afternoon, and the rest of your family will be similarly treated before you are released.”

She smiled.

“I wouldn’t make you bring your own family in — that would be inhumane. You will, however, invite me to visit one of these days, perhaps tomorrow, and you will provide me space to work. You will even find excuses to invite others by so I can ‘recruit’ them… or you will die. Your family will die. Your friends will die. And you will find a way to help the ABB rise, and you will do as you are told or… but why repeat myself? I see by the fact you’ve pissed yourself that you think you understand. It will do for now. For future reference… the next time you do that in my presence will be the last.”

Well, that explained the apartment complex of otherwise law-abiding citizens above her. I used my bugs to check for scars — I couldn’t get everyone in the building on short notice, but a spot check said she had total coverage of the building. Even the infant I checked had a scar there. And it also implied that she kept on the move, following her recruits to where they lived and using them to bait new victims in… and that meant Bakuda might not be here tomorrow night.
The lights in the restaurant flickered, and went out. My attention immediately focused on my own person, and I began gathering swarms closer to me. I slid under the table with my backpack, and felt around for my taser.

No one had come in, and the customers and kitchen staff were acting bewildered. No one was approaching the front. No one at the back. My awareness expanded outward — similar scenes of confusion everywhere I could feel.

The power had simply gone out for these blocks, maybe more.

I settled back into my seat, and returned my attention to Bakuda’s workshop, with a fragment keeping track of what was going on in my own surroundings.

She’d moved away from her victim, and was again fiddling with what looked like a grenade taken from a tray of other grenades, apparently wrapping wire around the ovoid, with periodic pauses to adjust whatever lay inside with some combination of a screwdriver and soldering iron.

The mere fact she’d spent more than a minute on it said that, whatever it did, it did a lot more of it than a grenade would.

I thought about launching an assault, but a bomb-focused Tinker in her workshop? I had hordes of bugs. She knew I controlled bugs. If she didn’t have a bug bomb that could exterminate insects by the neighbourhood-full, it would only be because she hadn’t thought she’d need it since I was already dead. And… she might stay a full day here.

I’d wait. I’d wait, and I’d watch, and I’d come back tomorrow night with Purity and put Bakuda down. If she tried to leave before then, I’d have to choose between trying to follow her — and risk that whatever she normally did to keep from being followed would kill off my insects — and trying to take her by surprise.

Besides, she had to sleep sometime.

I could wait for my chance. It burned, to know she was right there, that she’d killed Dad, and that she thought she’d gotten away with it… but it would burn worse to blow my best chance at her. I would wait.
Minutes ticked by, while I sipped my tea. The restaurant staff had taken the outage in good cheer, bringing out candles and using their gas stove to keep the hot soup and tea coming. They were actually doing pretty good business right now, as a candle-lit beacon of normalcy in the blackout around which people gathered. Someone out front had apparently dug out some kind of three-stringed banjo, and was playing — not brilliantly, but to a lot of cheering.

The part where the ice cream store next door came in and offered all their ice cream half price after the first half hour with no sign of power returning hadn’t hurt, either, and the convenience store down the street had also brought their perishables by, and it looked like some individuals were also bringing down whatever they had. At least two people had borrowed time on the gas stove to heat something they’d brought, before taking it out front. Distant sirens told a story of places dealing with the crisis less happily, but here? Here you had a feast, with people eating on credit (with the phone lines so jammed, credit card processing was functionally down) and a kind of community potluck festival was developing.

There were people literally dancing in the street.

Feeling the bugs on the people out there while they danced was almost mesmerizing — I’d been tagging people for as long as I’d been in range, and while I probably didn’t have everyone in my range tagged, I certainly had a lot of them. Feeling the way they moved, the way the crowd eddied and flowed, the way the dancers matched the rhythm of the musician, the way a young mother across the street on the third floor opened her window, and swayed and twirled with a two year old on her hip, the way a grandfather who’d dragged a chair up to the storefront tapped his pipe in rhythm… sound and motion blended together wonderfully.

Or… I could call in the Protectorate. People at the other tables were using their cell phones to check on friends and relatives, and if most calls were getting busy signals, a few were getting through. A location on Bakuda ought to bring a massive response as soon as it could be organized. Given what was going on in the city, that might be an hour or two… but still faster than waiting until my next meeting with Purity. I’d been so focused on the fact that the Protectorate wouldn’t approve of my trying to get Bakuda, wouldn’t permit me to do anything meaningful any time soon, that I hadn’t thought much about what they could bring to the table.

For all the gang presence in Brockton Bay, the Protectorate was still the most formidable single force — and it could draw reinforcements from across the country as needed, including several of the most powerful capes alive. E88 had survived decades of Protectorate manhunts by virtue of its deep bench: it regularly boasted a dozen or more capes on its roster, drawing white supremacists from across the nation and even the world to its banner. Every time one quit or was put away, another emerged.
The ABB, by contrast, was only a few years old and had survived almost wholly on Lung’s personal reputation: he was quite capable of fighting every other cape in Brockton Bay solo if the fight dragged on long enough, and while he could be beaten… he healed. His foes usually died. To date, no organization had been willing to go all-in against him, and anything less would only temporarily discourage him, at best.

Without Lung, the Protectorate probably could crush the ABB outright — and would be glad of the opportunity. They could focus on Empire Eighty Eight, then, or maybe clean up some of the minor players that had sprung up over the last few years.

Those minor players ranged from the loosely Protectorate-aligned New Wave to Faultline’s purely mercenary crew to the Undersiders themselves. There were usually one or two other villain-led gangs, but they never lasted. Coil… who knew what Coil was doing, or even if he were actually a cape. The running theory was that he was some kind of Tinker: his men were known for their professionalism and their laser guns both. The Merchants had only survived this long because literally every other power in the city had better things to do than squashing them — someday, that would change.

I roused from my musings as I noticed that two people were headed down to Bakuda’s workshop — I’d felt the car they’d come in press through the crowd on the street, felt them exit the car and enter the apartment building, but hadn’t paid them any particular mind until they turned down the stairs.

Two men. I focused my attention more closely, as Bakuda opened the door. A thin asian man in a black bodysuit, bandanna around his neck like he’d watched too many Westerns, wearing a lot of knives. And behind him… Lung.

Well, fuck.
Lung’s presence changed everything.

The Protectorate wouldn’t start an open fight with Lung on the loose, particularly with whatever Bakuda and Oni Lee had done to disrupt the city. The power outage that had inspired the outpouring of community spirit before me couldn’t have been an accident; the sirens I’d heard in the distance wouldn’t have been for blackout issues. There would have been bombs, and bomb threats, all over the city — and then Oni Lee would have gotten Lung out of restraints and into the fight, and after that…

The Protectorate might have taken serious casualties tonight already. The PRT surely had. They could both call in reinforcements, and they would be looking to avenge this… but right now, they’d be scattered all over the city, reacting to whatever Bakuda had done, trying to limit the loss of life.

Purity might risk it… but the most she could hope to do is drive Lung off. Hit him hard enough, fast enough, before he became unstoppable… and he’d simply retreat to heal. Pursue him, and unless you got him fast, you just prolonged the fight until he could win it outright. Could I convince Purity to bring in the rest of the E88? It would be elegant — doing extraordinary damage to both gangs with one ploy. But… the white supremacists would have done that on their own, years ago… if they thought they could pull it off. Start a bigger fight against Lung, and he just scaled up faster.

He wasn’t invincible — he’d been captured earlier through the use of poison, and luck. A lot of luck. If you got basically every cape in the city together, and kept up indirect pressure and occasional skirmishes… maybe. But how likely was that? The Protectorate, E88, New Wave, Faultline, Coil, the Undersiders, the Merchants… all of them going after Lung at once?

I’d have better luck trying to kill Lung in his sleep with butterflies than putting that coalition together.

They were talking.

“… hope you’re pleased with the extraction.”

“It served. The vest?” Lung’s voice was a low rumble.

“The one you requested for Oni Lee? Here.” Bakuda gestured at the vest. Lee silently picked it up.
and donned it, rearranging some of his knives for better access.

“Lee. Tomorrow, go among the Empire 88, and kill. No less than six places — a threefold price for Purity’s insult. If Kaiser or his lieutenants fight you, kill all you can, withdraw, and tell me where they are.”

Oni Lee nodded, and departed. I guess he could get away with multiple suicide bombings with his teleportation and short-lived clones, and with a Bakuda-designed vest… the casualties would be horrible. And E88 would respond, would have to respond: this would mean war in the streets. I tagged him automatically — I had no idea how I’d stop him. If I could stop him. Regardless, finding him would be the start of anything I could do.

“The grenades?”

Bakuda clasped her hands, washing them nervously. “Not yet ready — making something the idiot footsoldiers can use has its issues, and…”

“When?”

“I’ve been implanting bombs into people, giving us new recruits, and working on the big one you asked for, and that’s all taken time, that and engineering your escape. But the first batch will be ready tomorrow!” Her voice rose sharply as she pointed at the table, where a few modified grenades nestled next to the unmodified ones.

“Acceptable.”

The silence that followed dragged on endlessly, Bakuda fidgeting and Lung still as stone.

Bakuda cracked. “I took care of that bug girl who rotted your crotch off!”

I had done what? Hot tea flowed through my nose, and the next few moments were spent spluttering.

“You did what?” Lung’s voice remained perfectly steady, uncaring.
“She was trying out for the Wards, and they used her real name in front of one of our soldiers –”

I couldn’t see that Lung had changed expression, but Bakuda cut off.

“… your soldiers. Look, the thing is, I found out where she lived, and I blew her the fuck up.”

“I wished to hurt her.”

“She didn’t deserve you — she wouldn’t have put up a fight, she was a coward. That’s what she was famous for, among the kids her age: being the kid who was bullied so much her name was a punchline and an urban legend, the story kids used to scare each other with at sleepovers, the one with the locker full of used tampons and the girl who freaked out so bad.”

This was a lot more personally insulting than what I’d expected to overhear.

“She was no threat. She won through a trick. I wanted vengeance.”

Bakuda was gesticulating wildly by now. “Even if you had sought her out, she’d just skitter away from a confrontation like the insects she used. Like the insect she was! I didn’t think you’d want to fight her!”

Skitter? Insect?

“I squished her, and then broke you out of jail! I thought you’d be grateful! What she did to you…”

“I will heal. Could you?”

“What?” Bakuda’s expression of bewilderment lasted all of five seconds before a backhand knocked her to the ground.

“She was mine.” His voice, which had up to this point never varied its pace or tone, warmed slightly
as a hint of eagerness crept in. “That is reason enough.” Technically, his bared teeth could have been called a smile.

The look of mixed hatred and terror on Bakuda’s face, as she lay on the ground... I was starting to see what she’d meant when she told her victim that Lung had taught her all about how to rule through fear. She was in her workshop. From what I knew about her, she had to have explosives there that could cause extreme damage to Lung, or lock him down for a time, or both. A Tinker with her specialization, in a position of trust, on ground she’d prepared… she might be one of the few capes living who really could kill him.

And she wanted to do just that, wanted badly to lash out in response. Instead, she took this abuse. Because he scared her that much.

Honestly, I could see where she was coming from there.

Lung’s face relaxed back into its usual distant contempt, and he laid himself out on the only bed there. Either he thought threatening to kill a woman was foreplay, or he just didn’t care if Bakuda had to sleep on the floor tonight. Bakuda went back to the tray of normal grenades, and began painstakingly modifying one in order to add it to the tray of finished product.

The good news was that they thought I was dead. The bad news was that if he learned I was alive, Lung would consider it a matter of personal honor to fix that. That would make him determined. That would make him relentless.

That would make him… predictable.

I could use that, or try to use that, at least. Better than crossing my fingers and hoping he doesn’t find out on its own: Lung with the drop on me was a fight that could only end one way.

First things first, though — tomorrow was shaping up to be a slaughter. Was there anything I could do about it? Oni Lee was beyond my range already, and I somehow doubted the busses were running normally. Hell, given the crisis, and chaos, and emergency response issues, it would be hard to search the city even if I’d had my own car. I wouldn’t be tracking him down before tomorrow.

Fine — focus on what I could do. Eavesdrop on Lung and Bakuda, I guess. Not as useful as you might think, at least so far. Nothing convenient about their forwarding address, or secret weakness, or anything like that: just a masterclass in how to rule through fear. Not exactly helpful unless I
wanted to run my very own criminal organization.

What did that leave me? I could walk away for tonight — I’d literally have to, to make it back to my room at that hotel. The ABB thought I was dead right now (and I silently blessed whomever at the Protectorate had had that bright idea). So: I could continue to provide recon support to Purity. I could probably even bring most of the Brockton Bay Protectorate down on a target… once. After that, foster care and Ward time. With Sophia.

That was the safe play.

Problem was, I didn’t want to do it.

While I’d been tracking Bakuda, she’d been breaking Lung out. I hadn’t been fast enough, and everything I’d prepared for dealing with Bakuda wouldn’t work against Lung. Even if they split up, the only way to guarantee he wouldn’t pull her out of the fire… would be to find someone who could beat him or stall him, and if I could do that I could just go after them together.

The two thugs watching the lobby came down, and carried Mr. Park upstairs.

Letting Bakuda keep at it meant letting her continue to implant people with these bombs, use them to ensnare their friends and family… giving her a wholly disposable army to use the bombs she was modifying. The Protectorate could fight the capes. No one was prepared for widespread civilian suicide attacks. Sure, the Triumvirate could come in, and Dragon, and probably Myrddin and Exalt and Chevalier while we’re talking about it. But the casualties would still be staggering.

Best case, Brockton Bay would become a war zone.

Worst case… she was apparently working on a ‘big one’. I thought back to pre-cape history. Bakuda was a genius with explosives. With a big enough bomb, she could hold the city hostage. She could hold other cities hostage. Mutually Assured Destruction. With enough hostages, could the ABB take the city, stand off the Protectorate?

Probably not forever: Protectorate Thinkers, Tinkers, and Strangers could disarm her bombs, and the precogs could probably see it coming before she finished it. But… she was crazy enough to try it. And I couldn’t let that happen.
Oni Lee, on his own, was a vicious killer.

Lung, on his own, was a two-bit gangster... unless you fought him. Then, he was as strong as he needed to be.

Bakuda was the problem — she was the one who could make the ABB more than a street gang. Tinkers: the weakest capes without resources. With them, they could do damn near anything within their theme, and many things outside it.

She was the one who had to go first, and her devices with her... and insects don’t eat metal.

I left cash for my meal — and a substantial tip — and stood up, shrugging my backpack on. Those were good reasons for what I was about to do. Heroic reasons. And they mattered. They just weren’t the only reasons. Deep in my gut, where I’d been numb, there was a coal of anger.

She thought I wasn’t worthy to face Lung? That I’d just skitter away from a fight? That she just had to bully me hard enough, and I’d fold? She’d killed my father because she thought I was a punchline?

She didn’t get to win, not tonight.

Not ever.

I made my way through the celebrating crowd outside the restaurant, head down, anonymous beneath my hood. The guy with the three stringed banjo was still going strong, and an audience had gathered around him. The rest of the crowd swirled with conversation and movement, small children running to emptying vats of ice cream for more, older people exchanging greetings and gossip. With all the insects I’d been gathering, with everyone I’d tagged, it was easy to read the flow of the crowd and weave through it without breaking stride. I approached the apartment building...

... and passed on. With what I had planned, I wouldn’t need my physical body there.

I felt through the swarms, gathered others from the area, sorted through for which kinds of bugs I wanted to use... and acted. Swarms filtered in through the air vents, as quietly as I could manage. Lung was trying to take a nap, and Bakuda was bent over a table, fiddling with another grenade. Neither reacted for a very long minute. I had a pretty constant flow of insects coming in from the
outside, through the vent system. Another major swarm was waiting outside the door, clinging to the ceiling and waiting to drop.

This was as good a chance as I’d get.

I moved for Bakuda first. She didn’t notice until the column of insects was halfway up her calves, at which point she shrieked, throwing up her hands and stumbling deeper into the workshop toward Lung, trying to brush them off. I had the flying insects lift off and spread out in a buzzing, humming cloud that ruined visibility. Lung was on his feet, flames dancing around his fingertips — I’d held off on attacking him to try and delay the point where he’d just win outright. Bakuda ran to him, and hid behind him. I kept the insect cloud in the air, and the creeping carpet on the ground, following her… but slowly enough for her to reach him before being engulfed.

“You failed.” He cleaned her face with his flame, and it blistered as the insects fell away, stunned or dead. The survivors crawled away to join the curtain of insects that formed a cylinder around Lung — just over arm’s reach from him. Bakuda just glared out at my swarms from behind him, but stayed as far away as she could.

This wouldn’t hold Lung up for long, and I’d blown my best chance at swarming Bakuda under by letting her reach him. I’d been delaying attacking him, trying to slow his power from taking effect, because we both knew that after he got going, there was nothing I could do to hurt him. Hell, just getting in this fight was probably helping his regeneration along, so he’d probably be healthier after it than before. This kind of slow start was apparently A-OK with him.

It was fine with me too — keeping both of them trapped in the back of the workshop for just a little bit longer was all I’d been aiming for anyway.

Trying to use a Tinker device was normally an exercise in frustration: they were designed by and for people who didn’t respect the laws of physics, let alone common sense. But, every so often, a Tinker designed something for the unwashed masses, and then they had to make it usable by mere normals. Bakuda’s modified grenades should clear the room, and in a workshop just filled with explosives, well… it would ruin whatever she’d been working on, even if they probably weren’t volatile enough to chain-detonate. Might kill her too.

If she hadn’t killed Dad, I might even have cared.

Wouldn’t be long now: another of my swarms had just engulfed the tray. A little effort and…
Huh.

Pushing the lever and pulling the pin apparently took more force than my insects could muster. That… might be a problem.

I reversed my steps and broke into a jog. Some of the reinforcements were directed to cling to the lintel above the door above the manager’s office, in case those two thugs made trouble. And in the workshop… I’d need to buy time.

I formed a swarm-clone a good ten feet from them, where it would be only vaguely visible through the buzzing cloud of insects, and spoke through it.

“She did better than you managed, Lung. Still sitting down to pee?”

He snarled. His face was animated, his eyes alive, and his voice caressed the word “Motherfucker” when he spoke. The flames flickering around his hands were getting more intense, and his nails were visibly longer and more metallic.

I pushed my body into a sprint, shouldering the door to the lobby open and breaking directly for the stairs, taking them two at a time. I was in the stairwell before the two thugs watching the lobby were on their feet, and by the time I’d reached the basement they were thoroughly occupied with trying to wrestle with the twelve pounds of bugs apiece that had dropped on their heads.

The bugs were winning.

I tried to open the door — deadbolt!

The swarm clone turned its ‘head’ to Bakuda. “You thought I’d skitter away? I’ll show you skitter.”

So witty dialogue wasn’t my superpower — I was trying to get them talking, buy some time. Something.

Anything.
Lung, unfortunately, had his own ideas about clever ripostes, and they involved screaming and lunging with fire trailing from his claws. The swarm clone dissolved under his assault and a lot of the flying insects died. I reformed my decoy in another part of the workshop, with the operating table between it and Lung. He promptly ripped the table in half on his way to my clone, which he also promptly ripped in half.

Bakuda had opened a desk drawer by the bed, and pulled something the size of a breath mint out which she promptly threw into the flying mass of bugs closing on her. A deafening WHUMP later, everything within five feet of where it had been was gone, and I felt a strong, brief, suction from there through the rest of the bugs. She moved through the gap to one of her worktables at a sprint, and started grabbing things off of it; I had bugs crawling on her in an effort to distract her.

The plan hadn’t called for stinging or biting — just distraction — and I hadn’t brought the more vicious types along in any real quantity. I swore I’d have some seriously venomous bugs along next time, even if I shouldn’t need them.

Just in case.

Fun fact: deadbolts take a lot less effort to shift than grenades, and one of my swarms came through. I opened the door, and reached down. The carpet of insects met my hands with the first two of the grenades they were ferrying my way, the rings tied to each other with silk. I squeezed the spoons and pulled them apart. One ring popped out; the other jerked but stayed in.

Lung’s head snapped around, eyes focusing on me despite the screen of bugs blocking any normal sight between us. I underhanded a grenade forward, pulled the other’s pin and launched it in too. I barely slammed the door on the fireblast he’d launched my way. I formed swarm clones around each grenade and tried to re-bolt the door with a third grouping, while yet another group climbed all over Bakuda and a fifth tried to keep the sightlines blurry and buzzing. I ran for the stairs; my second clone shambled for Bakuda who was readying something that looked like a can of beans; the first clone moved toward Lung and got eviscerated for its trouble.

That just left him holding the grenade when it went off.

The rumbling knocked me off my feet as I hit the ground floor, and I had to crawl-scramble back to my feet before exiting the lobby. Whatever had happened down there, I’d lost a lot of bugs, including all the ones I’d had on Bakuda. I swept them through, and found wreckage and pieces, but it was hard to form a complete picture since they kept registering intense heat and then dying.
I hadn’t really thought I’d get Lung anyway.

I’d made it outside, and kept to a steady jog. The moon was brighter for the blackout, and my feet beat a steady tattoo on the pavement to the erratic accompaniment of further explosions in the distance behind me. For so many months, my runs had always led me back to Dad. That wasn’t going to happen, not ever again.

But, for the first time since I’d woken up on that hospital bed, I could think of him, see him in my mind’s eye, that weary smile and the way he'd look at me over his glasses... and not flinch away.

It really was a wonderful night.
I woke with a smile on my face.

I got up and showered, humming. The spiders in the crawlspace weaving sections for my costume hummed along, and when I found my toes tapping I noticed that the spiders were tapping along too. I dressed and pulled the curtains — the sun was shining in through the window, and life was good. Not perfect, of course. I wasn’t looking forward to seeing my father’s headstone set beside my mothers, but I could imagine that event now.

I’d dreamt of my parents last night. Dancing together — well, what my mother called dancing, given her two left feet. Holding each other, and swaying, eyes half-closed. And when they looked over to me they smiled. Dad had never been the same after Mom died, and for all the way they would just hug each other in public had embarrassed me at the time, now… now I smiled to think of it. To think of them. I had no idea if there was an afterlife — though some theologians were citing Glaistig Uaine as definitive proof — but I liked to hope they were together again.

Happy again.

And now I was crying and laughing both.

Saturdays had been the best day of the week for me for almost a year and a half, simply because I wouldn’t be going in to school. Today was shaping up to be an unusually good Saturday. There were still problems to deal with — Oni Lee had a rampage planned, and I was probably at the top of Lung’s to-kill list — but there was also an enormous sense of release. Of completion.

I lay back on the bed and kicked my legs idly.

I could actually join the Wards now. There were a lot of things I wanted to do: ABB was still a major power, and I hadn’t begun to touch E88, but somehow the idea of a month off wasn’t intolerable any more. I could use the training and practice, too. It hadn’t even been a week since I’d first gone out, and I knew I was a novice at this. I could be better. I’d have to be. Even the idea of dealing with Sophia didn’t sting as much as it had before — I guess Lung had recalibrated my idea of what fear was. The idea of Sophia trying to bully me just made me grin, with extra teeth.

There was still the issue of whether she’d deliberately given my name to the ABB or not — most Tinkers had minor Thinker powers associated, and even those that didn’t were perfectly capable of
adding two and two and getting Pi… but I bet the Protectorate had all kinds of lie detectors available. If she had, well — the Birdcage was a terrible place. If she hadn’t, putting her through a serious interrogation session would just be a harmless prank.

The smile widened.

There were other things I had to do, a different list. One of thanksgiving. Several people had gone out of their way to help me pull this off. Without Panacea, I’d still be in a hospital, or dead. Without Gallant and Clockblocker’s willingness to bend the rules for me, I’d be in a padded room somewhere with a PRT psychologist, unable to do anything. Without Lisa’s gift of money, I wouldn’t have seen a chance to get free. Even Purity had helped, though her motives weren’t exactly pure: without her repeated use of overwhelming force, would Bakuda have called in that extra security? And that was the break that led me to her. That let me get her.

I was smiling so hard it hurt.

Purity, I had a meeting with tonight. At the very least, I could warn her — through a clone, and from a safe distance — that someday, I’d be coming for the E88. Surprising her just didn’t seem like a fair reply for the trust she’d extended, for the condolences she’d offered. And Lisa — somehow I thought that I wouldn’t have many chances to thank her after I joined the Wards. The heroes, I could thank afterward. Well! There’s today’s plan. Tomorrow, the Wards.

I thought about rolling over to dig through my backpack, but instead pulled a small swarm in through the crack in the floorboard and had them undo the toggles on one of the side pockets of my backpack — I usually left it unzipped for just this reason. Actually lifting it to the bed would take a lot more bugs than I’d brought in, but if I linked a thread of silk to it like so… I jerked my hand across my chest, and then held it up to catch the cellphone. Having a bug on what I was trying to catch made things… simple.

Like trying to touch your own nose.

I repeated the trick with the cellphone battery and let my bugs clear away the silk while I fitted one into the other. A small team of flying bugs presented me with the slip of paper I’d found, and I dialed the number labeled ‘Lunch!’

“Taylor?” She sounded as if she’d been asleep.
“Lisa! I know the note said to call you for lunch, but I was thinking brunch. Waffles, and bacon — you know the Waffle House down by the boardwalk? See you there in… an hour?”

“What?”

“Great!”

I hung up. A lesson from happier days with Emma: assume they’ll get out of bed to do something, don’t give them a chance to say no, and they will show. Of course, they might be late… but in this case, that just meant more pancakes for me while I waited. And you know what? I could live with that.

………

The Waffle House was one of the few restaurants open this morning — plenty of others were still dealing with the loss of refrigeration from the still ongoing power outages, but they were famous for their disaster response planning, and a generator was buzzing in the back. Not even Endbringer attacks (well, Simurgh excepted), would shut down one of their restaurants for more than a few days, if that. Accordingly, it was bustling with noise and people. I’d gotten there first, as expected, and was busy finding out whether waffles were best with butter and syrup, or strawberries and whipped cream (provisional answer: more testing required!) when someone sat down in the booth with me.

Not Lisa — a man. Young, tall, very dark skin, chiseled jaw… and fit. Cornrowed hair. His voice, when he spoke, was deep and even. “I’m a friend of Lisa’s. Call me James.”

I blinked.

“Well, any friend of Lisa’s — want some waffles? I’m buying.”

While he studied the menu, I thought. Why would Lisa have sent someone else? Was she called away for some urgent heist, or something? My prepaid cellphone still had the battery in, and I had insects on it: I would have felt it if it had vibrated. She hadn’t called. So… why would someone like her surprise me with a strange young man?
Was this a blind date?

He ordered an omelette, with lots of extras and a plate of bacon, and then steepled his hands and looked me in the eye.

“We’re on a limited buddy system after last night.”

I nodded. *Not* a blind date, thank goodness. And if he’s part of the Undersiders, that would make him… Grue. Probably. “I saw the blackout.”

He nodded back. “All kinds of rumors on the streets. Bakuda tried to kill Lung in jail, but he broke out instead…”

I shook my head. “That one’s false.”

He blinked, and we paused while his omelette and bacon arrived, and another waffle arrived for me.

Between bites, he continued. “The official word is that Lung and Bakuda had a fight for leadership of the ABB — Lung won, but Bakuda’s a sore loser. If that’s not it…” he looked at me for a bit.

Lisa slid in beside him, and he moved over to make room for her.

“Taylor! You’re looking… surprisingly well.” She had deep circles under her eyes, but the smile was real. She promptly flagged down a waiter, asking for a pot of coffee and a stack of pancakes. A stack happened to be coming off the grill right then, and she was served less than a minute later.

Five minutes of quiet eating later, the discussion resumed with Lisa asking why I’d asked for brunch.

I shrugged. “Celebration? To say thanks? The money you gave me made a difference — gave me an alternative.”
Lisa squinted a little, before smiling widely. “So you got Bakuda!”

I smiled, and James glanced back and forth between us.

Lisa elbowed him and said “Well, that tells us which rumors to believe. The one where E88 has gone to war with the ABB?”

“Kind of. I pointed Purity at some ABB targets — which reminds me, their drug warehouse had a lot of cash and should I call that ‘bank’ number? I thought a fight might weaken both of them.”

James nodded. “Smart.”

Lisa waved a hand in the air. “The Number Man is a really good banker, and very discreet. Call the number; he’ll take care of you. The one where Bakuda set off bombs all over the city as a distraction, and then Oni Lee broke Lung out?”

“I think so.”

“The one where Lung blames everything on ‘Skitter’?”

I blinked. “I guess I see why he thought I called myself that.”

“The one where you took off his right hand?”

“I threw one of Bakuda’s explosives at him, he caught it.”

“The one where you took off his dick?”

“Spiders.”

Lisa clapped her hands over mouth, trying and failing to suppress a laughing fit. James’ face didn’t
move a millimeter — though I did feel him cross his legs.

“He’ll regenerate!”

At that, James did react: one eyebrow rose. Lisa had her face down on the table, pounding it with her fist. Me? I was mortified, and failing to shrink out of visibility. After a bit, she straightened up.

“I think we’ll just assume the one where he wants you dead more than anyone else in the world is… also true. The one where you wiped out the whole ABB with more bombs?”

I blinked. “What?”

Lisa sobered up. “If that wasn’t you, then… Bakuda had a deadman switch.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know yet… no one really knows yet. Between the bombs she set off to cut power and create disruption, the way most of the ABB went pop!, and the collateral damage from both of those… thousands, at least. The ABB has almost ceased to exist as an organization, as far as anyone can tell. But Lung’s alive, and Oni Lee has spent the morning tearing up E88 territory, so…”

Thousands? Dead? I should have thought. Of course Bakuda would have a deadman switch: if she was implanting bombs in her subordinates, she’d have to make sure they didn’t simply kill her in her sleep. And… how many had she implanted? Gang members, sure, but also random civilians. The conversation with Mr. Park hadn’t taken more than a few minutes, and that was with her lingering over it to explain everything, to make him fear her more. Had she wanted hostages? Agents to place her other bombs for her? An army? How many could she have gotten to? The spot checks in that apartment complex had shown scars in the right place on everyone I’d checked.

The explosions I’d heard behind me as I made my escape hadn’t just been leftovers from her workshop cooking off. And that was just one property.

I stood up.
“Please excuse me for a moment.”

I walked to the bathroom, not even seeing where I was walking, and proceeded to bend over a toilet and throw up the morning’s worth of waffles and syrup. Then I dry heaved for a while. Eventually I felt a hand on my hair, pulling it back out of the way.

Lisa.

“It’s not your fault, you know. She made the bombs, she set them up to go off if she died.”

I shook my head. “It was *obvious* that she’d do that — she had to. If a real hero had beaten her… they’d take her alive. Bring in Tinkers to take them out, disarm them. Everyone would still be *alive*.” I’d wondered if the Protectorate let the big gangs be because they thought the price of taking them out was just too high. Now I wondered if they had been right. So many dead, because… because of what I’d done.

A pause, while Lisa kept brushing loose hairs out of the way.

“If you’d waited, she’d have *more* bombs in *more* people by now, right?”

I thought about Mr. Park and his son… and the fact Bakuda had planned to have the ‘rest of his family’ implanted by morning. “Some.”

“You stopped this early — kept it from getting worse. And you’ve been at this for what, less than a week now? You’ll get better.”

Better? I’d been careless, and people had died. I’d learn. And next time? I wouldn’t *let* things get this far. I stood up straight, hands fist beside me. Lisa turned my head, checked each eye, and then stepped back.

“After you.”

I walked out of the bathroom to find James looming in front of the door and an ‘out of order’ sign, arms crossed. He fell in with us as I returned to the table and sat down. Lisa tapped James on the
shoulder, and then spoke.

“I think you need some time to think. We’ll do lunch again soon.”

She looked at me, smiled a little, then nodded once and turned toward the exit. James lingered a moment.

“Two things. They hit your family? They had it coming. All of it. And what you did — it’s a rumor, now, but that’s a still lot of rep. Use it.”

I blinked. “Rep?”

“Reputation. What people know will happen if you throw down. The more rep you have, the less you need to prove it.”

I tilted my head.

“You think I work out just for fun? Every time I walk home, the E88 idiots think ‘wait for someone easier.’ You paid for this. Use it.”

He nodded at me, and turned to go after Lisa.

I sat there, a cup of coffee in my hands, and let my thoughts drift. What he’d said… it fit with Lung and Bakuda’s idea of how fear was born of certainty and uncertainty — the certainty of loss, uncertainty as to the form it would take — but turned that understanding to a better purpose.

Maybe ten minutes later, maybe twenty, the waitress came by with the bill. She winked at me, and underneath the bill I found a wrinkled pamphlet on how to deal with bulimia, inscribed with ‘We’ve all been there! ♡’

I tipped her anyway.
I hadn’t really done anything in the afternoon. I’d spent it walking up and down the Boardwalk, often down on the beach itself, looking at the ocean and thinking. Six days ago, I’d gone out to try and be a hero. Now? Thousands dead and injured. Dad, dead. Set against that… Bakuda, also dead. Most of the ABB, dead. Was that what being a hero was like? Trying to make a difference, and then trying to live with how far short you fell?

My thoughts weren’t really going anywhere, and most of the time I was just wandering in a daze. I had clear memories of skipping stone after stone out into the ocean, of watching some teenagers play volleyball, of sitting by while a stocky girl played fetch with her three dogs. Each of those moments might have been minutes; each of those moments might have been hours.

Night fell, and my steps led me to the old Transatlantic Shipping building. It was locked, but mostly that didn’t matter when you could open it from the inside with a swarm clone, or pour the tiniest insects in the area into the keyhole to move the tumblers. Still needed a file or something to turn the lock, but I’d had one of those deep in my backpack next to my toothbrush. Looking at the crushed insects on this one, I put it in one of the ‘tool’ pouches, and made a note to get another one for grooming. Maybe I would have had to worry about alarms, normally, but with the building empty for a Sunday and the power still mostly down it wasn’t a real issue.

I made my way up the stairs to the roof access door, and then sat on the landing one floor down, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. This was as good a place to wait as any, and better than most, since I’d be alone. And for the meeting itself, well… Purity probably wouldn’t waste time destroying the building since she’d already seen that her beams didn’t do anything to stop me reforming swarm clones as necessary. I gathered extra swarms on the roof anyway.

Watching the clock in school had been a brutally slow way to pass time. Having insects on the hands of my little mechanical watch meant I always knew the time as soon as I thought about wanting to know it. I thought it was going to be a slow hour waiting for Purity.

It was.

8:59 and she landed; I formed a swarm clone.

“What’s the target for tonight?”
My clone shook its head.

“No target.”

“The lead on Bakuda?”

“Found her last night. Your strikes made her call in extra security — I followed them right to her.”

Purity’s soft light rippled oddly — making out facial expressions was really hard without any contrast, but that might have been a smile.

“All those explosions?”

I winced.

“She kept the gang’s loyalty with implanted explosives on a deadman switch. With her gone… boom.”

Purity was perfectly still for almost a minute, head lowered, before she spoke again.

“Lung? Oni Lee?”

“We need a way for you to get in touch with me when you find them.”

My clone’s head wobbled back and forth.

“I don’t know what I’m doing next. I wanted to tell you thanks… and to tell you that, someday, I
mean to come for Empire Eighty Eight too.”

Another change in the light around her face.

“I can’t say you’d be wrong to fight them.” Her voice was slow, reflective.

“Them?”

“I quit two years ago. H–They wanted power, to make a bigger difference. I thought what we were doing was making things worse. So I went off on my own, and fought the gangs.”

As far as everything I’d ever read went, Purity was still E88’s heaviest enforcer. Two years?

“But not E88.”

“It’s… hard. To fight people you’ve fought beside, people you’ve had drinks with. And there have always been other things to do. Like the ABB.”

I couldn’t really disagree with the end of that.

“I’ve spent over a year, harrying them every chance I got. I was starting to worry that nothing I did would make a difference. This… this made a difference.”

I wasn’t really sure how I was supposed to feel about that. On the one hand, I knew exactly how that felt: I really wanted to feel like I was making a difference. That it hadn’t all been a waste. On the other hand, I was being praised by a white supremacist for indirectly causing the deaths of a few thousand Asians.

Purity moved her foot in the loose gravel of the roof for a bit.

“There’s a number written there — call it to reach me. And… thank you.”
With that, she vanished upwards, one star among the others.

I climbed to the roof and went out on it. Another corner of my backpack had my notebook, with all the notes on the ABB members I’d been tracing. I added the number to a new page, put it back in the backpack, erased the number in the gravel and lay down spread-eagled on the roof, with my hood for a pillow.

There were a lot more stars visible tonight than I was used to.

I looked up at them for a very long time.
Skill alone was pointless.

Those who lacked skill thought it would solve their problems.

Those who had it knew better.

With a gun or in hand to hand, Victor knew no equal — and if he ever did meet his better, he’d take their skill for his own as well. Nor were his skills restricted to combat: he could sail a boat, snare a rabbit, or stitch a wound (to name just three possibilities) with an equal degree of skill. There were tricks available to him that he was convinced no human had ever tried before: very few people managed to spend a lifetime at parkour and a lifetime at judo, let alone a lifetime at marksmanship, and a lifetime as an aerialist as well. But Victor had all those skills, and could blend them and others in ways never before seen.

Not that he generally did — after all, skill wasn’t the point, and simplicity had a virtue of its own. Skill without purpose, without judgment, was meaningless. Take Uber, the parahuman closest to himself in power. Their powers weren’t quite the same: Victor needed time with a skilled person to acquire their skill and retained a fraction of it permanently while Uber instantaneously acquired whatever skill he could imagine… for as long as he concentrated on it.

Uber, literally, could do anything he set his mind to.

Anything.

What he chose to do with this unbounded power was run the 214th ranked YouTube channel, starring Leet and himself as they reenacted video game scenes… badly. He made no difference in the world. He wasn’t even making money! No, the only thing honorable about Uber’s life was his loyalty to Leet — and Victor honored that in him. It was a dog’s devotion to a man-child unworthy of it, but it was a pure gift given unstintingly… and unwise.

Victor had learned young that, ultimately, only your own kind could be trusted to help you — and not all of those. After he’d gained his powers, he’d done all he could to repay those who’d helped him. To help those who needed help. To clear out the wrong kind. To make a better world.
And when the call had come for him to go to Brockton Bay, he had gone. Empire Eighty Eight was the greatest gathering in North America dedicated to the cause; a summons meant you were being called up to the big leagues.

In a year, he had proven himself. There were more powerful superhumans in the Empire, Purity foremost among them. There were more ruthless ones — Hookwolf came to mind. But Kaiser did not rule through power or fear alone, nor because his father had been Allfather. Kaiser ruled because he knew how to lead: how to inspire loyalty and command obedience. And Kaiser had seen the same potential in him. Kaiser had gone out of his way to arrange a betrothal for him to one of Heith’s many cousins, and then to arrange a second betrothal to Ophelia after Isolde died.

It brought Victor, quite literally, into the Imperial family.

Victor was sensible of the honor involved. It meant that Kaiser thought that, with time and after Kaiser died, Victor might lead the Empire. It also meant that Kaiser thought that Theodore would not, after all, rise to the occasion. This was likely true — but Victor knew what it was to have a father who would not teach you how to be a man. The man Theodore might become would have to be of his own making, for the flaws in Theodore that disgusted Kaiser were of Max’s making. It was… unworthy.

The Empire was not.

That which Allfather had built and Kaiser expanded, bore study and respect. The Empire had survived the Protectorate, the Slaughterhouse 9, and the many, many, gangs that had tried to establish themselves in Brockton Bay over the years. And Max had even built a successful pharmaceutical company along the way, almost in passing — his talent as a leader was undeniable.

His personal life, however, was disastrous on almost every level. As a male, Victor could understand the appeal of Fenja and Menja very well indeed: blonde, tall, athletic, and twins. But a man ruled his desires, not the other way around. Nor had the damage stopped with his dysfunctional home life: Victor remained convinced that Max’s interest in the twins cousin to — and raised by! — his first wife had been part of what had split Purity off, and she hadn’t left alone. Even so, Max persisted in believing that Purity would return any week now in exchange for renewed purpose.

However chaotic his personal life became, his strategic judgment was real: for over a year, Kaiser had restrained his people from making war on the ABB. “They will destroy themselves” he had said. “We need only wait” he had said. And he had been right. Bakuda was dead and the ABB crippled in an internal power struggle. Victor could respect that judgment, and learn from it — just as he studied Max’s mistakes and learned from them. His marriage to Ophelia would be founded on clear communication and shared effort, not fickle lust or illusory love. He would be the man his father had not been, the man even Kaiser was not.
With time, he might even be the man the Empire — the world — needed.

To get there, though, he’d have to survive the next hour. E88 had expanded aggressively into the confusion, taking corners and territory. The dealers and whores who’d served the ABB fled before the Empire’s soldiers, cowards without the enforcers to stiffen their spines — within a week, E88 would own that territory, and the people and income that came with it.

And with the ABB gone, it would be time to settle with the Merchants. Or perhaps Coil. With both gone, Brockton Bay could begin to fulfill Allfather’s vision of a pure city, one whose example would inspire the world. And with the Protectorate focused on disaster relief, there were only two who would contest the Empire’s claim to ABB territory.

Lung. And Oni Lee.

Three times on Saturday Oni Lee had struck at E88 properties, causing havoc and death. The second time, Hookwolf had been present. Essentially invulnerable to grenade or knife, he had forced Lee to run, and pursued him until Lung in turn had ambushed Hookwolf. Hookwolf, to his credit, had withdrawn immediately, before Lung became dangerous enough to rampage throughout E88 territory.

With the ABB strategy revealed, Victor had picked out the next most likely target, assigned additional protection, waited for Oni Lee to strike… and watched as Lee slaughtered them. It had grieved him to do it, for protection must flow down even as loyalty went upward, but soldiers were made for battle. The information they had purchased with their lives had informed Victor's choice of this next battlefield: a cavernous factory now used only for storage, with a maze of shelving constricting access and sightlines at ground level but great windows on the third story, it would force Lee to come into melee to kill the E88 soldiers defending it — and come he would.

The bait would be all the more irresistible for Lee, for Victor himself would be there.

Twice before had they fought hand to hand, matching the skills Victor had taken against Lee’s speed and clones. Once, one of Lee’s clones had disemboweled Victor while he snapped its neck. He’d started wearing a breastplate after being left for dead like that.

Once, Victor had disoriented the real Lee with a temple strike and pulled the pin of one of his grenades... and Lee had survived anyway, somehow removing his harness and teleporting clear of the blast in time. Lee’s reflexes were the fastest Victor had ever seen, Cricket included, but he’d
stopped wearing his grenades wired to his harness after that. After losing his eyes to the shrapnel, 
Victor remembered his first sight being a look up at Othala, his head in her lap, seeing the worry on 
her plain face, and realizing for the first time how deeply she cared.

This third time should pay for all.

Already this morning, Lee had struck a different site, still within uncontested E88 territory. Perhaps 
Lung hoped to halt the move on what had been ABB turf? Regardless, it hadn’t been properly 
defended, and people had died. Victor had planned even for that, and there had been a map put up 
on the wall of every E88 site last night, with this very location circled in red. Far too obvious a trap…
except for the fact that Lung and Oni Lee were animals, both of them. Lee would come, and Lung 
would be waiting somewhere nearby.

If Oni Lee kept to his pattern from yesterday, he’d strike sometime in the next forty-five minutes. 
Given the long corridor formed by shelves two stories high, he could only come from one of two 
directions, north or south. Victor stood up from the floor and slipped into a Tai Chi moving 
meditation, leaving his attention everywhere and nowhere, all his concentration in the moment as he 
flowed through the forms. An endless time later, something drew his attention — someone walking 
quietly on concrete.

North, then.

Victor turned to face the northern end of the corridor, hands clasped behind him.

Lee looked him in the eye, and gave a deathshead grin.

A moment.

Victor drew his pistol from his belt holster a beat slower than Lee’s knife emerged and then fired a 
single shot at Lee’s scuttling charge, hitting the shoulder. He then dropped the pistol, spinning into a 
low sweep kick aimed behind him. Another Lee stumbled and gave ground, his intended stab only 
slicing along Victor’s bicep before glancing off his breastplate. Victor rose and followed with a rapid 
combination to the solar plexus and throat, temporarily incapacitating this Lee. Victor leapt forward 
in a roll, coming up facing back at the two Lees coming toward him around the one clutching his 
throat. The one with the wounded shoulder puffed into a blinding cloud of ash covering half the 
distance between them, and Victor instantly launched a spinning backfist.
Coming around, he saw a grinning Lee erupt from the smoke and met it with an uncoiling spinning kick that caught it on the chin, snapping its neck and creating another ash cloud, this one enveloping Victor. The rotation from the kick gave him a glimpse of another Lee behind him, knives flickering out from his fingers, and Victor bent backward into a back handspring, felt a knife skip off the stomach of his breastplate and another trace a line of fire along his left calf as it came up. The handspring transitioned seamlessly through a cartwheel into a front handspring and from there into a dead run. He skidded to a stop twenty feet later, and turned to watch the ash cloud disperse.

And Lee walked right out, still smiling, knives sheathed, a grenade in one hand.

There.

After three clones with knives, Lee goes to grenades. Like clockwork. Of course, just because Victor knew it was coming didn’t mean he could stop it — Lee was living proof that keeping it simple was lethal. He backed up into the shaft of sunlight slanting through the western windows and kept retreating.

This was what he was gambling everything on.

Lee closed the distance to ten feet, stepped into the sunlight, eyes glancing up and to the left before he pulled the pin and leapt forward. Victor immediately turned to his right and underbarred through the shelves, hitting the ground running, while the rippling explosions of a dozen daisy-chained claymores thundered from the roof of the building next door. Five seconds later, a dull thump announced the death of the remaining clone.


Skill alone was never enough to be victorious.
Intermediaries 3.1

Sunday had been… pretty quiet. I’d spent the day at my mother’s grave sitting crosslegged on the grass letting the April sun warm me a little, looking at the empty plot next to her. It’s not like there was a body left to inter, anyway, and I’d have to pick some kind of cenotaph for him sometime. Right now, the city was enough of a mess that waiting seemed appropriate.

Less than a week ago now, I had set out to be a hero. To take all the misery, all the bullying, and make it worthwhile… somehow. I’d thought nothing could be worse than what I faced at school. I’d been wrong. Badly wrong.

Yesterday morning, I’d thought I’d join the Wards today. Now, I wasn’t sure if they would take me. Or even if they should. I’d killed Bakuda, deliberately. Partly in simple revenge for my father, partly in an effort to keep the ABB from using what she’d already created.

That part had succeeded beyond my wildest dreams… and nightmares. She’d had a deadman switch on her, and countdowns for bombs all over the city had been set in motion with her death.

I still didn’t know the magnitude of what I’d set in motion.

News reports were fragmentary, but the radio this morning said there were over 700 confirmed deaths from all causes over the past few days, with many more in critical condition or missing, and the total expected to rise substantially over the days ahead. The major highway interchange was in pieces, and multiple power substations had been bombed in Bakuda’s attempt to distract from Oni Lee’s breakout attempt. One of her big bombs had blown a dam about forty-five minutes upstate, and she’d done something fancy with the timing of when the turbines had gone up that had caused a cascading power failure throughout the state and into parts of the neighbouring ones. Another one had pretty much leveled City Hall.

It could have been so very much worse: in the hours before dawn on a Saturday morning, most of the targets she’d chosen — presumably for maximum casualties and chaos — were as deserted as they’d get. Even the loss of power was well-timed: it was out for most of the weekend, and most people just stayed home and ate their pantry down a little.

Some of the misses were still nightmarish.
There was a playground in Harbour Park that was now apparently encapsulated in a bubble of frozen time. The effect hadn't caught anything but the squirrels and a family's cat, and local kids were already making a game of trying to throw stones into it... but it was clearly planned to be an act of startling cruelty.

And not all of her bombs had missed. Studio, the most popular nightclub on the Boardwalk, had been pretty packed when Bakuda's attempt at 'improving' a disco ball had gone off. Almost everyone had gotten out alive, but most were blind and it looked like the survivors would all be deaf. Similarly, a number of houses in neighbourhoods throughout the E88 part of the city had gone up in flames (or in one memorable case, ice) with lethal results for the families sleeping within.

The aftermath had gone about as well as one could hope.

Some had gone out to loot, but a rapid Protectorate response was credited with dispersing small crowds before things got out of control. A lot of people had broken out the candles and some of those had started fires, but the Bay's Fire Departments had done very well indeed. I think they'd only actually lost people to Bakuda's take on a firebomb, and they weren't really equipped to deal with normal napalm anyway.

Power was already back pretty much everywhere, with a few exceptions, and even those were expected to be replaced by the end of the week.

The world had had a lot of experience in disaster recovery, since Behemoth appeared, and this could be taken in stride.

Mostly.

Information was scarce enough about what the government was doing: I didn’t begin to know what was going on in ABB territory, or whether Lung and Oni Lee were still at war with E88, what the lesser gangs were up to… that kind of information would take legwork. I could do that. I’d done it before, to find Bakuda, and I could do it again now. The problem…

The problem was that I wasn’t sure about what I wanted to do.

The last time I left this cemetery, I'd gone forth with the idea of cleaning up all the gangs in Brockton Bay. To try and keep others from losing their fathers, and to make that change a monument for my
own. The fact that the ABB was so badly hurt was proof that I could break the gangs. My mistake had been my failure to anticipate Bakuda. I hadn't known enough when I acted, and it had cost people their lives.

So. I needed more information.

I could get that.

What else did I need? Right now, I had the Protectorate and Lung both looking for me, and both of them knew enough to look for me out of costume. I'd evaded them so far, but I couldn't count on that luck lasting forever.

I laughed, bitterly.

My luck over the last few years had been terrible. No — no relying on luck. I'd make my luck instead.

I hadn't even noticed myself standing. I'd set my own affairs in order, and then… and then we'd see. Today, I hadn't helped with the search and rescue… because I wasn't sure where I'd end up after I was found, but I was sure it would start with custody — protective or otherwise. That was the first thing to fix.

I produced my phone, inserted the battery, and made a call.

Two rings later, precisely, someone picked up.

“Ms. Hebert — or do you prefer Skitter?”

Someone who knew my name. Were they watching me? Was he a Thinker with some kind of power over numbers, including phone numbers? Had he traced my call somehow, in seconds?

Or had I simply dialed a phone number given only to me?
“The Number Man?”

“Yes.”

“Ah… Skitter, I suppose. I have some cash I would like to deposit.”

“Quantity?”

“Ah… about a duffel-bag full?”

“Trusting.”

Something in his clipped disapproval rubbed me the wrong way.

“If I can’t trust you, I shouldn’t deposit anything. If I can…”

A pause.

“Interesting. Place the bag behind the Dockside Marriott at 9 p.m. — we’ll arrange pickup.” With that, he cut the connection. I removed the battery, and headed off at a steady walk to retrieve the caches I’d made only three days before. And to get a duffel bag.

I had tried to count the money while packing it away, just in case, but there were well over ten thousand bills involved — and I was only confident of that because I figured out how many inches a stack of a hundred bills was, and then counted inches. I had no idea how much money I had, but I did know how many pounds of money I had: about 40.
I left the bag where and when I’d been instructed, tagged it, and settled down on a distant bench. I gathered swarms back where the bag was — just in case.

At least if the Number Man took it, I’d still have the lunchbox emergency fund.

Not a minute later, the bag lifted and moved. I looked through one of the denser swarms, positioned on a nearby rooftop, and saw a sharply dressed woman lift the bag and carry it around the corner. I attempted to shift my viewpoint to the swarm with an angle into that alley and had a brief moment of double vision before it resolved into a clear view of a completely empty alley.

Huh. Well, that probably wasn’t a random thief.

A quick phone call confirmed that he’d received the funds.

“Now that I have some funds on deposit… can you recommend a good lawyer?”

Monday morning found me in an enormous conference room, looking at the box of pastries and the pitcher of icewater, my back to floor to ceiling windows with a magnificent view of both the skyline and the bay itself. I felt terribly out of place in my hooded sweatshirt, windbreaker, and jeans… but that’s where my appointment had directed me.

I’d spread out my awareness almost instinctively while I waited, though this high up I could feel the way my range was smaller at ground level. I’d been playing around with sensing people, testing my fine control by using individual insects, and it turned out the mosquitoes provided a sense of where people were in the area, and a sense... of flavor, I guess you'd call it. The ability to see and hear through my insects had been tremendously useful, if unreliable — I still couldn't tell if the headaches which occasionally accompanied my efforts were from the concussion, or whether I was doing it wrong somehow — but I was pretty sure that I didn't want to learn how to smell through my swarms, so I stopped trying. There were other games to play, like sending an insect out of my range with instructions to return. Pretty pointless, but fun — like throwing a tennis ball against a wall, blindfolded. The time passed quietly, and after about half an hour the conference room door opened.
In walked a man in a perfectly tailored suit, right down to the burgandy pocket square that matched his double-Windsor silk tie. His face in profile looked tailored too: Hollywood good looks, smooth and symmetrical enough that it looked fake. The scar on the other side of his face didn't so much break the symmetry as explain it: a good surgeon could fix most things. Whatever left *that* was apparently beyond merely human skill.

"Skitter?" he asked. He had a nice smile: professional, but warm enough that it felt like he really meant it.

"Yes."

"Quinn Calle. What can I do for you? I have to say, while it's not unusual to get a referral, it is unusual for a parahuman with a profile as low as yours to need the kind of services we provide."

I shrugged. "I'd rather not have the Protectorate looking for me."

He nodded. "Entirely reasonable. Why don't you tell me about why they are looking for you, and we'll see what I can do. It will, of course, be completely confidential."

I laid out the events leading up to my father's death and my departure from custody. I had to give him credit, he didn't even bat an eye, nor did his easy smile so much as waver. He did, however, ask a question.

"So why not join the Wards? From what you've said, they're looking for you to keep you safe, not put you away for good."

I shrugged. "Four reasons. I don't want to end up in foster care — that's a legal issue, and you're a lawyer."

He nodded. "Family law isn't my specialty, but the firm does have experts in it."

"What is your specialty?"

His smile widened, just a bit. "Parahumans. It has its risks, but it's quite a fascinating field."
I nodded. "The second reason is all those bombings. They're my fault."

He leaned back slightly. "Really? All the news reports are blaming that on Bakuda."

"She had a deadman switch on her creations. And I killed her."

He blinked, once. It was... almost reassuring to see that he could be surprised.

"I don't think it will come as a surprise to you to know that much of my work for parahuman clients deals with criminal matters. Under these circumstances — your age, your father so recently murdered, your own substantial injuries, the concussion... I could all but guarantee an acquittal for you. Without considering any question of self-defense — you were in fear for your life at the time?"

"More from Lung. I mean, Bakuda was trying to kill me too, but Lung's... scarier."

He nodded. "That just makes it easier."

"It's more than that — the money I used for your retainer? While I was looking for Bakuda, I found an ABB drug warehouse, and, well..."

He paused. "And you want to keep it?"

"When Tattletale gave me the money at the cemetery, she said cash was freedom. Mr. Calle, if I couldn't afford you... I wouldn't have a choice. I could hide, but if I were ever caught I'd go straight to the foster system, and into the Wards."

"Which you don't want to do. What are the other reasons for it? You were happy to try out for them, earlier."

"Shadow Stalker. I know who she is, and she knows who I am. She bullied me at school... for years. I ended up in the hospital because of her. She gave my real name to the ABB — maybe accidentally, maybe not."
At that, he rocked back, fingers tapping madly.

"That's... a serious set of allegations. And would demand delicate handling. Do you have evidence for it?"

"Beyond my own testimony? Not really. The letter Bakuda sent me, which indicated how she'd found out, burned in the explosion. And the locker incident — I didn't see who shoved me in, but I know who was behind it."

"What about how you found out her identity? That's something that will influence how the Protectorate approaches this — they don't like anyone unmasking their capes."

"She gloated over me while I was recovering from my concussion on the Protectorate base. Said if I'd known my place, maybe I wouldn't have killed both my parents." Funny, how I could say that and not feel anger towards her. I didn't feel much of anything, actually. Just a sort of calm distance, as I recalled the episode.

"Both?"

"My mother was maybe trying to reach me on her cellphone when she died in a car crash. No way to know if it made a difference, but it was something Sophia liked to use to hurt me — talking about phones, flashing theirs, talking about their parents..."

One eyebrow rose.

"One of the things I'd like you to do once you've figured out how I can legally keep clear of the Wards is to make sure they discipline her. Prison would be nice. I always wondered why the school authorities didn't come down on her."

On the other hand, I was trying to ruin her life right now, so maybe this is just what I felt like when I was really angry.

"That... I can't guarantee. The Protectorate hates bad PR, and this qualifies — but that means I know that they will react, not how. Worst case, they'll want to buy your silence somehow."
I smiled. "I'm not sure they could afford it."

"All right. And your fourth reason?"

I paused, and steepled my fingers. "I'd like to take some time to myself. To think. And maybe to do some things that I need to do, first."

He looked at me, mouth briefly open, and then licked his lips.

"Clear enough. Anything else I ought to know about your preferred living circumstances, negotiating limits, or other goals?"

For the next two hours he probed me on hypotheticals from how I'd like to live to how I'd get an education to what kind of services I could offer as a rogue. I had no idea whether or not he could do what I'd asked him to do, but it was a good indication of competence. The meeting closed with him explaining that he'd be back in touch in shortly, and that he thought there would be grounds for a talk with the Protectorate soon after.

Hopefully, that would keep me from being chased by the Protectorate.

That just left the one who would kill me if he caught me.

*Progress*. 
There’s a trick to hiding from someone that every little kid knows. As we get older, we forget it and start hiding in shadows or empty rooms, behind or beneath things. With practice and cunning we advance to various forms of hiding in plain sight, using camouflage, misdirection and expectations, or the crush of the crowd to conceal ourselves. I’d tried them all, at one time or another, in dealing with the bullies… made myself quite the expert in hiding.

Never quite good enough.

The fancier forms of hiding in plain sight rely on understanding how your hunter thinks, and luck. The cruder forms of hiding out of the way rely on your hunter being lazy.

And luck.

The way my life had been going, I didn’t much feel like relying on luck.

And that meant I needed to go back to the most basic form of hiding there was: get in someone’s blind spot and stay there, no matter how they moved. Child’s play, literally, but with higher stakes. With Lung, the rule was simple: if he took me by surprise, I died. So, I’d have to be better than I was at hiding from Emma, Sophia, and Madison.

I could do that.

First, of course, I’d have to find him.

The day’s search of the city, sitting mind-wide-open on busses that were not yet running to schedule, had turned up some interesting facts: E88 was open for business across most of the city, including large chunks of what had been ABB territory. The Merchants looked like they were trying to move in on some of the rest.

The ABB was just… missing. Which was a problem for me: I could follow underlings up the chain — that’s how I’d found Bakuda. I was already taking notes on E88 and the Merchants for later use. But without any ABB presence on the streets, I’d have to find Lung directly… and that might take some doing.
If you can’t find where someone is, find where they’re going to be. Class schedules had always been the bane of my own hiding attempts. Lung… didn’t exactly have a publicly available list of which classrooms he’d be in when.

What would he be up to, right now?

I rubbed my forehead against the water bottle I’d just gotten from a corner store while waiting for the crosstown bus. The headaches weren’t as bad as they had been. Maybe that was the concussion fading. Maybe I was getting better at using my insect senses — I had noticed that it was easier if there were more insects in the area I was trying to ‘see’ or ‘hear’ in. It might just be something like eyestrain. Did capes get power-strain?

So many things I didn’t know.

But for some of them, at least, I had an idea of how to find out.

A trip back to the gun/outdoors store (“Walker’s”) yielded a warm welcome and a lot of gossip.

Dauntless and Miss Militia had apparently each stared down an incipient riot Saturday in fine style (he did grudgingly acknowledge that the incident handled by Armsmaster, Aegis, Velocity, Assault, and Battery was significantly larger… “but it’s not the same, when you’ve got backup right there.”). The other Wards had been doing some impressive search and rescue work, and Clockblocker and Vista had apparently spent the morning with some architecture Tinker from out of town demolishing the ruins of the freeway interchange — they’d already excavated foundations for its replacement.

Walker himself (“Call me Pete!”) remained as concerned for my health as ever. I wasn’t able to get out of the store without a water purifier (“What if Bakuda had hit the treatment plant?”), but I did manage to get the police band scanner and emergency radio I’d come for… and a promise to come back again sometime.
Now, I just had to make my way to E88 territory… and wait.

I picked a spot near the corner of a park.

Quiet, public, relatively comfortable benches — no one looked twice at someone sitting down and watching the baseball game going on as the sun went down and the lights came up. Little League. The stands were three-quarters full of parents and siblings — some sulkier than others. The kids were playing with the sort of total, life-or-death dedication that only made them seem younger, adult-solemn in carefully scrubbed uniforms that were already picking up dirt and stains as they dove for balls. It brought a smile to my face as I watched it, an earbud attached to my scanner and my attention loosely distributed over my range.

An hour passed in a blur of strikeouts, sacrifice flies, and twisting grounders. Occasionally, the swing was sweeter, and the crack of a line-drive sounded out. Once, an outright home run escaped the grounds and nearly concussed a young man playing Ultimate Frisbee on the green. He rolled to his feet with the ball and a smile, launching the ball back to left field with an astonishing ruler-straight throw. The rest of the Ultimate game paused to cheer the home run while the boy in question slowly trotted the bases, solemnly pretending to ignore the way the stands were erupting.

His successor hammered a flat drive that knocked the shortstop off her feet — but she came up with the ball to end the fifth, and so the final inning began with the score four to two. I was actually getting interested in whether the Medhall Monsters would be able to defeat the less felicitously named Tom’s Hardware Royals when a patch of static came through my earpiece:

“Shots fired, repeat shots…”

Well.

I stood up, shrugged my pack on, and secured the belt straps.

Time to run.
The steady rhythm of my foot strikes, the even puffing of my breath, gave me time to think.

I’d covered a half mile by now, and the chance grew with every second that I’d find the scene empty when I got there. I reached out to the bugs ahead of me as I moved forward, abandoning the ones behind me as I passed them. I’d work with what I found on site — no point slowing down to collect more now. Besides, half the weight in my backpack was insects. Insects that were venomous, flying, or both — I’d learned from the last fight with Bakuda. I might never want to use that option, but I’d make sure that I always had it.

As my sphere of awareness moved forward, I could feel people moving, feel traffic coming, and shifted pace and direction almost instinctively, threading through the knots of people outside a bar as if they weren’t there. Once, across a street against traffic. It was showier than I wanted to be, but right now I needed to be fast. There was nothing guaranteeing that it was Lung, anyway — Coil could be on the move, or even the Merchants, or…

A roar sounded in the distance before me, an immense and bestial cry of triumph that lasted most of a minute, and echoed endlessly after.

Good news: probably Lung.

Bad news: exactly the same.

Another block of running brought the address from the radio in range, and I reached out. I couldn’t feel any fighting going on — just buildings and apartments with people going about their business… and a big area of heat, much larger than Lung himself.

Looking through my swarms, I saw a building on fire, which would explain the heat. Judging from the name, still visible above the door, (“The Eagle’s Nest”), and the black and silver color scheme, it was probably an E88 bar. That… made sense. Lung might have issues finding E88 stash houses without his minions, but a bar wouldn’t be moving around weekly… and it sent a stronger message, in some ways, to torch a local bar.
I slowed my pace to a jog, considering.

A cop car drove up to the bar, slowed, and then swerved wildly as a man on fire flew out one of the bar’s windows, over the car, and across the street before skipping off the roof of another building, and into an alley. Maybe Lung had bad aim, or maybe he hadn’t noticed the cop car and had just been going for distance — either way, it was a hell of a welcome for Brockton Bay’s finest.

I didn’t blame them for hitting the gas and clearing the scene.

More chatter over the radio. The PRT and Protectorate were being notified. Lung might be perfectly willing to wait for them to show up, and that might solve my issues with him… or he might just beat them all and walk away.

He’d done it before.

The erratic noise of gunfire from the bar stopped. The smashing, crunching and screaming continued for a short time that felt long indeed, before it too stopped.

A portion of the wall glowed and exploded, showering the street with burning debris, before Lung walked out and glanced around the street. There was a perfectly good door not ten feet away… but given the size of the fire behind him, the building was probably a total write-off anyway.

He was still man-sized, though taller than last I saw him. The corona of fire about him died out, and I closed my eyes as a bullet simply… oozed out of his neck as he regenerated, as if he were popping the world’s biggest pimple.

Closing my eyes did exactly nothing to keep me from seeing this. Fortunately, it also did exactly nothing to my running.

Sirens were already sounding in the distance, and Lung was just walking… toward a yellow taxi with the engine running. He might be more calculating than I’d thought, if he was deliberately hiding himself in the traffic that way. Then again, maybe he’d just gotten into a cab and said ‘Take me to a neo-Nazi bar.’
I pulled up before I’d reach their line of sight, coaxing a single insect from the horde I was carrying clear: a female moth. It fluttered up, caught the wind, and rode it toward Lung, catching up with him as he opened the taxi door. I had it crawl beneath his jacket, in the small of his back, and reached out to it, flipping the switch that told it that it was time to mate… and then told it to stay right there.

Might work, might not.

Plan A was to follow him from a distance, but if he was in a car that would be tricky at best. I was already running toward the nearest bus station, guessing routes and where he might go to ground…

I really needed a car. Or a motorcycle. Or something. I’d bring it up with Quinn next time we talked.

The taxi pulled out of range a long time before the bus got there.

I felt a PRT truck arriving on scene, Armsmaster preceding it on his cycle. After they’d given the all-clear, the fire trucks showed up.

The bus took me out of range before I saw the fire doused.

Sieving one of the male moths in my backpack out of the swarm was effortless. Trying to smell through it left me with the beginnings of a headache, and no progress whatsoever.

Telling it that mating time had come, and then feeling the direction it wanted to go… that worked. And at this time of year, there shouldn’t be any other female moths emitting pheromones right now.

Tracking it down still took two hours and three bus transfers — the moth could tell me which way to go, but not how far, and the bus routes didn’t ever go exactly the direction I wanted.

Still, at the end of it…. Lung.

Reclining on a La-z-boy almost too big for him.

He was alone in the apartment, apparently content to simply stare straight at the ceiling. I couldn’t tell
if he was meditating, trying to get some sleep, or just imagining dismembering his various enemies. The moth was actually still with him, still in the small of his back.

I’d found him.

The next bit was going to be tricky.
Lung’s record was terrifying.

He was rumored to have fought an Endbringer singlehanded… and if Kyushu had sunk beneath the waves, Lung still walked the earth.

The wiki listed as ‘unconfirmed’ rumors that the Yangban had tried to hold him… and failed. Right alongside the rumor that he was a CUI agent of influence, actually, sent to fight a proxy war with Gesellschaft’s ally (or puppet, depending on which story you believed) Empire Eighty Eight.

The rumors proliferated along a continuum of believability that currently terminated in the one that he wasn’t actually a cape, but rather a shapeshifting immortal dragon who’d taught the Yellow Emperor his supernatural knowledge. Or possibly that was more credible than the one where he was the shapeshifting immortal dragon who’d been been great-grandfather to the first Emperor of Japan, and summoned by the last Emperor to its defence in the nation’s final hour.

The most recent addition was that he’d killed his entire gang rather than give Bakuda a promotion.

Rumors.

I knew personally that one of those was totally false, and I was pretty sure the others were too. The thing was, his confirmed fights were scary enough to give credence to rumors like that.

The known facts of his time in Brockton Bay were these: he’d come to town. He’d fought the entire assembled Brockton Bay Protectorate, and won. He’d walked away and the Triumvirate very pointedly hadn’t come to take him down, even when he started a gang, taking the name of an existing gang that was a minor player out west.

No one really thought he was loyal to the ABB hierarchy scattered through the California prison system.

Unlike E88, he’d almost avoided recruiting other capes to work for him. There were only two known exceptions: Bakuda, whom I had killed, and Oni Lee, reported possibly injured/deceased after a clash with Victor on Sunday. With them gone, and so much of ABB’s unpowered leadership, I — with my tiny amount of eavesdropping — might have more insight into what he cared about
than most.

What did he want?

He cared about fear, and being feared. He cared about possession and revenge. He cared about power.

Would that be enough for me to predict his actions?

Fighting him would be chancy at the best of times. The first time we’d crossed paths, I’d caught him off-guard, ambushed him and hit him with as much poison as I could as fast as I could. Through no preparation of my own, I’d followed that up with a five-cape (and three van-sized monster dog) ambush. That was as close to a perfect setup as I was likely to get: massive force deployed before he could really begin to ramp up.

End result? He’d lost his dick. Without speculating on what fraction, exactly, of his bodymass that represented, it was still clearly a minor wound.

I indulged a morbid bit of curiosity, and checked the apartment’s bathroom. Toilet seat up… so Lung didn’t even take a week to heal up. Probably his healing rate was better measured in ‘fights’ than ‘days’ anyway.

If we fought again, I could sense through my swarms instead of having to maintain line of sight. It would be harder for him to find me — though still just as easy to kill me. I still didn’t have anything capable of killing him, and wounding him wouldn’t do anything helpful in the long run. Worse, almost no one could put him down — Eidolon, probably, or Scion. Dragon… maybe.

Getting any one of them to intervene here would take work. And time.

If it was even possible: Scion had talked to people all of once in recorded history, and Eidolon and Dragon both had worldwide calls on their attention. It was kind of hard to argue that Lung was a bigger problem than the Endbringers, or even a bigger problem than some of the warlords squabbling over territory in Africa. Lung’s kill count wasn’t even a fraction of Moord Nag’s, and he wasn’t the kind of existential threat that, say, Nilbog or Sleeper were.

Scary as Lung was, it had to be said that the greatest heroes had bigger problems to deal with.
And even if I somehow got one to come, it might not even work.

Let’s face it, if *Leviathan* can’t kill you, the only sure escalation is to bring in Behemoth or Simurgh, and I wouldn’t even joke about having one of them hit Brockton Bay. I’d been born less than three months after Behemoth hit New York City, and I’d grown up with stories from my parents and other adults about what that had been like… along with occasional footage from other attacks the world over.

So: there were really only two things I could do.

Option A: hit him, fast and hard, and hope that I could knock him out the way I had last time… with none of the backup I had last time. And then hope that — with his gang more or less gone — the Protectorate could hang onto him this time. Also, that the Birdcage could hold him once he got there: putting someone whose power scaled with the fight he was in into a prison full of the meanest villains ever seemed like it was just asking for an inmate riot.

Or — option B.

A swarm of bugs gathered in the room, and promptly combusted.

Good reflexes there.

More gathered, sweeping in through windows and vents. Determined effort at the screen door out back yielded a small hole that quickly grew larger, and insects flooded the apartment.

Lung was on his feet, flames dancing in either hand, a six foot radius about him clear of bugs. The ground and sofa were black and rippling with chitin, and the air buzzed thick with insects. A living cylinder centered on Lung, with a subtle clockwise rotation and crosstcurrents. I was suddenly reminded of the last time we’d faced off like this, only three nights past. Just before I killed Bakuda and took off his right hand.

Which, I noted, was very much present right now.

I formed a swarm-clone before him, visible as a silhouette through the cloud, and spoke.
“Lung.”

He didn’t answer, just swayed, balancing on the balls of his feet. His smile wasn’t really a smile.

“If I’d wanted to kill you, this would have been a surprise. This isn’t a fight.”

“You know I will kill you.” He sounded almost… happy, every word delivered slowly and separately.

“Not today.”

My parents had always told me not to lie, but I thought they’d understand.

“You couldn’t, anyway — I’m a Changer. When my body’s like this… you’d have to kill every insect around to keep me from reforming.”

His eyes narrowed. “A lie.”

The clone shook its head, and then exploded into insects as Lung’s fire lashed out, cutting a gap in the cloud of bugs.

I piled them up into a clone again, this time to his right, and filled the rent in the veil of flying insects, putting them into a slow counterclockwise rotation.

He turned to face ‘me’.

“You’ve burned me before. It didn’t take then, either. Didn’t even hurt.”

He fisted his right hand, flame squirting out to surround it, burning hotter. Even without an outright fight, the longer this dragged on, the stronger he’d get. Keeping it a verbal fencing match only postponed the point where I wouldn’t be able to touch him.
“And yes, someday you’ll come for me. If you can find me. If you can catch me. But right now…”

Getting this guy to talk was like pulling teeth. He just waited.

“Right now, you want Kaiser, don’t you?”

He blinked.

And laughed, a sharp barking noise.

What?

“Yojimbo.” He shook his head, actually smiling.

What the actual _fuck_?

“Where?”


“For a price.” His voice was cold once more, and his face stony.

My swarm-clone tilted its head.

“Coil lairs beneath the Heritage Insurance Tower.”

“What do you want me to do with that?”
“Do as you please.”

That not-smile flashed again.

“While you live.”

With that, he lay back down on the La-Z-Boy, closed his eyes, and reclined it fully.

A stunned moment passed before the whine of the built-in back massager started up.

My swarm clone dissolved, and I began moving the insects out in an orderly fashion while I stood up and moved back toward the bus stop.

That… went about as well as I could have hoped.

The easiest way to stay in someone’s blind spot is to point them the wrong way and stay close. The lie about being a Changer was part of that. Keeping him focused on E88 was another. The fact that he was literally laughing at my planning was… not a good sign.

I really needed to find an Option C before I was forced to try Option A again.

And I still had to make sure that Kaiser showed up tomorrow. A confrontation like that wouldn’t be small or quiet. There would be fire, and blood.

Maybe I should make sure my new costume was ready in time.
The morning dawned cold.

That might have been the fatigue talking, actually.

I’d stayed up all night, and I once more had a costume. And a persistent throbbing pain in my temples.

It wasn’t dyed, making it the same sort of grey/off-white that the silk was naturally. Not quite as stealthy as my old black one, for now, but it shouldn’t stand out all that much. It had pouches and a kind of backpack, partly for my gear, and partly for my swarms: there were always lots of bugs around, but there weren’t always lots of the right kind of bugs around. This way, I could carry the rarer and more useful types with me.

I’d carefully packed the gear away, my small army of spiders still weaving. I could make rope from thread… or a new costume, if this one was incinerated like the last one. Either way, it would be useful.

Getting Kaiser to the showdown would probably be the easy part.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Purity.

“Hello?” Her voice didn’t actually sound any different, but it seemed much… more human. Less impersonal. Probably the fact it wasn’t coming from a woman-shaped blaze of light.

“Purity — this is Skitter. I found out where Lung will be tonight.”

“Where?” Her voice had quickened.

“The construction site a couple of blocks off of Memorial park, at sunset.”

“I’ll be there.” Quieter now, but no hesitation.

“It’ll be a trap. Lung’s trying to call out Kaiser. And… look, you know I’m no friend of E88.”
“Oh, it’ll be a trap all right. For him. With this kind of warning? On Kaiser’s turf? Everyone wants that animal dead. For this? We’ll take the losses if we have to.”

We. Guess those old ties did run deep.

“Good hunting, then.” I hung up. It would be time to cycle to the next phone in a few more days.

Well — this would be an interesting evening out.

I lay back, spiders weaving, and set an alarm for 5 pm. I didn’t know if I could get any sleep, but I was sure going to try.

……..

The phone rang, jerking me out of restless sleep.

It took my eyes a moment to focus, and it was… odd, seeing myself from every angle while I tried to rub the sleep from my eyes. I grabbed the cell phone, checking the time: 4:36. I would have had to get up soon anyway.

“Hello?”

“Skitter?” A warm male voice.

“What?”

“It’s Quinn. Most of the arrangements are in place. Could you be available for a meeting with the PRT tomorrow morning?”
I blinked.

“Sure…”

“Afterward, we can get lunch and discuss housing and some other ideas I’ve…”

I cut him off. “What?”

A pause.

“Are you alright?”

“I… the call woke me. I’ve had trouble sleeping.”

“Well, you wanted a place of your own. A safe one. Construction or modification will take time, but I think I can get you out of that motel as soon as tomorrow, if you want — foreclosed property. Actually closing the purchase will take a little longer, but hey” I could hear his smile “if you know whom and how to ask, there are ways. We can get you settled in there quickly.”

I looked around the room I was in.

Peeling wallpaper in what had once probably been eggshell white, but was now best described as ‘dingy’? Rough sheets, half-faded stains still visible on them? A shower that never really reached ‘hot’, even if it did occasionally spike to ‘boiling’ before running lukewarm again?

I could stand a change, sure.

“That would be… nice. And… maybe there’s a way to get around town? I’ve been using busses, and I’m too young to drive, so…”

A chuckle.
“Skitter, have you…”

“Call me Taylor.”

“Taylor. Have you ever heard of a farm permit?”

I blinked.

“No?”

“I’d been going to ask you how you felt about some agricultural work anyway. We’ll talk in more detail over lunch, after the PRT meeting. Suffice it to say: you’re not too young to legally drive.”

“You want me to work on a farm? What… what does that even have to do with anything? I just wanted to be able to make my own decisions.”

A sigh.

“Taylor, you hired me to advance your interests. And what you ask me to do, within the law, I’ll see done. If there’s more than one good way to do it, I’ll offer advice and counsel on different ways to go about it, and then take your decision as to means. But if I see something important I think you haven’t considered… I’ll use my initiative, and bring it to your attention. It’s always your decision — but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I wasn’t on the lookout for ways to help you do what you want.”

Neither of us spoke for a while.

“Look, get some rest. I’ll see you at the PRT headquarters tomorrow morning? Eight-thirty.”

He hung up.

Going back to sleep wasn’t exactly in the cards. In about two and a half hours, Empire Eighty Eight
was finally going to fight Lung. One cape against a dozen; one man against hundreds. And I wasn’t at all sure who would win.

And about twelve hours after that wound down, I’d get to walk into PRT custody.

Funny how the prospect of a three-cornered fight with Lung and the whole E88 was less stressful than having to explain myself to the authorities.

Well, maybe I wouldn’t live that long.

A smile tugged at my cheeks.
Intermediaries 3.4

It was funny how different different kinds of waiting could be.

I’d been doing a lot of waiting, lately, searching the city for the various gangs. I had a few pages of my notebook on E88 and Merchant possibilities, and Lung himself had all but pointed me at Coil’s organization. That had been a sort of… relaxed watchfulness. Sitting on a bench or in a bus, watching the world go by one way or the other, waiting to notice a group of thugs, or maybe some prostitutes, or anyone that might lead back to the rest of the gang.

Just yesterday I’d sat in this same park, watched a game of Little League baseball go by in fast-forward, relaxed and ready for something to happen. Or for nothing to happen.

Nothing is what usually happened on stakeouts. But there was a sort of peace to that, an easy patience.

There was a game on today too — involving one of the same teams, even. The Medhall Monsters apparently had a doubleheader.

Today, every pitch dragged.

I thought about trying to count the leaves of every tree in the park again, but the attempt really hadn’t helped the first time.

My awareness was spread out through every bug in the area — and I’d dragged as many into the area as I could. It was… it was like an Imax 3d theater, kind of. I could see everything, from every angle — at least where I had insects. I could see inside buildings as well as outside, simultaneously.

It was dizzying.

And, at the moment, all it meant was that I could see everything in what amounted to agonizing slow motion, tracking every detail as it passed.

I was pretty sure that was my head messing with me, not enhanced reflexes.
Waiting, when you knew something big was about to start… was just painful.

I’d prepared swarms, provided them with lengths of silk. I’d looked for places I could ditch the sweats and backpack if I needed to intervene in my own body. I’d done everything I could to be ready. And checked it. And checked it again.

The wait seemed endless.

Not even the arrival of E88 had really changed anything — and they’d come in force.

The construction site was for a midrise office building complex — the foundation was excavated for most of the buildings, a rough driveway laid out, and the steel frame of the central building was already more than half up. An hour ago, there had even been a construction crew at work. A hundred foot tall tower crane stood to the south of the building, a stack of I-beams still suspended at height, along with two excavators and a half dozen dump trucks.

Someone from E88 — big, wearing black leather and a crude metal wolfshead mask, his blond hair kept long and greasy — had ‘invited’ them to leave their phones and be escorted to a local bar, with drinks on the house for the evening. Rather civilized, really.

They’d done just that.

He was currently on the second floor of that central building, north side, pacing back and forth with a long, loping stride. Near him, a tall, heavily-built man leaned against a support beam: chain-wrapped arms crossed across a muscled chest, black slacks and bare feet, one leg bearing his weight and the other loose. The group’s third was a young woman with a dancer’s build and close-cropped white-blond hair, head enclosed in some kind of barred helmet, who sat on the floor with her legs crossed, eyes closed, two small scythes by her right hand.

Another group had gathered near the south-east corner, above where the I-beams were stacked for lifting. This group looked to be made up of teenagers — a blonde girl in a cowled blue robe, an older girl in a red bodysuit and domino mask with a symbol on her chest, a young man in black domino mask and a black breastplate over a crimson shirt and black slacks, and what looked like a complete albino wearing a tailored white suit with a white tie.

About halfway between the east side of the building and its center was a third group: two young
blonde women who might have been twins, wearing what looked like some movie’s idea of fantasy medieval armor, one with a spear, the other with a sword and shield combo; slightly behind them a heavyset man with close-cropped blonde hair wearing what looked like a military uniform, with extra silver skull decorations and round gold-rimmed sunglasses masking his eyes.

At the very center, facing west, sat a man in metal armor, upon a throne rising out of the steel floor beneath him. The jagged throne looked to be formed of blades, fanning out to form the seat’s back. His uneven crown continued the theme, and there was a ruff of hooks and blades about his neck. The rest of his armor looked like platemail, as forged by a demented engraver with a love of sharp objects, menacing with spikes everywhere I could imagine and some I wouldn’t have thought at all comfortable.

Kaiser.

If Lung was the most powerful cape in Brockton Bay, Empire Eighty-Eight was the strongest organization. The Protectorate as a whole was stronger; the Brockton Bay Protectorate… wasn’t. The local Protectorate could field seven capes — another six if they called out the Wards. Thirteen in all, and the Wards weren’t intended to face heavy combat.

The Empire had brought eleven today, and they hadn’t brought everyone. No sign of Crusader, Night, or Fog.

And no sign of Purity.

That came as a surprising relief.

Numbers weren’t everything when it came to capes — the fact that Kaiser thought he needed that many for Lung alone was proof enough of that — but they weren’t meaningless either. And the local Protectorate just didn’t have anyone as tough as Lung on the roster. They didn’t have anyone as tough as Hookwolf, even. Dauntless, given a few years… maybe.

And like the Protectorate, E88 seemingly had no difficulty replacing their losses.

They drew on a worldwide population of skinheads, and concentrated their capes into one city and a handful of other organizations, Gesellschaft foremost among them. The Protectorate had a much wider area to cover. The end result had been an uneasy stalemate for over two decades.
Most parahuman gangs didn’t last a tenth of that time. Even the ones that did, like the Teeth, had known defeat, exile, and rebuilding. Not Empire Eighty Eight. If they had not yet achieved their victory, made the Bay into their shining white city on a hill, neither had they yet known true defeat.

That, as much as any ideology, was what drew people to them. As many capes as they gathered, they gathered more normals. Today, that meant that the four cardinal directions of the property were covered by small groups of men — one in the open to deter passersby, the others dug in with shotguns.

It had become accepted doctrine that it was functionally suicide for a normal to fight a cape. Special forces still did so, not without success, but often took horrifying losses for their trouble. Many of the best were now in the PRT, primarily working as backup to Protectorate capes. Coil’s use of mercenaries was one of the reasons people assumed he was a Thinker, Tinker, or both… because a gang of normals hadn’t been summarily driven out of the city by their parahuman opponents.

And yet, there they were: unpowered members of Empire Eighty Eight prepared to try and fight Lung with shotguns. They believed. They believed in their cause, they believed in their superiority, and they believed in the strength of the Empire that had yet to falter.

If I wanted to end their presence in my city, that tradition of victory was what I’d have to break. I’d have to shatter it so thoroughly that they no longer even hoped for a new Reich; teach them that down this road lay only sorrow and pain, and that they should just stop coming.

And I didn’t know what it would take to do that. If it was even possible. Hell, World War II apparently wasn’t enough to stamp this out, and I was pretty sure that dwarfed any degree of force I could possibly unleash.

But if there were a way, it began with Kaiser. He’d led the Empire for almost as long as I’d been alive. Maybe they had another leader with his level of skill waiting in the wings… but I doubted it. Alive and free, he’d always be the rallying point for a fresh round of recruitment.

In a perfect world, Lung and Kaiser would both fall in the fight, the Empire would fracture, and the Protectorate could clean up the mess almost unassisted.

I was pretty sure this wasn’t that world.

But I wasn’t even sure how the fight would go, and that made it hard to plan how to change the
outcome. I was sure that I wanted the gangs to go more than I wanted the villains gone.

Lung without his gang was limited. Some of the things they’d done — taking half the Asian kids in my grade, and pushing them to ‘join or die’ — took numbers. And sure, most of those kids weren’t even in the running to be blooded members — more likely lookouts or mules.

Or whores.

I had reasons I wanted to eliminate the gangs in my city.

Besides my father.

Lung alone was dangerous, very dangerous. He would kill me if he caught me, and he would kill others as it suited him. But, unless he started recruiting again, he simply couldn’t have the broad impact on the city.

And that meant going for Kaiser if I saw a chance. I didn’t know what I could do to him. Maybe there would be a chance to intervene in the fight, or maybe I’d just follow him afterward and find an opportunity to fight him on my terms instead. A public defeat would be preferable. One at the hands of a ‘subhuman’ like Lung better still.

Of course, if he managed to kill Lung today… I could live with that too.

Stormtiger reacted first, moving from his slump to a balanced stance, pointing to the west. He shouted, and a ripple passed through the E88 capes, all of them reorienting to face west. I turned my own attention to the west: there was a road which currently formed a T-junction, but would become a four-way stop once the development was complete, leading directly into the broad avenue that terminated in an oval turnaround before the half-built central building.

And walking right down the middle of that road came a barefoot man, with dark jeans and a black longcoat. The half-set sun cast his shadow out before him, down the gentle slope towards the construction site and Kaiser. As he came onward, he opened that coat, revealing a chest entirely covered in elaborate tattoos.

Well then.
I rose from my seat on a park bench and began walking south, weaving around the strollers crowding the park on a fine Tuesday evening.

To my southwest, people were beginning to react to seeing Lung on the street. He wasn’t wearing his mask — probably still in a Protectorate evidence room — but it wasn’t as if there were that many six-foot Asians covered in dragon tattoos in Brockton Bay. Those on the streets were clearing out, a rush of people going up the hill the other way, and another going before him. A mother, picking up her daughter and ducking right back into the grocery store she’d just left, bags abandoned on the street; a young couple, hand in hand, the man clearing a way uphill through the crowd; even a legless man in an electric wheelchair, desperately trying to reach the intersection so he could turn away before Lung got wherever he was going. At those speeds, it wasn’t going to happen.

Lung crossed the intersection at the same steady pace, traffic dodging around him.

I’d found my alley, and was in the process of ditching the backpack and sweats when he encountered the normals at that entrance. A word from Krieg into his walkie-talkie, and they retreated as he approached, falling back at a controlled run toward a ditch to the southeast — most of them. One, braver or more foolish than the rest, stayed in the trench, waiting until Lung was almost crossing it before popping up and emptying his gun. The volley of shotgun blasts rotated Lung a half step backward, and left him looking he’d been sandblasted. He directed an offhand stream of fire into the drainage ditch as he resumed his march toward Kaiser.

The exception was still in the ditch, madly rolling about in an effort to extinguish the flames.

Bare seconds had passed since Lung had crossed the property line.

Kaiser’s hand rose; Krieg shouted into a walkie-talkie; and the Empire’s capes took the field.

Hookwolf’s group paused a moment to trade glances among each other, Cricket rising to her feet… and then darting forward. Stormtiger was swiftest, trademark claws of compressed air shimmering upon his hands as he rode the wind forward. Cricket managed the twenty-foot fall to the ground with a gymnast’s grace, dropping into a roll and coming up into a sprint, kamas at the ready. Hadn’t even cut herself doing it either. Hookwolf himself loped behind them, slow only in comparison, and though he leaped from the second floor after Cricket, what landed was a shape of steel and blades, a nightmarish jigsaw puzzle of sharp pieces in a vaguely quadrupedal shape that passed.

The younger group was slower off the mark: Victor set up a bipod-mounted rifle, every movement
precise and graceful. Behind him, the cowled girl had jumped down onto the pile of I-beams and
before him the albino in the white suit high-fived the red-suited Othal… and then blurred, moving
faster than anyone I’d ever seen. He closed the quarter-mile gap in moments, charging right at Lung
with a knife in each hand.

He ran right into a rabbit-punch that lifted him off his feet before the followup combination left him
lying on the ground, an arm hanging loose and one leg with an extra bend in it.

Also, on fire.

But while Lung was crushing Alabaster, Stormtiger was descending upon them both. His aerokinesis
had taken him in a long leap all the way from the building to Lung, and he struck as he descended,
claw slicing through duster and flesh alike. A frozen moment passed on the landing, before there
was an explosive blast of air that blew them apart. Lung rolled end over end before catching himself
in a three-point stance, his left arm hanging useless from his shoulder.

Stormtiger had flipped in the air and glided forward to a soft landing, arms up and legs straight as if
he were playing to an audience. A thunder-crack sounded as he landed, and as Lung twitched and
fell to the ground I noticed Victor working the bolt action on his rifle. Behind him, Rune rose back
into view, riding an I-beam like a surfboard and with another dozen rising up beside her. Stormtiger
pointed at Lung, and the claws on his right hand reformed. Beside him, Alabaster stood back up,
knives in hand. I’d seen regeneration before, but there wasn’t a fading bruise on him and it looked
like his clothing wasn’t even dirty anymore.

The Empire’s command group remained unmoving in the center of the building, watching. The
blonde twins had their knees slightly bent, holding themselves coiled and ready, while Krieg’s head
twitched back and forth as he followed the fight. Lung might be facedown in the dirt, but they didn’t
look confident in the Empire’s victory yet. Kaiser alone seemed unconcerned, leaning to one side of
his throne and resting his head on his hand.

Cricket certainly hadn’t slowed a step in her headlong run — fast as she was, she was only now
approaching the fight… and Lung was rising, bloodied and maimed but grinning. As Cricket passed
them, Alabaster blurred forward once more while Stormtiger launched himself upward. Was he
trying to distract for them? With the shorter distance separating them, the albino got into melee before
Lung could react, knives flashing everywhere to little effect. A burst of flame blinded him for a
moment, and then he ate a side kick that folded him up and launched him back at the oncoming
Cricket. She was dodging almost before the kick landed, and didn’t break stride as she came.

Lung was clearly stronger than Cricket, but she was fast, dodging every blow he threw, kamas
spinning in her hands, scoring his forearm and legs repeatedly, and twice drawing thick red lines
across his belly in a flashing five second series of passes, before she threw herself diagonally
backward into a one-handed handspring as Stormtiger dove once more. Lung couldn’t adjust his body in time, and the claws cut through cloth and flesh alike once more. A frozen moment passed, Stormtiger’s hand buried in Lung’s abdomen. Then a corona of fire erupted around Lung, and an explosion engulfed them both.

I guess that’s what happens when compressed air and an open flame meet.

When the smoke cleared away, it revealed that Lung had rolled backward perhaps six feet, dropping into the drainage ditch by the now motionless E88 soldier he’d burned alive, the fragments of his coat flaking into ash about him. Stormtiger’s trajectory was high and arcing once more… but this time uncontrolled. He landed hard, and didn’t rise immediately.

Alabaster was on his feet again, just as unruffled as before, but moving now with merely human speed. He started to run back towards the central building as Cricket pressed her attack once more. She charged Lung as he was climbing out of the ditch, and wove through his defenses with the same startling grace as before, but now her kamas met scales when they struck… and glanced off. Again, she aborted her attack, rolling clear just as Hookwolf pounced, landing an immense paw-swipe — it drew countless bloody lines across Lung’s torso and launched him fifteen feet in the air, and four times that in distance at least, toward the crane south of where Kaiser waited.

I had my mask on, and was moving closer to the site, though on the opposite side of it from where the fight was happening. I didn’t really want to lay eyes on them — the first rule of how not to be seen is leave no line of sight — but I did want to be close enough, if I needed to do something with my body instead of my bugs.

One building between my fragile body and the fight seemed about right.

Kaiser rose from his throne, hand dropping, and Krieg shouted into his walkie-talkie for the second time in less than a minute.

Lung rose to his feet, taller now, snapping his still useless left arm into place with his right — an ear-numbing crack, and Lung stumbled, hand to head, while Victor reloaded once more. An I-beam flew toward Lung a second later, but he slapped it aside, sparing a glare for the others floating about Rune.

Kaiser began walking south toward Lung at a measured pace — the twins behind him glanced at each other, and then broke into a jog toward the increasingly inhuman Lung. As they leapt down, they simply grew until their heads were above the second floor they’d just departed.
Forgotten in the distance, Cricket had helped Stormtiger to his feet, and they were making a limping withdrawal together. His right arm wasn’t there below the elbow anymore, and fragments of the chains that had been wrapped around it were embedded in his side and legs, but she’d made a tourniquet of strips of her shirt.

Lung glanced around at the oncoming giantesses, and the beast of whirling metal coming up behind him, then reached out and hefted the fifteen foot long I-beam beside him like a whiffle bat, his fingers forming a contoured grip in the metal. A feint toward the twins, and he turned and swung at the leaping Hookwolf as if he were playing baseball, albeit with only one working arm.

He might have been good at it once.

He certainly launched Hookwolf back in a line drive that would have done credit to a pro. Fenja and Menja checked stride at the sight, and Lung seamlessly turned his rotation into a half skip and step before launching the I-beam between the two giantesses like a javelin.

Krieg’s hands came up, and the arrow-straight flight of the beam at Kaiser turned into an uncontrolled tumble that bounced off the edge of the second floor.

Kaiser hadn’t even broken stride.

Nor, as he came to the edge of the floor, would he have to: the I-beam thrown at him was warping itself, shifting into a stair for his footsteps as he walked onward, hands still clasped behind his back.

Lung was nearly nine feet tall now — the smallest of the four fighting in melee, but still growing. Fenja struck him with a sword longer than Lung was tall and he took it on his forearm, leaving a wound that showed bone… briefly. The injury didn’t stop him from dodging two of Rune’s hurled I-beams and headbutting a third, and by the time he used that same arm to slap Menja’s spear aside and charge her, there was no sign he’d ever been wounded. Menja took his claws and flames without a scratch on her thighs, and kneed him fifteen skidding feet backward. Hookwolf leapt at his back, and Lung twisted to meet the charge with remarkable quickness… only to lose his footing as Krieg gestured. The twins stepped in, Fenja going for a decapitation and Menja trying to pin him through his torso like an insect, but Lung threw Hookwolf at Fenja, tangling her feet and sending her stumbling into one of the I-beams angling up out of the ground, and rolled to the side just as the other valkyrie’s spear came down. Another crack from Victor’s rifle made Lung pause and shake his head… but nothing more.
It was now one minute since Lung had crossed the street, and no one had since landed a hit as telling as Stormtiger’s two.

Which had now healed.

The conclusion was inescapable: this was Lung’s style of fight. Any conflict where he wasn’t losing… he would win.

Eventually.

Kaiser had to know that, too. Why…?
What was Kaiser thinking?

I got my answer when, halfway down the stairs, he raised his right hand. Krieg, still two steps behind him, barked into his walkie-talkie… and a new star rose in the north.

Purity.

In an eyeblink she was overhead, hovering a bare fifty feet up. A second later, a beam of light larger than she was lanced out… and Lung was thrown down into an uncontrolled tumble, a lash of fire reaching up wildly while the Empire capes in melee leapt clear.

She didn’t even bother to dodge, and the beam lashed out again, pinning him to the ground facedown, and cutting off the flame. He struggled to rise, getting his hands in position, and even pushing himself up to his knees… until the beam widened as it split into a rotating double-helix, the intensity of the light bordering on blinding. Lung was once more slammed into the concrete beneath.

He was actually slowly grinding an outline of himself into it under the relentless hammer of Purity’s power, and through the blinding glare I could see his scales crack and bleed, the blood itself flashing into steam as he sheathed himself in flame. Fenja raised her shield against the coruscating magnesium-white strands, and Menja and Hookwolf crouched at either shoulder. Another I-beam floated off to the side, and I could see it sharpening itself into a giant stake as Kaiser reached out to it with his power.

Kaiser clearly believed in keeping something big in reserve. I could learn from that. I’d need to, if I wanted to pull all this off.

Lung had already learned that lesson.

Purity’s beam broke off, a man grappling with her from behind, a knife through her stomach. Another knifed Rune in the kidneys. A third attempted to slit Krieg’s throat, only for his knife to turn on him, branching into a dozen seeking spikes that found his eyes and throat. None of the three had legs — well, they all had a left leg ending just above the knee, but that was it — and each was hanging off of their specific target. It was when this third one burst into a cloud of ash that I understood: Oni Lee.
I widened my attention, looked at all the things I could see through my bugs, but hadn’t necessarily understood. The scarf-wrapped man in the electric wheelchair I’d seen earlier… he too exploded into ash. Lee’s bandages were soaking red — this couldn’t be safe. Perhaps he didn’t care. He might simply prefer to die fighting than to die in bed… or prefer death to disobeying Lung.

In the second I took to grasp this, a fourth Lee appeared on Victor, who immediately leapt on Othala, covering her with his body. A blinding flare of light went up as Lee’s incendiary grenade went off.

The execution of Lung was in shambles — Rune’s I-beams had dropped to the ground when she had. Purity had detonated the clone on her with a quick pulse of power, but was trying to hold her stomach in as she evaded straight up, vanishing in the clouds. Kaiser and Krieg remained untouched, but their focus had been disrupted.

Krieg actually turned away from the fight, gesturing, and launched a fresh Lee to the west, toward the roof of the building I was behind. He puffed into ash on impact, and I resumed searching for the real one, scanning the rooftops.

Lung rolled over and began to sit up, fire leaking out through his feral grin, only to have Hookwolf land on his head. Not everyone had lost track of the fight. Hookwolf’s immense steel carcass pinned him for but a moment, but in that moment the twins lunged forward. Fenja’s sword and Menja’s spear struck, piercing Lung through the meat of each thigh and pinning him to the concrete. With a convulsive heave, Lung threw Hookwolf off him once more, and then sat up and attempted to snap the spear.

He failed.

Burning it didn’t work either.

Whatever power the giantesses had that let them shrug off Lung’s blows so easily, they could apply it to their equipment as well.

If I was going to intervene against Kaiser, I’d have to do something soon. I looked throughout the scene — Hookwolf pacing in pouncing range, Kaiser reaching the bottom of the stairs, Krieg turning to follow Kaiser, the twins pinning Lung down beneath the crane.

Beneath the crane!
That had been Kaiser’s plan all along, or at least his backup if Rune somehow failed: drop a stack of I-beams on Lung, and then use all that metal.

But how?

How would you beat a villain whom fighting only made stronger?

The Undersiders and I had put Lung down for a very brief span by hitting him before he got going; Armsmaster was the one who’d managed to keep him restrained. And the more of this fight I saw, the more unbelievable that seemed to me. How had Armsmaster managed to keep this force of nature from just walking away, through walls if necessary?

Right — heavy sedation. Get Lung unconscious or otherwise out of a fight, and he was tough… but not Endbringer tough.

Kaiser didn’t seem to be trying for drugs — just metal, and more metal, enough I-beams to build a small building. Could Lung suffocate? Pinned beneath tons of metal, unable to melt his way out without consuming his remaining oxygen and collapsing, left alone without a fight to fuel him… it could work. And it would let E88 disengage and claim victory even if it failed.

And if that was Kaiser’s plan, then the crane drop was the time to intervene.

I had some swarms in the crane for the panoramic view anyway, with hanks of silk thread — I set them to binding it together into a long rope, bugs guiding it down to attach to one of the beams, others guiding it through one of the pulleys and down.

I still needed to figure out where to attach the thread… but Kaiser’s armor did have a few hooks in the ruff guarding his neck. Worth a shot. The line itself was nearly invisible, but steering it down there without being seen meant guiding a long strand of silk with relatively few bugs. There was a reason spiders used these things to go hang-gliding, and it made guiding the strand down fiendishly difficult.

Kaiser hadn’t been idle, either — from the forest of beams that Rune had planted in her efforts to hit Lung sprang a web of steel encasing the increasingly draconic cape. Spikes emerged and pressed against his body, as he thrashed and vomited flame. The twin giantesses held him down, unflinching, though Fenja did cover her face with her shield, while Hookwolf paced at a watchful distance.
I was concentrating on guiding that stubborn strand of silk down, when I was abruptly interrupted by a punch to my kidney. There was an odd moment of double vision as I turned, hand trying to reach behind me into my pouch, bugs boiling forth, while still guiding that thread down.

The good news was that my costume was, as designed, knife-proof.

The bad news was that I had an Oni Lee on my back, trying to test that.

An odd blink, and another swarm of bugs appeared on the roof above me. With another Lee. Whom they kept biting and stinging. After several hard punches, the one on my back shifted to trying to cut my throat — that wouldn’t work either, but the pressure left me unable to breathe. I could feel myself thrashing about, feel the panic in my body. I focused on the one on the roof.

The real one?

I couldn’t tell.

Then there was another, more distant. The real one was taking my bugs with him when he teleported! And he was moving fast, very fast — he could get away, like this. I had my swarm go for the eyes. Could he teleport blind? I didn’t know.

Still choking.

Still couldn’t grab him, or budge him.

Even maimed, he was too much heavier than I was, and far stronger, and that knife kept sawing away at my throat. Couldn’t cut the silk, but he was pushing hard enough I couldn’t breathe either. It’s funny what runs through your mind at times like that: I couldn’t figure out if Lung telling Lee that I should be killed if seen was Lung’s way of responding to the threat I’d made in finding his newest lair… or if Lung moving me off his personal kill list was just his way of saying ‘thanks’ for my setting up this meeting with Kaiser.

Either way, I could have done without it.
While I had been fighting for my life, Lung had been getting ever less human — his neck was serpentine, now, and his face… his mouth opened too many different ways.

Kaiser’s metal prison held him, for now, but the metal thorns it had spawned were no longer boring deeper into Lung’s flesh. He shifted to forming something close to a guillotine blade, trying for Lung’s unnaturally long neck, only for Lung to twist his head about, snakelike, and bite it, keeping the razor metal from building up momentum and turning it into an outright contest of strength. The blade moved downward, slowly bending Lung’s neck back, but not with the force it would need to sever.

Another stalemate — and everyone present knew which side those favored.

Lung’s thrashing was giving him noticeably greater play in his steel restraints. His fire might not be hot enough to melt steel, but it was clearly hot enough to soften it. Worse, Fenja’s sword hand was beginning to redden, as if from sunburn. If the giantesses could no longer pin him down, E88 was running out of time to defeat Lung.

Much of their force had already left the field: Purity. Cricket and Stormtiger. A badly burned Victor, wounds half-closed and still weeping, was even now staggering away alongside Alabaster, who carried Rune in his arms. Othala jogged alongside, periodically touching both Victor and Rune.

The guillotine shifted shape, forming a plug for Lung’s mouth. He opened all four of his mouthparts wider, flame roaring up at the sky, thrashing hard enough that the giantesses had to reset their stances. Kaiser spread his arms, and more metal flowed in, spreading the plug to cover the yawning maw. Other metal moved to cover Lung’s smoking nostrils, and while Lung’s thrashing broke an arm free, he wasn’t quite able to pull it out: the plug was still joined to the I-beam which had spawned it, and the connection thickened as Kaiser shifted his efforts to keeping it in place.

So Lung simply took a talon and gave himself a home tracheotomy, flames gushing from the new hole in his throat, blood spurting as he continued to rip his regenerating flesh apart to keep his airway clear.

Kaiser turned to Krieg, and I looped silk on one of the hooks on his ornamental armor. Krieg began raising and lowering his hands rhythmically, tipping the bundle of I-beams up and down like a teeter-totter.

A shouted command, and Fenja and Menja fell back, abandoning the weapons pinning Lung in place. He redoubled his efforts to squirm free, and Kaiser abandoned the guillotine, turning his full attention to containing Lung. Lung was beginning to move despite the metal web, wrenching it with
him as he twisted — but Kaiser’s constant efforts held him down, web twitching as if alive, squeezing him, and repairing itself more quickly than Lung could bend it.

Kaiser sought to match the dragon’s raw strength with his mastery of metal alone and — for now — he was winning that fight.

An ash cloud erupted around me as I inhaled at last, and immediately began coughing.

The real Lee — or the one I thought was real — wasn’t teleporting anymore: he was writhing about, trying to crush my insects. He pulled the pin on a grenade, and I felt for the new copy.

Nothing. The madman had set off an incendiary next to himself! I could feel the swarm around him crumble — insects were not made for temperature changes like that.

Though the insects on him were drastically reduced in number, I could still feel him push himself up with his hands. Did he not feel pain? I could see the blood-trails his stumps were leaving, and he hadn’t escaped his own grenade unscathed. He was teleporting again, and in my direction now. And he had other grenades on his belt.

Lee was the only cape from the ABB who hadn’t yet tried to set me on fire. Maybe I was due.

When the stack of beams rotated to near-vertical, they began slipping out of the cables holding them. One fell, Krieg moving it into position where the web had grown thinnest like a man playing three-dimensional Tetris. On impact, it immediately began to warp, twisting itself to reinforce Kaiser’s web.

A second beam fell, Krieg aiming it at Lung’s head with one hand while the other continued to amplify the rocking motion of the bundle. A desperate twist had Lung’s neck looking like a question mark, wrapped around where the ton-plus of steel had hit the ground. Kaiser promptly began shaping it into what looked the framework for a coffin.

I frantically gathered swarms about me, vectored others in in an attempt to intercept Lee. I’d have to guess right about his jumps to catch him. I rolled into cover behind a dumpster, and set a clone where I’d been. Lee didn’t have to come in close — he could just throw grenades from a rooftop and barbeque the whole alley. But I was betting he’d come in with his usual suicide clone strategy… and if he tried it, he’d take the decoy swarm with him when he left again.
Three more beams slid free, and the rest could not be far behind… but the fifth beam that fell had a string attached to it, and if that string snapped almost immediately, it lasted long enough. Kaiser was jolted upward and to the right almost twenty feet.

Krieg abandoned his other efforts to give his leader a safe landing, which he managed — it hardly took four seconds before Kaiser was on his feet again, a dozen feet closer to Lung from where he had stood.

But without Kaiser adjusting the metal binding him, Lung ripped free more quickly than that. The spear and sword still held him… right up to the point where he simply ripped his legs off them, leaving about a third of each thigh behind.

I guess when you can regenerate, there are different options available.

Lee teleported in on the clone, and left as quickly — I shivered as the wave of heat and noise from his grenade passed by, and directed the swarm he’d picked up to resume the attack. With more bugs on him, I again had a better picture: it looked like my earlier efforts had messed up his eyes, and he was in bad shape regardless, bleeding heavily from the remains of his legs. He collapsed on the rooftop to my left — I could feel him struggling to rise, and failing. Again, he set off an incendiary to clear the swarm.

This time, he didn’t get up afterward, but simply burned where he lay.

The beams continued to fall, and both Kaiser and Krieg were clearly still trying to bury Lung. They succeeded, too.

But before the avalanche of metal caught him, Lung exhaled a line of fire, eye-searingly bright. Still not quite hot enough to melt steel, Kaiser’s armor included.

More than hot enough to leave him crumpled on the ground. His armor wasn’t airtight, not even close.

Menja snatched him up and turned to run while Fenja did the same with Krieg. Behind her, Lung crawled out of the pile of I-beams, hawking and spitting out a glob of steel. His legs still trailed behind him — while they were visibly healing, that wasn’t the same thing as being able to support his weight.
Hookwolf launched a desperate attempt to cover their withdrawal, but Lung simply swatted him aside to focus on Menja, whose ten-foot strides were eating up the distance. She might even have gotten away if it hadn’t been for the wings. Lung simply glided in onto her back, and once she stumbled it was all over — Lung ripped her to pieces with fang and talon over an unbearably slow minute.

Kaiser’s death was swifter.

Looking at the devastation through my swarms, I changed out of my costume and left, bruised, sore, and more than a little shaken.

I’d achieved my goal: Kaiser had fallen.

I only hoped this wouldn’t be the start of something worse.
I woke up the next morning, and when I sat down to relieve myself I pissed blood.

Kidney bruise.

A souvenir from Oni Lee to go with the sore throat. Legless, bleeding, and half dead, he’d still nearly killed me.

And Lung...

I’d fought Lung twice, and I’d never seen anything like that. I’d known he got stronger with the passage of time and the intensity of the fight, but I hadn’t understood it. Somehow, last night, he’d gone farther than before... and he’d gotten stronger much faster than either time we’d fought. Was it the number of other parahumans nearby? The size of the fight? The fact he’d known it was coming, instead of being caught by surprise?

I had no idea.

I knew this much — if I had to fight him again, it would be by surprise, from ambush, while he was asleep.

With a good escape plan ready just in case.

He really was powerful enough to challenge every other group of capes in the city by himself. But he wasn’t unbeatable.

I’d done it once.

I really wasn’t looking forward to doing it again.

I consoled myself with the thought that, as long as Lung wasn’t reforming the ABB, I could probably focus on E88 for a while first. Or Coil. Maybe the Merchants. I wasn’t sure that what I did...
could make a lasting difference — the ABB had only ever mattered because Lung *made* them matter, and if he was all that was left… he’d built them up from there before.

On the other hand, depending on the outcome of this morning’s meeting, I wouldn’t be able to keep working on the gang problem. The PRT had no charges to bring against me, as far as I knew. But being an orphan meant that the government took an interest, and being a parahuman meant that I wouldn’t be slipping through the cracks unless I went completely underground.

What I’d read about Hellhound — or Bitch, I guess — on the wiki had said she’d demolished her foster home and been on the run ever since, over half of Maine all the way down to here. And maybe I could do something like that… but I was pretty sure I couldn’t do something like that *and* stay in the city, and this is where I needed to be to do the task I’d set myself.

My clothes hadn’t exactly been picked for quality: for days on the bus, and blending into the throngs of people lacking work, they did the job. For a formal meeting with the Protectorate about my future… maybe I should have spent more time shopping for clothes. Pretty much any effort I’d spent in the direction of clothing had been on my costume.

Which, granted, had saved my life last night.

I dressed in my costume underneath my sweats again, and shrugged on my backpack, and looked in the mirror one last time, briefly.

I’d never liked mirrors.

I checked the clock again.

7:40.

Time to catch my bus.
I looked up at the PRT building, an enormous blunt rectangular structure in concrete, with the windows behind metal bars. Tall as it was, it squatted. This wasn’t the sleek, futuristic fortress of the Protectorate’s floating, force-fielded base in the Bay — this was a monument to institutional power.

It looked like a school. Or a prison.

Bad associations, either way.

I looked at the large revolving doors, reached out and felt for insects within almost instinctively. Not much to work with, really. More than most people might think, of course — some in the walls, some in the ventilation system, some in what had to be a breakroom with regular spills, and the list went on — but it was clear that this building was occupied and regularly cleaned.

I inhaled, squared my shoulders, and walked toward the entrance… only to feel someone coming toward me. I turned: Quinn Calle, a cup of coffee in his hand, as impeccably dressed as ever, the same professional smile fixed on his face.

“Taylor!”

He paused to look me up and down. It was… odd. Not sexual, more… assessing, somehow.

“First off, you’re not going through the front door. That’s the public entrance, and you, my dear, are not the public. Second, you’re not going in dressed like that. Third… coffee?”

He offered the cup to me.

I took it, cradling the warmth in my hands.

“I don’t really have other clothes, right now.”

He nodded. “There are really two options here — go in costume, or go in something a little more formal. The first says you’re presenting yourself as a cape; the second as a civilian. The clothing
you’ve got on says you’re treating this casually, and that’s not the message you want to send. Come on” he jerked his head and half turned “I’ve got a place for you to change.”

“Won’t we be late? You said 8:30, and…”

“The meeting’s at 10:00.” He grinned impishly.

“One of the first rules of serving your client well is knowing how to help them effectively. Right now, you need a change of clothing and — unless I miss my guess — a hot breakfast.”

I hadn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon.

“Come on — I’m buying.” Again, the smile reached his eyes for a moment.

I hesitated.

“You’re certainly paying me enough. Get some of it back while you can.”

He gestured, and I followed. He walked me down the street to a small apartment building, buzzing through the door with a fob, and then up an elevator and into an apartment furnished tastefully, if impersonally.

I blinked.

“You live here?”

He shook his head.

“The firm keeps something like this available for use near most PRT offices. It’s cheaper than having a partner dedicated to Brockton Bay, and more discreet than a hotel. He gestured toward a door.
“How do you want your eggs?”

“Scrambled’s fine.”

He nodded.

“Go ahead and get changed — I’d recommend the civilian option laid out for you, for reasons we can discuss while I get you fed. Breakfast will be up by the time you’re out.”

What was laid out for me in the next room was a very basic black suit and white dress shirt combination, along with four pairs of shoes, each a half-size apart.

I changed, taking my time, and feeling quite awkward. The clothing didn’t fit, quite, and the loafers were new, and stiff. I looked at myself in the mirror and felt like an imposter. Dressed for a funeral in someone’s hand-me-downs.

I returned, finding the table laid out with paper napkins and a delivery from what looked to be a local diner.

Quinn was seated, and gestured at me to join him.

I paused, smelling the food.

“This… it doesn’t really fit.”

He nodded.

“Sit down, and eat up. It’s supposed to not quite fit. With the kind of money you have available, I could have brought in a tailor and made something to order. That’s one of my nephew’s old suits — had him overnight it after we met the first time. Wearing a suit says you respect the institution. Wearing a tailored suit says you think you’re a big deal, or possibly a dandy. Wearing a slightly ill-fitting suit, in your particular circumstances…”
His smile invited everyone to share the joke.

“Says you’re doing your best, but times are hard. Poor, but honest.”

He pointed his fork at me.

“And that is the message we want to send them. That they should want to help you. This is the important part. The firm’s got solutions for who your guardian ad litem and eventual guardian will need to be. Child Services has enough kids without easy solutions that they won’t be a problem… unless the PRT is pulling the strings.”

He took a drink of coffee, then swirled the remainder around his cup.

“For this interview, I’ll handle being the bad cop where necessary. They expect it of me anyway. You just need to tell the truth — not everything, necessarily, but lying to them is a bad idea. If you’re unsure, just ask to talk to me. We’ve got a very simple strategy here — stay focused on the truths that help you, stay away from anything that wouldn’t.”

I hesitated.

This made me uncomfortable. In some ways, I’d have been more comfortable trying to storm the PRT building singlehanded. I wouldn’t want to — they were the heroes, after all — and it probably wouldn’t end well for me, but I couldn’t help thinking that I knew how to start going about that. How to map out the building, and find a weak spot; how to identify targets and put them down.

How to fight.

How, hopefully, to win.

Talking to the authorities had never ended well for me before.

I thought back to something Mr. Barnes had once said: “Most lawsuits end when one side runs out of money.”
I looked at Quinn, his face still smiling, and thought about the kind of money I had on account with the Number Man, and the kind of money this lawyer charged to take a case.

Fine. This wouldn’t be about asking them to do their jobs right. This would be a fight. And if it wasn’t the kind of fight I knew — yet — well…

I could learn.

I sat down to breakfast and started asking questions about strategy.

We entered the PRT headquarters building through a side door at 9:55, and were ushered through an efficient security check to an empty elevator, and from there to a small conference room.

Where we waited for fifteen minutes.

I wasn’t worried: Quinn had explained that this kind of posturing wasn’t uncommon, that they might well try to unsettle me before offering a solution.

Besides, it gave me time to try and get a sense of the surrounding area. Bugs crawled through ventilation shafts, puddled in cracks and corners, and where I could, I peered out. What I saw was an office, with cubicles and workers.

A little disappointing, actually.

A knock at the door, followed by two people entering. Armsmaster, heavy in his power-armor, unconsciously adjusting his halberd to avoid the door frame, followed by a squat woman in a jacket and skirt, wearing a frown.
Director Piggot. The person I’d have to convince in order to walk out of here.

The introductions were brief, and for all that Quinn’s smile never wavered, I got the impression that he wasn’t liked here. Given what he did for a living, that wasn’t really surprising.

“Well, I’d like to thank you for meeting with us, Director, Armsmaster.”

She grunted as she sat, and turned directly to me.

“If lawyer up?”

We’d prepared for this.

“Two reasons, ma’am. I’m worried about foster care, and I have reasons to worry about joining the Wards.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Bakuda wrote a letter to me. I’d stopped to read it on the way in — probably why I survived at all.”

I paused. No one else was willing to break the silence.

“Something Shadow Stalker said gave her my identity — the combination of ‘Taylor’ and ‘locker’.”

Armsmaster spoke “We’d considered that possibility. There was no way she could have…”

I interrupted “Shadow Stalker put me in that locker four months ago. Hospitalized me. For weeks.”

Piggot met Armsmaster’s gaze for a moment, and he nodded.
He did have some way of telling truth from falsehood — I’d thought he had, when we first met. It had been part of the strategy Quinn had shaped.

“You didn’t report this to us.” His voice was stern, almost accusing. Then again, stern was pretty much how he’d sounded almost every time I’d heard him speak.

“I did report it — to the school authorities. The complaint went nowhere. Now I wonder if I know why.”

“You uncovered Shadow Stalker’s identity?” Armsmaster was quick on the uptake.

“When I was being treated at the Protectorate base, I woke up once. She was standing over me, told me the death of both my parents was my fault, because I hadn’t ‘known my place’.”

Another glance, another almost imperceptible nod.

Piggot’s frown deepened.

I got the impression she frowned a lot.

Quinn wanted them on their back foot from the beginning, and wanted the biggest hits to come in response to their own questioning. He’d spent a couple of minutes talking about how you shouldn’t ask a question you didn’t know the answer to, especially on cross-examination, and how unexpected answers had more impact than if you just listed your complaints up front… I hadn’t tuned him out, but I had tried to boil it down.

Know what they were expecting. Disrupt it. Take advantage.

The director turned her eyes on Quinn, as if she could stare right through him.

“You don’t sell yourself cheaply.”

He smiled that professional smile, the scar quirking one side up a bit.
“Daniel Hebert had a life-insurance policy. More importantly — I’ve often been surprised at how parahumans, granted extraordinary abilities, can only see the combative uses. My client’s abilities have tremendous applications, from agriculture to textiles and beyond. And these talents command commensurate compensation.”

He smiled warmly, hands flat on the table to either side of the blank legal pad before him.

“She can afford my time.”

A moment’s pause, almost enough to draw a response, and he continued. “Emily — my client isn’t interested in a wrongful death lawsuit…”

I broke in. “You’re the heroes. I don’t want to keep you from doing your job… I just want someone to take a look at Sophia. Make it stop. I don’t think I was the only victim at Winslow… just the worst.”

That exhausted most of the pre-scripted offense we’d hashed out together. The rest would be contingencies and improvisation.

Armsmaster glanced at Piggot, and turned to me. “I’ll look into it.” His voice was controlled, but… intense. More than usual, even.

I nodded. “Thanks.”

He continued “We did find the body of Oni Lee last night. Burned badly, but additional organic matter about his body…”

Quinn spoke up: “If you’re implying that my client…”

I waved him down.

“I was in Memorial Park yesterday afternoon. I noticed the fight start, and tried to get closer — to
maybe make things better, somehow. Oni Lee came after me. I think he set himself on fire, trying to kill off the insects I had on him.”

“Clear self-defense.”

All of it, one of the contingencies we’d prepared, with another mini-lecture from Quinn about how people heard what they expected to hear, unless you shocked them out of it.

“He didn’t hurt you?”

_He didn’t kill you?_, I mentally translated. I didn’t blame him for the surprise in his voice. Frankly, I was still surprised I’d won too — teleporting clones were simply better than bugs as a power. Pretty much everything was.

I’d just have to work harder.

“My costume is knifeproof. Still ended up with a bruised kidney.”

A nod from Armsmaster, and a flicker of something from Piggot. Sympathy? Disgust? It was gone too quickly to tell.

Piggot leaned forward. “You shouldn’t have put yourself at risk like that. In the Wards, you’d have training and support.”

Quinn’s voice was mild and friendly. “Emily, has the PRT changed policy and decided to discourage independent capes from trying to fight crime?”

She sat back, frowning. “No. We _encourage_ them to join the Protectorate or Wards, where we can better help them.” She turned to me. “I do believe it to be in your best interest.”

I shook my head. “I won’t rule it out… but not now. I can’t.”

There.
That was it.

Quinn had said that if they started asking me, it would be because they no longer thought they could compel me. And if that held true, then I would win on the foster-care and Wards issues. As for Sophia… well, that wrongful death lawsuit was still on the table. I’d rather not play that card, but Quinn was confident that the PRT would really rather not see it played. Too much bad PR.

I sat back while my lawyer dickered with the Director of the Brockton Bay PRT and waited.

Armsmaster walked us out, stopping for a conversation before the security checkpoint.

“You fought Lung and Lee, and both times you walked away.”

I nodded, uncomfortable in my borrowed suit.

He stared at me for a bit. Or maybe he didn’t — the visor kept me from really knowing.

“Maybe that was luck — but maybe not. There are plenty of capes whose first, last, and only response to a problem is to use their power. And for some, that’s enough. Their power is strong enough.”

Again, a heavy silence between us.

I broke it first.

“I know my power isn’t anything big. I know I have to work harder. I know how close I came to dying.”
I swallowed.

“But I can’t…”

I couldn’t speak. I thought of Sophia, telling me to know my place. I thought of the little villain fiefdoms throughout the city. I thought of Empire Eighty Eight, and its generation of ruling a chunk of my city. I thought of Lung, ruling through fear. I thought of my father. I thought about letting them win.

I can’t.

He nodded.

“I can’t tell you effort trumps raw power.” He smiled, but it looked bitter.

Another silence, my mind replaying scenes of Purity effortlessly crushing ABB thugs, of Lee, cutting a red path through E88… of Lung as a rampaging dragon, ripping apart any who dared face him, simply powering through any and all opposition.

The way I never could.

Was he trying to demoralize me?

“There’s a place for you, if you change your mind.”

He turned and left.

Quinn gestured toward the doors, and I followed.

I walked out of the PRT building a free woman.
Somehow, it didn’t feel like a triumph right then.
There was a lot wrong with the world, sure, but there was a lot of enjoyment in it too. A man had to have a cause, or he wasn't much of a man, but a man also had to have some fun, or what was the point?

And if you were even halfway on the ball, you could have fun while serving your cause and making money. Ethan had seen a lot of grim and gloomy people on the job. And sure, some of them, they had reasons to be down on life right then — a death, maybe, something final like that. Most of them, though? Determined to be unhappy, or serious, or some nonsense like that, and accordingly upset about the commute or the coffee, or too busy thinking about how serious they needed to be to do the job to, y'know, actually do the job.

Real professionals enjoyed what they did, knew when and how to cut loose, and when to be serious. And how to have serious fun being serious. Not a quarter of the mercenaries he'd worked with understood that, and most of them didn't last: being serious when you should have been relaxed makes for unnecessary enemies, and being relaxed when you should have been serious is the kind of mistake you get to make once.

But it's a free world: you choose the life you want, and deal with the consequences after.

There were always replacements coming along, anyway.

Honestly, having to spend time with that all too common attitude of self-important seriousness might have gotten Ethan down from time to time... if it hadn't been so damn fun to mess with such people. And it was a no-lose situation! Either the joke never got old, or they lightened up and were thereafter nicer to be around. Making the world better through teasing, one humorless coworker at a time.

He smiled, and then started whistling softly: 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.' Not a patch on, say, the Colonel Bogey March or Greensleeves, musically speaking, but you had to suit your whistling to the circumstances, and things right now had a distinct whiff of farce about them, or even slapstick.

How could you not enjoy being paid to fight Nazis?

Such great villains.
When he was younger, he'd hoped that they'd make a third Indiana Jones movie, get back to what made the first one great: beating up Nazis. Pity that the second one had effectively killed any hope for that franchise to continue, but second acts were notoriously hard to get right. Too many people tried to change everything, and lost what made the first one great. Most of the rest tried to change nothing, which meant there really wasn't a point to the sequel at all. No, the secret to any good second act, in drama as in life, was to keep the essence intact and vital even as circumstances changed.

Granted, he wasn't actually getting paid to beat up Nazis just at the moment. A more pessimistic man might have called it the reverse, and gone home early: technically, he was getting paid to not beat up Nazis right this second. That man would have missed out on some of the best fun Ethan had had on the job for a good, long, time.

Getting paid to watch Nazis beat each other up was hilarious.

He kept a running internal commentary going, in the style of the wrestling matches he had loved watching as a kid.

*And Big Guy is going for a headlock on Shaved Head. He's got it! And one punch to the face! Two! That's GOT to hurt, there. Three! And Shaved Head is on the ground. Could he be out? Will Big Guy be the last one standing?*

*Wait!*

*Mustache is getting back up off the ground, and he's got a pipe! Ooh! To the back of the head! And Big Guy's on one knee, and... oh, that was a kidney shot right there. Mustache is really going for revenge here.*

*He's walking around, winding up for a big swing, and... Big Guy just gave him an uppercut to the nuts! I'm sure there are a lot of men in the audience crossing their legs around now, folks, that's hitting below the belt in the worst way possible. But this is a no-rules street-fight tonight, and that means, yes, he CAN do that!*

*And... after that brutality, and the way Big Guy has been pounding his face into the pavement since, it's probably a relief for Mustache to pass out.*

*Big Guy is having trouble standing, but is he... wait.*
Is Twitchy Kid coming around?

No, Twitchy Kid is trying to crawl away, not get up. Big Guy has done it! He's the last man standing!

Fantastic entertainment while officially on the clock. There were better ways to spend a Friday night out... but not that many, really.

Sadly, he probably couldn't get away with bringing popcorn along next time: the boss would think it unprofessional, and the joke simply wasn't worth the extra duty assignments he'd pick up along the way. Worth asking about it, though, just to get a rise out of someone. Maybe the wife.

His grin broadened. For all the effort he'd put into loosening her up over the years, she was still pretty... uptight. Not that her singleminded focus was a bad thing, no indeed.

On the street below him, the biggest skinhead limped over to another thug also sporting a wolfshead design on his black leather (why was it always black leather with these types?), leaving the three wearing the skull to bleed in peace.

Ethan tapped his phone and spoke through his earbud. "No capes at this fight, boss. Anything else on for tonight?"

The answering voice was clinical. "No other predicted hotspots. Clean up what's there, and return to base."

Ethan smiled, eyed the three on the ground and two walking away toward one end of the alley, and picked his spot. He dropped to the ground behind the two, landing silently — a bit of cheating was involved, sure, but like his dad had always said: "if you're not cheating, you're not trying."

Three steps following their limping progress, and it was clear that neither 'Big Guy' nor 'Crew-cut' were going to notice him following them any time soon, and while it would be fun to wait until they noticed, he had another three to clean up. Besides, the sirens would be coming in any minute now.

A tap on the shoulder of the big one, to freeze him for half a second looking the wrong way, and
Ethan just bonked their skulls together. Classic. Not necessarily efficient, but these weren't the kind of opponents where he'd need to pull out all the stops, and he had controlled the force of that impact precisely. No damage done he didn't intend to deal.

He turned around to pick up the other three, and found four. Yet another idiot wearing black leather with fake military trappings and a skull motif... but this one wore a full costume.

And that meant he might have to get serious tonight. Ethan's smile sharpened.

"You needn't take them away, you know — you'll find that no one involved will wish to press charges. No witnesses will come forward either."

"Is that so?" A discreet triple-tap on his holstered phone, and HQ was listening. Did he need backup? Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, no. But being professional meant covering that chance too.

Arms spread, one foot back, a faint accent that might be German — real or assumed? With these clowns, could be either way — the costumed man spoke again. "It is an internal dispute, you see. These... debates do not involve lethal force. None of us wish to destroy the prize for which we fight."

"Guess you won't mind my taking these two away, then, seeing as they're not any of yours."

"I am afraid that even such straying sheep as these are still mine to shepherd. Protecting them goes some way to demonstrating my claim to be their leader, no?"

"Maybe we can make something stick to them, maybe we can't. You're a different story, though."

A nod. "And yet, I am a reasonable man, one who values order and discipline and efficiency. Would you really prefer to have Hookwolf running things?"

Ethan's grin was positively predatory by now. "I always was a fan of 'none of the above.' "

A light step launched him forward, instantly accelerating him to about sixty miles an hour in a long
flat leap toward Krieg. He could go faster, of course, but stopping safely was always the trick — he could fake a Brute's invulnerability to physical threats by conscious use of his power, but human reflexes had limits.

"A pity." Krieg flipped a hand up, and Ethan found himself launched mostly upwards, clearing the villain by a good ten feet.

A fingertip tap on a fire escape let Ethan readjust his motion into a spinning drop straight down; a little effort on the landing ensured it felt effortlessly soft while launching him sideways into a nook where the buildings weren't perfectly aligned and out of Krieg's line of sight.

A quick tap to his earbud. "Assault. Engaging Krieg."

This was going to be a game of Hide and Go Seek, then. If Krieg saw him before he reached melee, he'd go flying again. If he put a finger on Krieg, that'd be the game. The great part about being a strong Striker was that almost anyone you could lay hands on, you could lay out. The frustration was that everyone else knew that too, and spent a lot of effort on staying out of arm's reach.

A rippling series of finger-taps on the brickwork behind him sent him up the wall, swift and silent. Everyone remembered the way he could smash through walls or send tons flying with ease. And sure, that was fun. But control of the speed, momentum, and acceleration of anything you could touch — and of your own, while you could touch something — lent itself to all kinds of subtler tricks.

Also, fantastic massages.

A fast and noiseless crawl along the roof later, he risked a peek over the edge — Krieg had relocated. Not that much of an idiot, unfortunately. Another peek showed five skinheads scrambling toward one end of the alley, and a single backlit silhouette at the other.

Hmm.

Using his men as decoys to cover his escape... or vice versa?

Assault pondered, and then moved toward the lone man, taking care to keep out of line of sight.
Two beeps in his earpiece. Reinforcements en route, and nearby. It was nice working with professionals.

He checked again, and Krieg looked up at him as a walkie-talkie crackled. Sharp senses, or a spotter? Either way, it was time to keep Krieg watching the known threat. He poked his head up over the roof, hand reaching out to circle the mast of an old satellite dish, probably no longer hooked up to anything.

"You can't think this is going to end well for you, Krieg."

A hooked pulling gesture was his reply, but as long as he wasn't completely out of contact with anything, the pull was nothing he couldn't counter with his own power.

"You fight to capture, Herr Assault."

"You won't fight to kill, Herr Krieg. Unless you want a kill order on your head." Assault grinned. "Would you really prefer to have Hookwolf running things?"

"Touché." The angle was wrong to see his face beneath the brim of his cap, but Ethan rather thought the man was smiling.

Krieg was backing away slowly, and as he turned to run Assault leapt down, chasing him at swift lope, one hand running along the wall. Krieg half-turned, and shouted "Purity!"

Assault dove for cover behind a dumpster as a light ignited on the rooftop to his right.

Three seconds later, when the light failed to move and the dumpster failed to disintegrate, he poked his head up, and saw the light bobbing off over the roof in the distance, and then going out with mechanical suddenness.

He smiled.
A flashlight! He'd been snookered by a powerful flashlight! Granted, a flying blaster was the second worst kind of cape for him to fight, and Purity was more than strong enough to warrant care, but that had style.

Still wouldn’t stop him from putting Krieg down hard, though.

He resumed the pursuit — Krieg's bluff had bought him a dozen steps, but that was all. Assault took two quick steps, toeing a length of chain and launching it down the alley before resuming his run. Krieg half-turned, and again gestured up… this time just setting the chain spinning more wildly.

Assault grinned.

Most powers had some kind of restriction like that — a clear vision of your target, or concentration, or touch, or something. Applying force at the center of mass of a rapidly spinning length of chain was apparently just a little too complex for Krieg. The chain struck Krieg on an arm, then wrapped around him with bruising force, bringing him down mid-stride. He slid almost the end of the alley… where a white van was even now pulling up, panel door sliding open.

The fact that two people were stepping out was cause for some concern — people didn’t generally step into a cape fight unless they were themselves parahuman. Both were wearing plain black civilian clothing under a cloak with the hood up: grey for one, black for the other. Close enough to a mask, under the circumstances. The outfits were known to him, but that pair had left E88.

Another bluff?

He paused.

The one in grey dissolved into fog as he stepped forward, leaving the other one as a dimly seen silhouette helping Krieg to his feet, though none of them advanced down the alley.

Not a bluff, then.

This was the worst kind of cape for him to fight — someone whom he couldn’t touch, at all… and Fog could still kill him if they closed. He could avoid losing this fight, but it would be awfully hard to win it without backup. Putting Krieg down while he was surrounded by Fog would be very hard, at least without resorting to probably-lethal amounts of ballistic bombardment, and Night was some
kind of Brute/Changer/Stranger. If he could stop her at all, it wouldn’t be simply done. He’d never really liked killing — done more of it in this costume than the old one, as it happened.

Worse, the sound of gunfire and explosions echoed somewhere nearby. That was either his backup, or something serious breaking out which might well divert his backup.


“Miss Militia here. Engaging Alabaster and Fenja with PRT support. Handling them both, but occupied for the moment.”

“Armsmaster. En route with Triumph, but ETA two minutes.”

Two long minutes, and they’d still be outnumbered at the end of it. Battery, Dauntless, and Velocity were on a recovery shift right now. For anything short of a truly desperate emergency, maintaining patrol coverage meant the Protectorate simply couldn’t field its full force in any single fight.

“Boss? They’re standing off, for the moment. Do we let them go?”

A pause.

“Can you hold them long enough?”

He smiled, teeth gleaming in the night.

“I can find out.”
Coordination 4.1

It hadn’t even been three days, but it felt like my life had changed completely.

I had an apartment now — a small one, in the Boardwalk area of the Docks, registered to one of the thicket of corporations that had sprung up over the last few days, each one owning the next or paying it a licensing fee or an intellectual property fee or something else entirely. There were a lot of papers to sign.

I thought I would be paying myself rent starting May first, but it was hard to be sure.

Technically, the duplex was still owned by the bank — title wouldn’t transfer until some time next week, and even that was moving fast. I’d asked Quinn about how that worked, and why the bank wasn’t worried about the contractors going through it even now, adding steel security doors, and window bars, and lights, and plenty of terraria. He’d just smiled and said that the trick was knowing what everyone wanted, and being trusted to deliver it when needed. And then followed up with a ten minute discussion of how different escrow structures and forms of property interests interacted that I probably could have done without.

The point about trust was interesting, though. I’d have to think about it more later.

Either way, when they were done, I’d have a newly renovated apartment, pretty secure by normal standards, with a couple of boltholes and multiple escape routes. A determined cape would still go right through it, but it might slow them down a step… and that might be enough.

I might be a little paranoid about the security of any given place, but that was understandable, given recent events. And I could see myself getting to like living there, eventually — it would be a comfortable space: one side of the duplex on which to live, and another on which to work.

When I wasn’t working on my farm.

There was an actual, honest-to-goodness, farm out west, past Captain’s Hill.

Maybe someone would have put houses on it eventually, but it was the property to which the very Captain Brockton who’d founded the city had retired. Too historic to redevelop; not historic enough to have to have its own endowment or any tourism income. Too small to be a working farm; too
large to be someone’s country estate… but apparently just right to be an agricultural research facility.

With some kind of historic conservation easement, and who knew what other legal issues, involved. I couldn’t follow the dizzying array of exceptions, subsidies, and tax breaks that were apparently available, but I did get the sense that Quinn was enjoying working on a different sort of problem than usual.

Some of the legal things were clear enough — importation of foreign insects was, generally, illegal. Also, an authorized parahuman PRT vendor could pretty much bypass those restrictions. I guess, compared to Tinkers, my requirements were considerably more modest. Anyway, Quinn had spent most of Friday down at their headquarters talking to them about spider-silk, and pricing.

There’d be room for more of that work next week, once I could get started on the farm. Quinn was already ordering bees shipped up there — you could get pounds of bees for almost nothing! Heck, I could sell queens back to the suppliers and cover the cost in about three weeks, though there were bigger plans in the works there.

And apparently, having one of the corporations I owned employ me as farm labor meant that I could get a driver’s license, which was why I had a little Vespa scooter now. It definitely beat the bus on convenience!

All of which explained why getting down to where the Downtown met the Docks took me eight minutes, instead of forty-five-to-fifty and a bus transfer. I’d settled into an overly fancy café — the kind where the coffee came in varieties with French or Italian names, instead of ‘black’ or ‘cream and sugar are on the table’ — for a late breakfast with a croque madame, some hot chocolate, my notebook, and a paper.

The paper had some useful news: there’d been a big fight last night between the Protectorate and E88, with a dozen capes in all joining in at one time or another. It was being reported as a Protectorate victory.

I frowned.

They’d captured Alabaster.

He wasn’t anything special, as capes went, but the fact that the heavily outnumbered Protectorate force had taken him and kept him did say something real about how the fight had gone. Something
real enough that E88 might well try and break him out to maintain their reputation... if they could.

There had been reports of infighting among E88 over the last few days, following the death of Kaiser. I’d been too busy with Quinn over the last few days, trying to set up the foundations of my independent (and, so far, legitimate!) life to follow up… but now I had time.

Which was while I was reading about the other crime news (dominated by missing person reports, mostly missing due to Bakuda, ranging from a heartbreakingly young girl in middle-school through a father of three to the Bay’s lone centenarian), my attention was also focused on the Heritage Insurance tower just three blocks away.

And beneath that tower there was something that looked very like an Endbringer shelter from the outside… except for the amount of activity. And the fact that it wasn’t on the evacuation map of the area. It wasn’t, strictly speaking, impossible to keep insects out of a man-made structure, and a buttoned-up shelter was about as close as one could get to making that practical. But there were people coming in and going out, and where they went insects followed.

Bit by bit, I was building up a picture of a military base, with armories and barracks, supply warehouses and cafeterias, infirmaries and brigs, all staffed with hard-eyed men and women in camo and harnesses. At that, the facility had space for four times as many people, easy.

Dense enough concentrations of bugs to see what was going on were rare, and I wasn’t eager to do anything out of the ordinary until I understood what Coil could do. If he were a Thinker, he might be able to deduce my presence from observing the directed movement of a single insect, let alone a swarm. And if he were a Tinker instead… the only limitations on how dangerous a Tinker could get were lack of resources, lack of imagination, and lack of focus.

Dragon was, as with pretty much everything else concerning Tinkers, the paradigmatic example.

She had a budget speculated to be the size of some small countries. And with that budget, she built and kept the Birdcage: a prison which held the most dangerous capes. I had no idea how many capes she was holding, but it was a lot. One Tinker versus an army of extremely powerful parahumans, each specifically selected for strength and viciousness. With her as Warden, there’d never been a breakout.

And since that didn’t even qualify as a full time job for her, she moonlighted as one of the most powerful heroes in the world.
Bakuda had been, as Tinkers went, barely mid-list — and she had a higher kill-count than any cape in the Bay with the possible exception of Lung. She would have only gotten more dangerous with time: whatever the ‘big one’ that she’d been working on when I killed her was, it probably would have been a real threat. Something that boiled the seas, or stopped time… or maybe just a nuclear bomb. Anything her imagination, her focus, and her resources permitted, a Tinker could accomplish.

Anything at all.

Oh, Tinkers had specializations — but that mostly affected how they did what they did. Probably made some things easier, others harder, but from a distance? Even Leet could pull completely new sets of tricks out of nowhere in time for his weekly show, while the rest of us capes had to work with whatever one trick we’d gotten.

Tinkers.

Maybe he wasn’t one. Coil had money enough to be buying his laser guns, and a Tinker base might be expected to have more Tinkertech lying around. Not that I’d necessarily recognize it when I saw it, not that I was seeing everything. Put simply, I did not feel like taking a chance here until I understood what I was dealing with.

This guy had a no-fooling underground base, like a Bond villain of some kind, and a force of trained mercenaries armed with guns. And also lasers. Bakuda, who’d killed so many, had been working out of a converted apartment maintenance office.

So, I was pretty sure he had all the resources any Tinker could ask for.

I was similarly confident that he had pretty good focus — no one gets to be a crimelord accidentally. And I didn’t really feel like risking a fight against the chance that he wasn’t imaginative enough to have taken precautions against being (literally!) bugged.

At the very least, I was pretty sure that Lung had given me Coil’s location in the hope I’d get killed, and he might well have warned Coil that I would be paying a visit.

That was nothing less than what I’d done to him with Kaiser, after all.

There were some anomalies: places that just didn’t fit into the otherwise symmetrical military base
layout. An area sealed behind vault doors thicker than the ones at the entrance. Thicker than what they used for Endbringer shelters. Maybe I could get through by forming a full swarm and trying to get through the mesh in the vent system — maybe not. Not something to try today, but definitely something to worry about.

Worse, the guards posted on that door faced in as well as out.

It looked like a prison built for Lung… but Lung was, as far as I knew, free. And I didn’t think whatever it was would be guarded this way if it were empty. Besides — there were noises coming from the other side. Not the reassuring kind, either.

There was also an area that looked more like two dozen small apartments — less than half occupied, but clearly not intended for the troops. Officers? Guests? Specialists?

Capes?

Another fortified area, this one with what looked like two escape tunnels from it, was probably Coil’s office. It had an anteroom, what had to be an office with a massive desk, a bathroom… and, in a side room on a cot, a young girl sleeping.

Too young.

I couldn’t think of a lot of good reasons for a gang boss to keep someone younger than I was on a cot next to where he worked. She was clothed, and periodically someone came by — from the movements, a doctor or nurse, giving her medical care and sometimes pills — so maybe it wasn’t what it seemed. From her mutterings, she wasn’t feeling well at all — except right after she got some of her ‘candy’.

Not a good sign.

I didn’t get much out of Coil himself — he sat at his desk and typed, looking at a screen. I didn’t have the density of bugs to see what he was doing, didn’t want to risk gathering more than were there naturally, and those were so few and so far away that even the hearing was sometimes patchy. Occasionally he spoke, over a phone or in person, with his subordinates. His conversations were brief, businesslike. He spoke in a frustratingly familiar manner, like he’d stepped out of a military movie I half-remembered. Most of it wouldn’t make sense without more context: he was moving forces, preparing for something, checking on status of projects — all vital intelligence, if I had any
idea which force was which, what goals he had, or what projects he was working on.

Taking notes would help build that picture up.

Eventually.

The discussion about the setup of ‘another secondary base’ didn’t really need further context to disturb, though, particularly since the street referenced wasn’t in his territory.

Coil’s reputation in the Bay was that of a minor crimelord, barely hanging on in the face of the ABB and E88. This massive underground fortress didn’t look like it belonged to someone who was content with that role. It didn’t even look like a gang base at all — it looked military. And it couldn’t have come cheaply or quickly.

Either Kaiser and Lung were wasting money by the truckload, or Coil’s turf wasn’t his sole source of revenue.

Not even his primary source of revenue.

And if Coil had these resources, this power, already… why was he bothering with pretending to run a street gang? It wasn’t unheard of for people to lowball their abilities — Lung, for instance, had the power to be doing much grander things than taking a C-list California gang’s name and turning it into his own banner.

It was still… odd.

Maybe Coil liked being underestimated, but no one built a giant underground death-fortress without an ego that required a giant underground death fortress for itself. And that kind of ambition, or possibly insecurity, didn’t fit with a desire to enjoy the little things in one’s street-gang life, not the way Lung’s La-Z-Boy with automatic massager did.

More mysteries.

Well, if Lung was setting a trap for me, then I’d go slow. Find out what Coil’s power, if any, was.
Find out what he wanted, and how he planned to get it. Find out who he was keeping prisoner, and how to set them free. If I were willing to be ruthless, it wouldn’t be hard to find all the entrances and exits, take time, and swarm the whole complex under. Right now.

Three things stopped me.

First, killing was… something I wasn’t really at peace with. Bakuda was dead, by my hand. Arguably, I had a share in the deaths of Kaiser, Menja, and Oni Lee as well. Come to it, arguably I had a share in all the deaths from Bakuda’s explosives. I wasn’t sure I could swarm the complex under without killing anyone — and I was sure that I couldn’t do it in a way that would guarantee any of his prisoners wouldn’t become hostages.

Given the whole Bond-villain base theme, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had a self-destruct installed.

Second, I didn’t know what kind of power Coil might have, but if it was at all to scale with his organization, I did not want to find out through trial and error. I’d learned a little, at least, from what happened with Bakuda.

I folded the newspaper, tucked away my notebook, and stood.

And finally?

This afternoon would be my father’s funeral.
The funeral didn’t feel right.

“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord…”

The family had never been really religious. Kind of Christian by default — that’s how my parents had been raised, that’s how they’d married, and if we didn’t go in every Sunday, there were still the big occasions. Christmas, Easter, weddings. The occasional christening.

Funerals.

There were times it didn’t feel real at all.

There were times it felt like the only real thing in the world.

I wondered inanely if this was how Dad had felt at Mom’s funeral.

The priest finished, and we began walking toward the grave site.

Next to Mom’s.

We weren’t the only group conducting a funeral in the cemetery today, and in the distance I could hear singing. It only made the near silence in which we walked more oppressive.

The day’s sun felt weak and watery, but I didn’t really feel cold.

I didn’t feel much of anything.

The sky was blue, the clouds were white, and spring was coming — perhaps it really was a nice day. I wondered about that for a while as we walked: could a day be objectively nice? Or only
subjectively?

Distractions.

In time, we came to a hole in the ground, a pile of dirt to the side, a simple stone at its head.

The priest began speaking again.

“… For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were…”

My mind seized on a single sentence in the half-chanted, half-recited flow. Had Dad been a stranger in life? A rootless wanderer, coming home now at last?

I was suddenly angry.

And just as quickly cold, an almost physically freezing wave sweeping over me as if I’d fallen through ice into the water beneath.

I could feel the insects throughout the cemetery we were in, and beyond, feel the ways in which they rippled under my control and gathered, seeking out vantages and chokepoints, preparing to war upon whatever frightened me. Whatever pained me.

Not that this was a problem that could be solved by fighting.

Having so many swarms in so many places did give me an unparalleled multi-angle view of the ceremony, which didn’t help with making it seem real.

It was a little like an out of body experience, seeing the crowd of mourners with an empty casket from every angle, and seeing myself among them. Black dress, black shawl, black everything, dull blacks all — not the eye-drinking black of a cocktail dress, or the shiny black of polished leather. It brought on the same disturbing sense of the surreal that comes from looking into a mirror unexpectedly, the same uncertain and dizzying displacement of self.
“… I will lift up mine eyes to the hills; from whence cometh my help?”

I blinked.

That was a *good* question.

Who had come to help Dad?

Who would come to help me?

There were some who had come through for me in my hour of need, heroes and villains both. I resolved again to thank them, as I could. To pay those debts.

No one had come for my father. Or for Bakuda’s other victims.

There could be no way of making such deaths right.

Of making such debts right.

Where did that leave me, debtor that I was?

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.”

Funny how much of the funeral rites were about the Resurrection.

Tomorrow would be the first Easter without him.

His death stung.
It stung sharply, a raw and painful hole where one of the foundations of my life had stood.

We hadn’t talked about a lot of things.

Not about the little things like boys or classes, nor about the big things like bullying or my powers.

Or my mother.

Or the way the Dockworkers’ Union was slowly withering, and how the money didn’t stretch far enough as it was.

But every day, I could feel the strength of his need to protect me, the way he ached when he fell short, the way nothing in his life mattered more than getting this right. I didn’t have answers either, and when I didn’t talk to him it was mostly because I didn’t want to see him hurt when he reached for an answer in a world without them. The same reason he didn’t talk to me about a lot of things, I think. He hadn’t been perfect, but he’d been my father: loving and beloved, slowly breaking himself against the world in the hope that I wouldn’t have to.

I would have done anything rather than add to his load. I had kept silent. I’d lied, mostly by omission, but a few times outright. I’d let a chasm grow between us, of all the truths unspoken. I would do it all again, and I would have done worse at need, rather than cause him pain.

His last memory of me was my leaving the house with a smile. My last memory of him was him waving me off to what he thought would be school, a fragile joy in his eyes at my rare but real smile, praying that this day might be the beginning of something better. That belief was the gift I had so desperately wanted to give him, and I only wished I’d managed it more often.

There was so much I’d wanted to say, to hear. Things I’d not dared to raise, with each of us on the ragged edge, about the life we had. Things I’d not dared to hope for, when every day was misery itself, about the life I hoped to lead someday. Heroism. Marriage. Children, eventually. So many dreams, left for the future, now never to be shared.

Oh yes, his loss stung.

This sure felt like a victory for the grave.
And, I supposed, therefore the law.

What did that passage even mean?

Someone handed me a shovel, and I grasped it blindly.

A pause, and I felt the weight of the crowd’s expectation, their gazes upon me. It hadn’t been a bad turnout, really. The Dockworkers had come out in force for the funeral of one of their own, and if I knew hardly anyone here beyond a few faces or names, well. There wasn’t really anyone I did know that I’d want to have here. No friends from school. No one on the cape side of things I knew well enough to have invited.

Besides, that was just asking for trouble. A gathering of capes at a funeral could easily have ended in a fight, and if someone had started a fight here and now I would have killed them all.

With a start, I realized that they were waiting on me still.

I set the shovel into the pile of dirt by the grave, and the priest began to speak.

“Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother departed, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope…”

Levering the dirt up wasn’t hard. Dropping the shovelful in wasn’t hard.

Hearing the hollow noise as it rattled against the empty coffin… was.

I paused again. Someone came up behind me, took the shovel, and added his own spadeful.

I stayed where I was, looking on but not really seeing, as people came through and shoveled. With enough gathered, it went surprisingly quickly.
Not much time at all, to definitively mark the end of his life.

Not that things ended there. They couldn’t. Next came the conversations.

It was probably good that I was feeling numb. A better chance of making it through the rest of this without causing a scene. I really didn’t want to see anyone right now.

A parade of people came through, shaking my hand, sharing brief memories of my father. He’d been a good man. He’d been kind. He’d had a temper, in righteous causes. He’d helped them out once, when they really needed it. He’d been a good friend. He’d be missed.

He was still gone.

Others asked if I was all right.

I always responded the same way, saying that I’d be fine.

They took it as the lie it was, politely pretending to accept it.

One man, enormous at the shoulders and with a beard to match, told me in his basso rumble there’d be a wake tonight at a Dockside bar, and that I’d be welcome, drinking age or no.

I thanked him.

He meant well, I thought. Either way, it was real, and so very little of what was around me right then felt real in any way whatsoever.

I’d have called it nightmarish, but my dreams were never this bad.

Before.
There would be a lot of things that might change now, though it would take a very long time before I stopped feeling the aftershocks. I wasn’t really sure I’d come to terms with the death of Mom yet, and that was almost four years ago.

Kurt and Lacey were near the end, some of the very few that I recognized. They’d been frequent guests to our home, or we at theirs. The parents used to go out to dinner with them pretty frequently… before Mom died.

A lot of things had changed when she died.

They asked the same question, got the same lie.

They took it with good grace, and a reminder that if I needed anything…

I nodded.

It wasn’t likely that I’d ever take them up on it, not when it could put them in the crossfire… but I appreciated the fact they meant it.

Too many of the others had said the same, but as a polite lie.

Maybe that was too cynical.

Hard to tell.

At last I stood there alone, feeling the light breeze on my cheeks, watching the branches sway and the clouds go by.

Watching everything but the graves I stood before.

I’d always expected to bury my parents.
Someday.

And I couldn’t help but wonder how much of the fault for their early deaths was mine. Sophia’s taunt wouldn’t have cut so deep if I didn’t wonder whether my mother had been trying to reach me when she crashed. No way to know, really. On the other hand, there was no doubt at all but that my father would be alive today, if I hadn’t had that fight with Lung the first time out. I’d just have to live with that.

And there were other funerals in the cemetery today. How many of them for victims of Bakuda? I couldn’t know, but I could guess.

Too many.

I’d have to live with that, too.

And I still had no answers about whether that agonizing price was justified. Whether it even could be justified. What I could hope to accomplish to balance out so much loss. I had reasons enough to hate the gangs. Reasons enough to believe they made the city worse.

But I had no idea if it were even possible to drive the gangs out of the city.

More concretely, I had no idea what Coil’s power was, or how to deal with him. No idea what Empire Eighty Eight was doing with Kaiser dead. No idea what Lung was up to. No idea about what other groups might be active. No idea about the Merchants either, but I’d worry about them later.

I didn’t even know if my efforts were making things better… or worse.

That would be a particularly bitter irony.

For how long I stood there, eyes open but unseeing, I do not know. The sun rode low on the horizon when I wiped my eyes and looked at what lay before me at last.

An empty grave, with a stone marking the place where my father was not:
Daniel Michael Hebert
1966-2011

He never gave up.

No.

No, he hadn’t.

For all he’d lost, for all he’d feared, for all he’d failed, he’d never once given up.

Well, neither would I.

I turned and left, leaning into the wind, my stride long and swinging.
Sunset found me back at the café, pretending to be fascinated by “Five sure ways to tell if he likes you!” and other urgent magazine articles. I’d gotten another hot chocolate, mostly to excuse my use of their space while I waited.

I wasn’t feeling hungry.

The slow pace of a stakeout — the timeless unthinking receptivity, smooth minutes slipping by, where even the occasional scritch of pen on paper as I took note of the noteworthy was not so much a disruption but another step in a stately, silent dance — was very soothing to me.

This was something I could do.

The impression of military organization conveyed by the base was reinforced by the snippets of conversation I heard: the contextual switches between informal bantering and formal precision, the jargon they used, the very way they held themselves… all seemed military to me.

Or at least, enough like the military I’d seen in movies to make me draw the connection, and subtly different enough that it didn’t feel like an act.

At the same time, it didn’t feel like this was an actual military.

No one used names or titles — always and only nicknames. Even when taking orders from or reporting to someone who was obviously in command. That couldn’t be normal.

Could it?

If it were abnormal, what would it mean? Some kind of special force, staffed by… well… special forces? Ex-military mercenaries? Or were the nicknames just the hench equivalent of a cape mask, a way of covering one’s identity?

I thought I had a hard count, too: perhaps thirty who felt military, and another dozen who didn’t fit the profile. About half were clearly engaged in maintenance, or possibly construction. Most of the
rest sat at desks, and a couple looked to be medical specialists of some kind.

I had yet to see anyone leave. I could tell where at least some of the doors were by the guards posted there, and feel other cracks and crannies through which insects had found their way into the base, but no sense yet of how they handled deliveries, or put people on the streets at need. There was enough construction work going on that you’d think they’d have to take deliveries… but there were supplies in there for a long time.

Or a lot of people.

I wasn’t sure which was the more disturbing prospect.

Coil’s office, once I dared to move individual insects in, hiding them where I didn’t think anyone could see, revealed surprisingly little: he sat at his computer. Sometimes he typed. Once, a meal was brought in to him. Rarely, he called someone to him, and gave them clipped instructions.

Tantalizing hints regarding other bases surfaced occasionally.

I was almost certain now that he wasn’t a Tinker, but rather a Thinker: all he was doing was sitting and typing, and there wasn’t even a workshop in his office. Conceivably, he could be a software-Tinker or something like that… but then there would have been a lot more automated defenses in his base, instead of these soldiers. At one point, Coil called a group of six, whom I’d tentatively identified as leadership, together to attend him… but only offered anticlimax.

“Empire Eighty Eight continues to rip itself apart, and it does not do to interrupt an enemy in the process of making a mistake. I will now survey the base. Captains, as you were.”

Coil himself was the only one to use ranks and names, ever punctilious in the courtesy he offered. He was always ‘Sir’ to the others, and they in turn were ‘Mr.’ or ‘Captain’ and a name. A real name? No way to be sure, but I recorded them even so. The girl, he always referred to as ‘pet’. ‘His pet.’ I wasn’t sure how that meshed with his otherwise faultless manners, but I didn’t like it.

There were no exceptions for the courtesies he required.

Maybe once it would have seemed funny to have armed soldiers saluting and snapping to attention when a bone-gaunt man in an opaque bodysuit walked into a room, wrapped tight enough to let
everyone count his ribs or measure his package. But these days, wearing a mask meant *cape*. Very few capes actually wore a cape, come to it, but almost all of us wore a costume. Very nearly every one of the known exceptions didn’t need a costume, because they didn’t really look human.

Of course, there was really no way to tell if there were large numbers of capes hiding in plain sight, using their powers undetectably. I had concealed myself for months that way. Arguably, sitting in the café and feeling the underground base out from blocks away, I still was.

Either way, putting on a costume like that was a public assertion of *power*. Something like wearing a military uniform, but *heavier*. Full of threat and promise both. Halloween aside, it wasn’t the kind of act people put on. Not for long anyway, or perhaps ‘not twice’ would be the better way to put it.

And more, Coil walked with the kind of absolute confidence I had rarely seen even among capes.

Just thrice before, in fact.

Once, and once only, I had seen a man all but ignore a rampaging force of nature in the unshakable belief that his power justified his cause and arrogance both, that he could break anyone he met at need or merely at whim… that all others were spear carriers in his own grand destiny, whose lives would find meaning only as a footnote to his own inexorable victory. Kaiser had sat his metal throne with just such an armor of contempt.

Not, in the end, proof against Lung.

Twice now, I had stood face to face with Armsmaster, felt the *focus* and the *drive* that had carried him to command of a city’s Protectorate, that had made him perhaps the second-most powerful Tinker in the world (the number one position was uncontested; the debates about the other slots unceasing). I couldn’t say I understood him, the times we’d talked, and I’d never seen him in a fight, but he *walked* like one who didn’t count odds or costs once he’d chosen a goal. Like a man who could be killed, but never turned aside.

Nor had he turned aside, even for the Endbringers. A Tinker, with all a Tinker’s fragility and good cause for fighting at range, he was on record as having fought in *melee* against all three of them, which took a kind of unsparing and relentless courage (or insanity) rare even among the heroes. Rare in part because it so often led to an early death.

Three times I had seen Lung with my own eyes, and three times survived to tell the tale. Lung
himself, out of a fight, had an air of lazy arrogance, of power slumbering comfortably, an almost
catlike unconcern for anyone in his presence. **In** a fight, he came alive with a sort of dreadful
eagerness: catlike there too in the joyful desire to inflict fear and pain upon his prey. In either
situation, there was neither hesitation nor doubt in his eyes, only a limitless certainty in his own
strength: a belief that all his losses were temporary; all his victories inevitable.

One fine day I might have to test the truth of that belief with my life.

Coil’s certainty was different from each of these, more poised, more watchful, but no less immutable.
He weighed and measured with every glance, sifting through his subordinates like a man choosing
the correct screwdriver from a drawer, and with exactly as much concern for them as a careful
worker might have had for his tools. If the way he bore himself was any indication, it was clear that
Coil was a cape. And a very powerful one.

Or completely insane.

Or both.

The Bond-villain base… wasn’t actually helpful as a tie-breaker.

This represented a staggering investment of resources, but didn’t necessarily bring any security
against the Protectorate. Endbringer shelters weren’t designed to withstand Endbringers directly; they
were designed to withstand being in the same zip code as an Endbringer for a short time. There were
a dozen capes I knew of who could destroy it singlehanded over the course of half an hour, and
about half of them were in the Protectorate. And that was just the ones I knew about! Also, while an
underground base was a pretty good place to hide, it wasn’t perfect. I had found out about it. Lung
knew.

Lung was on the list of capes who could crack it if he chose.

Lung had sent me, instead of going himself.

The base didn’t make sense, not unless he had some answer for that problem. Some reason to believe
that he could prevent such powerhouses from calling, or some reason to believe he could stand them
off.
Or capture them.

That… prison? Vault? It disturbed me. I’d gotten a handful of insects in, through the air vents, spread them out through the vast interior space in an attempt to feel it out, find out who or what warranted those guards.

They’d vanished.

Normally, bugs get in everywhere and it takes an extended and determined effort to exterminate them. Not even overwhelming force can guarantee complete extermination: cockroaches were notoriously expected to be the last survivors of a nuclear holocaust. Whatever was in there, killed bugs. Ate them, poisoned them… lasered them out of the air, for all I knew.

I had no idea. Not enough bugs for vision, and the sounds… it sounded like an enormous animal, breathing heavily. That is, when it didn’t sound like a young woman, screaming, or like a roaring beast, ravenous and maddened.

A possible ally against Coil, who held… her?… captive, and one I’d investigate further, but if I ever were to open those cell doors I’d want to do it from a safe distance.

If there was one.

Perhaps worse, one of the apartments was presently occupied by someone sleeping. Sleeping right now meant nocturnal, and likely up to something. The fact that there was a mannequin in the room with him, dressed in formalwear was disturbing on a couple of levels: who bothered to do up all the buttons and get the layers to drape right? It looked less like he’d posed the mannequin, and more like the mannequin itself had been wearing the costume out and about. More chillingly, there was a mask with the outfit, and that meant a cape.

No one I knew or had heard of, and I was pretty sure I’d heard of all the local capes. A new face? Or a new arrival? Disturbing on its own, it was a reminder that Coil liked playing his cards close to his vest: I’d never even heard of Coil employing another cape — he was known for only using normals. How many more capes might he actually control, secretly? Today, or in his future plans?

There were two dozen apartments in that section.
I’d really been hoping those apartments were just for his ‘captains.’

I guessed that settled the question about whether he was a Bond villain or not: if he was shooting for two dozen capes under him at this one base, then he probably did want to make a moonbase (Simurgh permitting), irradiate gold reserves everywhere, or carve out a small country for himself.

Of course, if he really was a Thinker, and he really was as strong a cape as he seemed… maybe he wasn’t insane, just ambitious. All the more reason to be cautious, particularly since he seemed to take great pains to be underestimated. But if he needed to be underestimated, then that itself was a weakness. I’d done more damage to E88 with the right phone call than with my swarms…

Then again, rather than getting into an information fight like that with a Thinker, maybe I should just stick with bugs. Lots of bugs.

I froze. Coil himself had been walking about his base, ‘surveying’ it, but he was… was he… he was leaving.

He wasn’t walking quickly, but he was walking with purpose. I had barely made it to my little scooter, leaving a generous tip behind at my table instead of waiting for the check, just as the van moved out of the underground parking garage. I would have lost contact if the driver hadn’t been carefully driving two miles under the speed limit, instead of the customary five to ten over.

A careful parallel course two blocks north left me unprepared for the turn southward, and it took some doing to dodge across two lanes of traffic and come to a stop once I picked them up again, in a garage. Coil stepped out of the van, and I took the risk of having one of the fleas in the van leap directly to him.

No reaction I could detect.

He was moving again, again just slightly below the speed limit. Cautious. The van seemed to be retracing its route, and I abandoned it in favor of following Coil.

Fifteen of the quietest, most uneventful, nerve-wracking minutes of my life later, I had learned that Coil lived in small house on a quiet cul-de-sac in the suburbs. And drove a Prius. And either had no idea that I’d been following him, or was playing a game of some kind. I would have said the former, but… Thinker.
Probably.

I looked at the quiet neighbourhood, reached out, feeling the area. I’d be back to search it some time when he wasn’t there. When no one was there — I didn’t want to do to anyone what Bakuda had done to my family.

Dawn Sunday found me doing a jogging loop along a trail that ran beside a creek.

It was nice: packed earth, instead of concrete, shaded by old growth trees green with new leaves.

Better footing than I used to get jogging down the Docks and Boardwalk.

And the time was perfect: early morning stillness lasted a little longer on Sundays, and the early morning air was just crisp enough to be uncomfortable standing still. No ocean view upon which the rising sun might lay out a golden path, and no waves to break in rhythm with my stride, but the trees and rippling water noises made for a very pleasant space in which to run. I wasn’t really sure if it made for better scenery than my old running routes, but it was a nice change.

The houses in the area were definitely more expensive, though. And the few other joggers or cyclists I saw out at this hour were likewise wearing more expensive gear: synthetic fabrics and new shoes, and some of the bicycles probably cost more than my Vespa.

No one opening up stores, or getting ready for the breakfast rush, either.

I hadn’t pushed my insects inside, though I had placed one inside the bumper of the Prius. Until I knew Coil was gone, I wasn’t going to take that risk. Worst case, he decided to take Sunday off… and I got in some running practice. Which I needed anyway. There were threats I couldn’t run away from, but there were also threats I could.

Besides, I’d gotten to enjoy the running, the rhythmic exertion, the way my skin could be cool-to-
cold, and still comfortably warm within, the slight burn in my legs as I forced them up another hill… it was satisfying on some basic, physical, level. And it was fun feeling the world wake up, the insects shifting their behaviours as the sun crept above the horizon and a new day began.

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Coil apparently did believe in being early to rise, though not dawn early to rise. I was working on my eighth circuit of the loop, having taken a half hour off in the middle to stretch, drink water, and watch the morning sky, when I felt the Prius pull out.

I slowed to a walk, and started heading back toward my scooter. Back in the cul-de-sac, insects gathered. Quietly. I was going to take my time here. Leave no trace.

Paranoid?

Maybe. Lung wanted me dead. E88 might want me dead over Kaiser. One line of thinking ran ‘What more could Coil add to that?’ The other, saner, line ran ‘Why find out? I have too many problems already.’

And then there was the third line of thought, the one that said all I needed was to piss off the Merchants too and I’d have the whole set.

I was trying to ignore that one.

While I was idly musing on my walk, I’d also been busy searching.

Brief concentrations of bugs to give vision and context to the searching swarms had quickly established that the house was empty. In more ways than one: I could tell that Coil liked extra bacon with his eggs, did the dishes immediately rather than leaving them to soak, and read the morning paper with his breakfast. But his bookshelves were almost empty, and the whole house was… too tidy. Not really lived in. Everything in its place. Another sign he was a Thinker? Or just tidy-minded?
There was an office upstairs, with a computer… but nothing supervillainous was lying around in the open.

Some Powerpoint presentations, from which I gathered that this Thomas Calvert apparently had a job with Fortress Construction — the company that had gotten the contract to repair and upgrade the Endbringer shelters a few years back. That helped explain how he had his own underground base, but not entirely. That much money, that many people, that many work orders, the zoning… he could have hidden his own project in the overhaul, but there would have been literally hundreds or thousands of people who could have noticed what he was doing.

Maybe no one had. Maybe people just saw what they expected to see. Maybe he’d made them see what he wanted them to see.

The money side of things was even more disturbing, in its own way. It was well known that the Protectorate employed a bunch of its Thinkers making sure that the economy wasn’t destroyed by Parahuman activity, and a couple of the smaller countries had seen currency collapses and hyperinflation when a cape went totally unchecked.

It could be and had been worse: several countries simply weren’t there anymore at all, dissolved into a no-man’s-land of cape warlords. Regardless, embezzling from Endbringer defense spending was the kind of thing I would have expected to draw extremely rapid and unfavorable attention.

Which meant that either he had access to that kind of money directly — and it was a lot more than his gang should be producing, particularly since I was pretty sure that highly-trained mercenaries charged way more in salary and benefits than gangbangers did — or he had found a way to beat the massed Thinkers of the Protectorate. Either way, he was deliberately lowballing his organization, slumming it to pretend to be another street gang. What could possibly justify that deceit?

There was a collection of phone chargers laid out on a mat to the left of the computer screen, balancing the mousepad to its right. He was apparently as fussy about this as everything else, as sunlight had faded noticeable outlines where the phones were normally placed. An iPhone and a flip phone were missing. A smartphone of unusual design was still there, still plugged in.

Three phones was a curious number. Two phones, and I might have thought one for each identity. Several phones, and I might have thought he rotated between disposable phones, the way I was doing. But three phones, two of them expensive… and one left behind. I put my hands on the small of my back and stretched backward, seeing the blue sky between the white clouds while I stared at the phone.
It was maddeningly familiar.

I began pulling my insects out, leaving a sprinkling where there had always been insects in the house.

Cell phones had been bad news for me.

My mother had died, trying to make a call on one. For months, Emma, Madison, and Sophia had made a point of showing me their phones. Asking if I liked their new cell phone straps. Commenting on model upgrades. Software upgrades. Varying their ringtones and text alert sounds. Sophia had even gone so far as to get a second phone, just to…

Huh.

So that’s where I knew that shape from.

And that explained the budget. And where he was getting a trustworthy core group for his ‘mercenaries.’ And where he was getting his capes. Though not why he was disguising his actions as a gang. What could be important enough to justify an operation on this scale, though? It would have had to have been sanctioned at the very highest levels.

Did Lung know?

It was hard to imagine him stooping to subtlety… but it would explain why he wasn’t targeting Coil directly. Lung had fought the Brockton Bay Protectorate before, but only to count coup — mild villain-on-hero violence could draw a bigger response than lethal villain-on-villain. If I squinted, it made sense as an attempt to get me to do something which Lung himself could not be seen to have a hand in doing.

Was this what Lung’s sense of humor looked like?

Or his sense of revenge?

Either way, I was glad I’d been cautious. There’d be more digging to do, on Coil and on the others,
but I felt like I’d avoided making a real mistake this weekend.
Monday was interesting.

My first real day on the farm.

It was quiet. I'd never had so much space to myself, and I'd spent the day walking it while moving the bees into their hives, and playing around with them, and with all the insects in the area.

It was a pretty place. Not one neatly kept, no, but you could see where, three owners ago, someone had tried to make of it a country retreat, and if the rosebush hedges dividing each part of the property from the next were now thoroughly overgrown, I could still see the where clean lines had once been laid down. Once they were in full bloom, I thought the effect might be quite beautiful, even.

As it was, their unchecked growth over the years while the bank held the property made for a thorny maze of barriers averaging six feet high, utterly impassible to the eye or probing limb. But with my insects, I could feel the little paths or tunnels through; with my spidersilk costume, I could ignore the thorns. Tactically, it made for a wonderful defensive retreat, a place where I could withdraw and evade entire armies at need.

Unless they could ignore thorns too. Or set the bushes on fire. Or fly.

So this wouldn't even slow Lung down, though it might let me play hide-and-go-seek with him. Or, preferably, hide-and-run-away. Not that the environment would necessarily stop another strong parahuman — it wouldn't even stop me. Flight, toughness, enhanced senses... any of them would be enough to bypass its shelter. Even a Tinker could whip up some kind of tracker. Or a flame thrower. Or something bigger still. I took my time walking the tunnels anyway, seeing with my eyes what my swarms had shown me, recording the paths with my feet as well as my bugs.

And while I did that, I reached out.

You got different insects in the country, and exploring those differences, feeling the way the land and habitat varied for acres in different directions, was a new and pleasant feeling. There were different insect habitats in the city, of course, but they weren't quite as varied: uniformity of construction selected for a certain uniformity of insects as well.
Here, you had marked variations around the house, in the orchards (four owners back, there'd been an attempt to make hard cider here during Prohibition — trucking it in from Canada had proved cheaper), in the woodlands (the owner the bank had foreclosed on had liked his pheasant hunting) or in the meadows.

The neighbouring properties felt different again, the distinction between pasture and farmland palpable in the differing insect populations. It was something to think about, while crouching through another green-shaded thorn-rimmed tunnel on my way from one part of the property to another, tracing all the different paths between them.

While I was doing that, I was also working. I'd set the bees to making honey — I had plans for tomorrow. It wasn't hard to make them more efficient, but it was pretty clear that they'd run through the resources of this property pretty fast. I wasn't sure if that was because I had them harvesting more efficiently, or simply because I'd had a lot of bees delivered. And I was already making more queens — it would take a few weeks, even with my forcing things along, but there would soon be extra hives.

You can never have too many bees, after all.

Still, I'd have to explore other ways of feeding them, if I wanted to have as many hives as I needed, and some basic kitchen experiments (opening jars without knocking them over and breaking them may be beyond bees working in unison, but surprisingly little else was) had established that they could eat other things. Sugar and water would cover most of their needs, but I could tell that wouldn't be enough to support the new bees and queens as they grew.

It was a fun little game: identifying the proportions and ingredients so that they'd get the nutrition they needed. And if I ever wanted to leave them alone for a while, I'd have to make sure that they'd eat it without me making them do it, so there were some elements of taste or smell to it. From my end, it was more mixing things up and feeling what a hungry bee felt attracted toward and revulsed by, and then trying lots of different experiments.

I had no idea what the countertop would have looked like to a passing stranger — probably a swarming mass of insects which periodically paused for a bee to take a bite of something, before mixing things back together again. Eventually, my taste-testers started to agree on a mixture, and I smiled.

Taylor Hebert: bee-chef extraordinaire.

I might even take a few hives with me to my little apartment in the city. Fresh honey in the mornings,
and bees at hand if necessary... and none of the issues about how much pollen might be available to support the number of bees. Besides, the buzzing sounded like it would make for a comforting white noise when I wanted to sleep.

After settling on what amounted to a bee vitamin formula, I turned my thoughts to honey. Arranging for individual cells in the frames to be filled with honey taken from harvesting different sources was trivial, and a single cell's worth of honey was enough to taste-test things. I wasn't really sure how far I could take it, but I was pretty sure that I could arrange for some very precise blends of honey flavours, some of which would be novel.

While I'd been doing this, I'd also been gathering spiders, dividing them up, feeding them, setting them to breeding and weaving both. It would take time to set up a full population, even with what I'd managed to salvage from the spider populations I'd organized in my old neighbourhood, and while it was perfectly feasible to order bees by the pound, people just didn't ship black widows by the pound. And they got a little nervous when you asked if they would, too.

At least Quinn kept telling me that sometime this week he'd have the paperwork done for me to be a PRT vendor (codename: Tailor) and I could officially start ordering exotic insects. (He'd also said that this was far from the weirdest thing he'd seen Tinkers import. Not that I was a Tinker, not really.) I was planning to start with Darwin's Bark spiders, but there were a lot of other possibilities, depending on what I needed. Anyway — a few more weeks and I'd have an awful lot of spiders here.

I had a fair number in the terraria in my city apartment, but this farm was measured in acres. I could cram a lot more insects into a lot smaller space than people might expect, but here?

Here I could have tons of insects.

Literally.

Might get expensive, feeding that many, so I'd probably stop well short of that amount.

While I'd been doing all of that, I'd also taken out my phone from time to time.

I had plans for tomorrow, after all.
A few calls had established that, while the PRT switchboard operators did their dead level best to screen out random callers, identifying oneself as a known rogue bypassed most of them. Or maybe it had to do with the pending vendor application? Either way, it was funny to be able to say it was "Tailor calling, like the profession" and get put right through. Things had been arranged for tomorrow afternoon.

I'd set that phone aside, as not to be used except for dealing with the heroes.

Quinn had said that talking to villains wasn't itself illegal (though what you said might be: e.g., don't agree to do things for them, or ask them to do things for you), and that if the Protectorate ever got serious that swapping phones wouldn't matter that much... but it was worth keeping as a habit, and that he could sell it as a reaction to Bakuda instead of a guilty conscience.

Which, after all, it was.

He'd also said that no matter what I used, any conversations with him couldn't legally be recorded by the heroes... and that some conversations should be had in person anyway. Like the one we'd had over tea Sunday afternoon ("at my hourly rate, weekends are for other people") on how he really couldn't talk about any prospective illegal act except to tell me "don't."

He had at least agreed to look into Thomas Calvert, since figuring out whether someone was PRT or not wasn't criminal unless you were planning to kill them or something, and was just common sense if you weren't sure whether they were misrepresenting themselves or not.

I'd also called Lisa. That would be tomorrow evening.

Purity still wasn't answering her phone, I really didn't want to leave a voicemail, there hadn't been any reports about her appearing in public since the fight with Lung, and tracking her lair down would be an unfriendly act... so I waited.

I wasn't really sure how bad the stomach wound had been, but Othala had gotten away from the fight. There'd been other grave injuries, so unless Purity had died almost immediately, it was hopefully a matter of spreading out the regeneration to keep anyone from dying.
Tuesday morning was pleasant, in an early spring kind of way. Clear and chill, with the promise of warmth to come. The table on the porch was laid out with an assortment of mugs and condiments for them to choose among, and water inside was boiling. I could feel the slow approach of a small unlabeled truck as it made its way up the hill.

I reached over to the counter, and pulled on my mask.

Show time.

More frightening, in its way, than a fight. I knew how to fight, and how to run.

The truck pulled into the driveway, and from it stepped Gallant, silver power armor gleaming, followed by Clockblocker's lanky white bodysuit. And then Aegis, in his red and silver, followed by the red and gold of Kid Win. Gallant turned, offering a hand to Glory Girl, tall and blonde and apparently dressed for an afternoon of yachting. Panacea, in her white robe trimmed with red caduceuses, declined the assist, though Vista grinned beneath her green visor as she took his hand for her hop down.

I watched them, silently.

Gallant turned gracefully, spoke — "The administration wasn't exactly eager to let us out on our own, and as soon as one chaperone was added..."

Aegis broke in, curtly. "It's my responsibility. Partly, it's that these two have demonstrated that they can't be trusted to follow the rules — which do exist for a reason" his gaze briefly left mine to sweep over Clockblocker and Gallant "without supervision. Partly, because I screwed up in ways that made your life worse, and I need to apologize."

He bowed, holding it a little longer than I was comfortable with. "I'm sorry."

He straightened. "And, partly, because I need to show my juniors" — the sweeping gesture now encompassed all Wards present — "how to run things when it's their turn. Second most important job
I have."

I blinked behind my mask.

Everyone watched me.

If you're pinned down, disoriented, and can't improvise, that's exactly what contingencies are for. I promptly fell back on my prepared plans.

"Tea?"

A chorus of replies echoed back, giving me permission to turn around and flee into the farmhouse.

I listened through my bugs as I filled teapots and set bread in the toaster.

"Is she rich or something?" The voice was young, male, unknown to me. Kid Win?

"Kid, you know how much your Tinkering budget is?" Clockblocker.

"Yeah."

"Well, they've graded her Tinker 3, Master 2 for now. And while she can't make insect size laser rifles, that just means she doesn't really need to buy materials or components the way you do. But spider silk has some very rare properties — and she's the only source of it on earth. So now imagine a small fraction of your Tinkering budget, and everyone else's, going to her. Once you're done with that, imagine what it costs to replace all our costumes normally."

A whistle, followed by "Daaamn."

Followed in turn by a thump and some muttering beneath Gallant's smooth tones: "Ladies are present, and we're not even in combat."
I made a note to check more closely with Quinn about what he was negotiating in my name, pulled the bread out, added another batch, and moved back out with one of the teapots and a plate of fresh toast.

"I don't have a lot of different teas, but I do have some herbal and some black. And there's honey."

I gestured at a number of mismatched small bowls on the table.

"Homemade. I've been trying for different flavors, but that might take a while to get right."

Glory Girl was first to them, dabbing bits of honey on toast and then sharing them with Panacea. Apparently, she had something of a sweet tooth. Kid Win followed, and Vista hung back initially, watching, until Aegis put a hand on her shoulder and steered her to the teas.

That left Gallant and Clockblocker. The latter spoke "It's a nice gesture, but full-face masks make it kind of impractical."

I nodded. "I'd planned to go inside, or to the other side of the house, or something like that. And really, I wanted to see you two and say thanks. I don't know what would have happened if I'd been forced into the Wards."

Gallant studied me a moment. "You do seem calmer. And we're glad to have helped."

I could hear the grin in Clockblocker's voice, even if I couldn't see it through his mask, as he said "Helping is what we do. That it irritated Piggy was just a bonus."

I hid a grin of my own. Director Piggot hadn't seemed friendly when I met her. Apparently, she had simply been trying to treat me like one of her own from the start. Downright welcoming of her... from a certain point of view.

"Anyway. I owe you guys. Wanted to make that clear."

Gallant shook his head. "All part of the job, miss."
He sounded like he believed it, too.

I shrugged.

"I'd been planning on doing the uniforms for your team at cost anyway, but maybe it'll help your position with the Director if I let you break the news?"

They looked at each other, and laughed.

I smiled.

Panacea was harder to find a chance to talk to. She kept to her sister's shadow, and frankly I wasn't really eager to face another rapid-fire round of questions about how I did my honey flavors, and if I could do chocolate or coffee flavored, and what living on my own was like.

Particularly that last.

And that was exactly what Glory Girl had hit me with after blitzing the toast and tea I'd set out.

Gallant had stepped into that crisis smoothly and managed to point her toward replenishing the toast while I stayed near the door. Clockblocker joined the others at the table, tasting the honey and making tea.

Vista walked over to stand beside me, finishing her toast with precise bites.

She could be anything from a tiny freshman to a sixth-grader. Too young? As if any of us were old enough.
We watched the three inside fiddle with the toaster for a while.

"That's a practical choice of costume. Good coverage."

She might as well have been discussing the weather. I guess, for her, she was discussing very basic facts of life.

"Thanks. I wanted something safe. Knifeproof. Better, if I could manage it."

Her hand moved to her chest, as if reaching for a necklace she wasn't wearing. Something from her civilian life?

I paused, then ventured a question of my own. "You wanted something more colorful instead?"

She shrugged. "People expect heroes to look the part. Better armor would be nice though."

I nodded. "I'll probably be working on that, soon."

Kid Win joined us.

"So, you're going to measure us?"

I blinked. "I hadn't planned on it today, but I could, yes."

"How?"

"I'd cover you in spiders."

They both squeaked as New Wave emerged with more toast, Gallant in tow.
I managed to corner Panacea later — Glory Girl ("Victoria, please.") had dragged off Gallant the long way (the one without thorns) to look at the apple trees, and Aegis, Clockblocker, Kid Win, and Vista were on the lawn, playing the craziest game of keep-away I'd ever seen. Aegis had prefaced it as a reaction-time and power-usage drill, and it probably served those purposes too, but I wondered if he was covering for Gallant's walk with Victoria under the trees.

Or if the coincidence that let me talk to Panacea a moment really was just chance.

"Panacea, I'd asked you here to say thanks. That I owed you."

She shrugged, and ducked deeper into her hood.

"You probably hear that you made a difference all the time, but it really made a difference to me, being up and about sooner."

"'S what I do. What I have to." Her voice had dropped to a near whisper by the end.

I looked at her freckled face, shadowed by the hood, and was silent a moment.

"If there's ever anything I can do..."

The words hung in the air a moment before a giggling Victoria flew in, waved, and babbled something about Gallant coming for payback before sweeping Panacea up, up, and away.

I watched the pair fly off, gladdened by Panacea's first smile of the day, and wondering what it would have been like to have had a sister. I was still watching the sky when Gallant strolled up beside me.
"Tried to thank her too?"

I nodded.

"Not much luck?"

I shook my head.

"She could use a friend."

"Being public like that can't help."

"Doesn't."

He stretched his arms, and there was a lightning-fast interplay of glances between Gallant, Aegis, and Clockblocker — I don't think I would have seen it if I hadn't been watching the yard from almost a dozen different angles, through my swarms — and Clockblocker leapt up, tapping the ball and leaving it hanging.

"I win!"

Aegis' voice cut through the ensuing chatter. "All right. Time to pack up anyhow."

He turned to me.

"Tailor, thank you for your hospitality. Particularly considering how things went last time, it was courteous of you to extend the invitation."

He paused, and his tone grew a little rueful.

"Besides, we could all use a Director-approved break."
I blinked. "I hadn't read anything in the papers..."

Laughter brought me up short.

"And you won't. Dramatic fights make the papers; gang beefs don't." Vista's tone was purely matter of fact.

"And there's a lot going on?"

Nods all round.

Aegis took the lead. "I don't know if you heard, but Lung killed Kaiser."

I nodded.

"Ever since, his lieutenants have been fighting over the big chair, and Lung periodically jumps in. It's a mess. As bad as I've ever seen it."

I blinked.

I hadn't heard anything about that.

I hadn't seen anything like that.

I'd spent my time lately looking at Coil's base — not coincidentally, in roughly the middle of his territory — and getting my new life organized. What had I failed to see? Was this distraction Lung's motive, or one of them, for pointing me at Coil?

"We'll be on our way, then."
The heroes shuffled back into the truck, which drove off as anonymously as it had come, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I began cleaning up. There were a couple of hours to sundown and my next guests.

Something wrong in my city? Something I hadn’t known about, still didn’t know enough about?

I knew just who to ask.
Cleaning things up and doing the dishes hadn't taken long at all.

The farmhouse still had a mismatched complement of furnishings left over from the last owner — the things too heavy or not valuable enough to take or sell. I don't think I had a single complete table setting, but I did have the orphan pieces of a half dozen, making for a plentiful, if mismatched, supply.

The surviving furniture was the same way, and the appliances... Quinn had had a couple of contractors blitz through it over the weekend, which is why I had a working refrigerator and oven, even if there was no bed sitting in the wrought iron canopied four poster frame. I did have three different chaise longues, though, and two of them were comfortable enough to sleep on, if cold.

I settled in on the back porch to watch the sun set, and wait.

One of the benefits of building right on top of the ridgeline of Captain's Hill was a gorgeous view in both directions: west across the hilly countryside, and east of the city running down to the bay. The way the setting sun dappled the hillsides was just beautiful, the sort of thick golden light that painters and photographers loved. While my spiders spun and my bees prepared themselves for swarming, I let myself relax and take in the beauty. Eventually, the sun touched the horizon and seemed to widen and slow in that old deceptive way, and for a time I watched it drop below the horizon.

On impulse, I stood, and turned east, following the patio which wrapped around the house to the front porch, the last light of the sun casting my shadow before me. The city itself was already in darkness, shaded by the hills, but the sky remained bright. I scanned the streets, just now brightening with streetlights and headlights, wondering about the fighting that might be taking place there tonight.

Wondering what I'd need to do to end it.

The ABB had had, courtesy of Bakuda, a single shared weakpoint, and had perished en masse. Lung and Oni Lee had survived — and someday, I'd have to reckon with Lung — but as two capes, alone and without support. In some ways, I could sympathize with Lung: trying to change things alone was... tricky. Empire Eighty Eight had more than four times as many capes as ABB. And more soldiers and territory, too.
Even before.

With them fragmented like that, I wasn't sure how to approach the problem of a civil war among the remnants of the Empire. Indiscriminate constant pressure until the weakest fled to safer cities? Target the leadership? Pick a faction and support it? Pick another gang, and support their takeover?

It was looking like it would have been a lot simpler to back ABB in a takeover of E88, and then kill Bakuda. Except for the fact that that would have involved vastly increased casualties, that probably would have been the neatest way to tie off the gang problem in Brockton Bay.

Not an option anymore.

The crunch of gravel under tires, heard through a hive stationed near the entrance, settled in for the cool of night, led me to stand and mask up again. I checked the table setting fretfully, turning the heat up under the kettles. I still wasn't sure why the house had come with two different enormous kettles, but I suspected one of the previous owners really liked tea.

I thought again about the possibility that Lisa would be bringing more than her invited self. I hadn't allowed for that with the Wards, and I really should have. In this case, I'd gotten off lightly with a somewhat awkward afternoon of socializing with junior heroes... but not accounting for unexpected reinforcements was exactly the kind of mistake that got Kaiser killed.

I would learn from that.

I had to.

I thought again about what I knew about the Undersiders — little enough, really.

Grue's darkness, unless it cut off powers too, wouldn't stop me from navigating by swarm-sense, and I'd already positioned scattered lines of insects, marking out doors, stairs, lines of retreat. I was pretty sure Lisa's power wasn't made for direct offense. I had no idea what Regent could do, and was hoping that it was limited to line of sight, or similar. If things came to it, I could retreat to my hedges where the only certain risk would be from Hellhound's dogs.

I felt in my costume's backpack, running fingers along the half-dozen twists of paper, thick with pepper. I was not equipped to fight something that big, fast, and mean. But however big they got,
they were still dogs, and could still be left sneezing.

Hopefully.

Better than nothing, anyway.

Certainly better than having to plan contingencies against whatever Regent did, when he had a profile so low he wasn't even showing up on the wiki.

I stood, forcing my hands down by my sides. They were coming as friends. This kind of preparation was really just procrastination. I already had perfectly adequate plans to address them socially even if she brought her friends. I would greet them, ask them if they liked tea, and bring out tea, honey, and toast. Things would go just fine. Better, even, for my newfound experience as a hostess.

Probably.

And if they didn't, I had a plan for that too.

An ambulance nosed into the driveway, and I felt my eyebrows rise behind the mask. Really?

From its back spilled three familiar costumes and a half dozen dogs (all normal looking), and the tall black driver could only be Grue — James, as he'd introduced himself.

Once more I gestured to the table, once more asked how my guests felt about tea, once more received a ragged chorus permitting my safe withdrawal.

Dealing with people really wasn't so bad, if you were prepared.

Or had an employee do it. That was what had made the conference with Armsmaster and Director Piggot go as smoothly as it had.

Would it have been awkward to have my lawyer host the tea-parties?
While I was inside, bustling, Hellhound grunted and walked toward the table while Regent gravitated to one of the rocking chairs. James and Lisa stood on the porch, taking in the view of the night skyline of Brockton Bay and looking at the stars in the moonless sky.

I emerged, with toast and the makings of tea, and the standing pair joined me at the table.

Lisa opted for hot chocolate, but declined the offer of tiny marshmallows. James opted for a black broadleaf variety that didn't actually taste like oranges, no matter what the label said.

Regent, from his rocking chair, waved his scepter and announced “Some green tea, if you have it.”

James and Lisa both took their attention from their brewing long enough to glare at him, and he shrugged with a smile — “Couldn't hurt to ask, could it?” — before rising and joining the rest of us at the table.

I paused to contemplate the tableaux: James, dressed in a crisp EMT uniform with the collar starched and trouser creases sharp enough to shave with, looked like he'd just stepped off a recruiting poster. Even his posture fit: while waiting for the bag to steep, he was standing in what I thought was called parade rest in the military, the fabric drawn tight around his muscular chest and arms. His interpretation of the role he was playing? Or a hint at his approach to life?

Lisa carried herself entirely differently while in costume. It wasn’t just having the hair down, much as that did to reframe her face. This close, I could make out the subtle use of makeup to sharpen her cheekbones and jawline, and enhance the effect her domino mask had on her eyes. Her posture, too, had changed. She looked intensely alert, full of nervous energy, but not high-strung — just relentlessly inquisitive, sly, and knowing.

Regent (“Anyone who feeds me gets to call me Alec.”) made hot chocolate as well, with the little marshmallows. He was slender, with artfully tousled black curls framing a pale face which seemed to have two expressions: bored, and the left end of his mouth turning up in a half-smile. The billowy white shirt he wore, the implausibly tight pants, and the stylized white carnival mask made me wonder if he’d designed his costume by going through romance novel covers. If he had, I was pretty sure there was a joke involved: he didn’t seem the type to unironically announce himself as a heartthrob.

Rachel (Lisa's explanation that ‘Bitch’ or ‘Rachel’ was vastly preferable to ‘Hellhound’ had been my first glimpse of Regent's half-smile) was large and muscular. Her features were blunt and her dress
plain, and her words so far had been just the same. The dogs surrounded her, obviously devoted to
her, and she spent the bulk of her time and attention on keeping them in order. Having tasted the
toast and honey herself, she was now feeding her dogs little treats from her pockets, going through
them in order, with occasional pauses when one of the less disciplined dogs tried to leap up, or cut in
line, or beg. Sometimes she'd simply say ‘No’ or ‘Bad’; other times she'd signal the scarred dog that
seemed to be her favorite and he'd snarl or snap. Either way, order would reassert itself, and, after a
long pause to see if the lesson had taken, she'd go on.

The toaster dinged, and I brought out a new plate of toast.

Most of them had settled in around the table, though Regent returned to his rocking chair.

James broke the silence, speaking over his steaming cup. “Nice place.”

I nodded. “A good banker and a good lawyer can do a lot, with money.”

“No foster care issues?”

I shook my head. “I have a good lawyer.”

He nodded, and took a sip.

“Expensive?”

I waggled a hand. “Not cheap. But I hit an ABB stash house, and then there are some ways I can get
paid for using my power, legally, that I'd never have thought of... he's paid for himself several times
over.”

He nodded again, and arched an eyebrow at Lisa.

She raised both hands, made a gesture as if weighing a scale with indeterminate results.
I looked back and forth between them.

“Do you want an introduction?”

A long pause, while he all but emptied his cup, and then held it, letting it warm his hands.

He refilled it, and spoke while it steeped. “Maybe later. I think I'd rather avoid coming to the official notice of the authorities in my unmasked capacity, if possible.”

I nodded. “Risky line of work.”

He nodded, dark eyes distant and deep. “Some things are worth the risk.”

I didn't have anything to say that. Partly because there wasn't much, and partly because I hadn't had a conversation that long with a handsome boy my age in... well, years. Certainly not since before I'd started noticing boys. And their eyes. Or the way their muscles bunched under a shirt.

Combine that with Alec's prettyboy costume, and I had to wonder if Lisa had been picking teammates for the eye candy. I glanced at her, and met a knowing grin and and headshake, before she spoke.

“There are lots of reasons I could offer for joining up. And what you've pulled off is ample reason to ask if you'd like to...”

Rachel looked up from her dogs, staring at me, while Lisa continued.

“But you're not going to, are you?”

I shook my head.

“I owe you guys for that fight with Lung. For coming through for me in the cemetery. And I wanted to say thanks, to acknowledge that debt. But... I think we've got different priorities.”
James stepped in, voice smooth. “The gangs.”

I nodded. "You can't tell me you wouldn't be glad to see Empire Eighty Eight dissolve completely."

He laughed, a short sharp bark that momentarily pulled the dogs’ attention away from Rachel.

“No. War with them is a bad risk, if avoidable... that's the only reason not to pick a fight. They're scum.”

Lisa chimed in, firm and musical “They give villains a bad name.”

Alec’s voice was light. “I hate Illinois Nazis.” A beat. “And the ones here too, I suppose.”

Rachel spoke to a human for the first time that night. “They run dogfighting rings.”

We all stared at her briefly.

I nodded. “Empire Eighty Eight isn't the only gang in town, but they're at the top of my list right now. I'd hoped the death of Kaiser would be enough…”

Lisa blinked twice, rapidly. “That was you?”


A long, low whistle rose from the rocking chair in the background, until cut off by a glare from James.

Alec shrugged, elaborately, the very picture of accused innocence. The glare continued.
I shook my head, and spoke. “This fragmented civil war just makes things... tricky. Since they're no friends of yours, I was wondering if you could give me a rundown...”

Lisa and James glanced at each other, and he nodded.

She spoke. “Right now, you've got at least three factions in play. Hookwolf's Chosen, or Fenrir's Chosen, as they sometimes call themselves. He's backed by Stormtiger and Cricket, and a large number of the more violent enforcers. You've got Krieg's Regency, with Night, Fog, and Fenja, and a smaller number of better organized enforcers. And then there's the Pure, led by Purity, as you might expect... but she's only got Crusader with her so far. Victor, Othala, and Rune are staying out of the fight for now, and probably have an outright majority of the unpowered skinheads with them, but haven't declared as an independent faction either. So far they've gotten away with it since everyone needs access to healing, and no one wants the organization to be destroyed in the crossfire. Most of the fighting is really between Krieg's group and Hookwolf's, until the Protectorate shows up. So far, that's been the cue for both sides to kiss, make up, and bond over fighting the heroes. Purity's been running a private crusade against the Merchants, which makes for some spectacular lightshows... but, since they'd rather run, not any real fights. She has kept them from keeping any of the E88 territory they tried to take, but that's about it.”

I nodded, turning plans over in my mind.

“Regency implies an heir.”

Lisa shrugged. “Unless Regent's been secretly running an E88 faction —”

“Too much like work.”

“— then yes. But I don't exactly have a detailed family tree for the descendants of Allfather, and it might just be that Krieg hasn't decided — or been told by Gesellschaft — whether or not he'll take power in his own name.”

I nodded again, and looked into my own teacup for a time.

James stood. “Good luck with this mess. If it doesn't get cleaned up soon, there's likely to be an escalation. Either from the heroes' side... or ours.”
I looked up, met his gaze. “Yours?”

“A couple of the players are calling for a council. Truce-rules: nobody starts anything, or everybody finishes them. Maybe make the different E88 factions talk it out.” He grinned. “Maybe agree to make them just... go away.” The grin faded. "This kind of noise is bad for business. For everyone. Nobody wants the Protectorate to come in here with thirty or forty heroes, spearheaded by the Triumvirate.”

I nodded thoughtfully.

He waved toward the ambulance, and the Undersiders all stood. I stood with them.

“Look, we’ve got some business of our own to be about tonight. And if you were joining up, you’d be welcome along. But since you’re not, do you mind putting off going to war until tomorrow? We prefer to work smooth — no one knows we were there until we’re long gone.”

Alec idly drawled “And you seem to like things rough,” prompting a glare from Lisa and a facepalm from James. Unapologetic, he continued. “I’m just saying… this used to be such a quiet town. You know. Before.”

I blinked.

James stood straight, and continued without so much as turning his head toward Alec. “I can’t discuss details, of course. But the target’s no friend of yours — nothing to burden your conscience over.”

I nodded. Empire Eighty Eight, then. An easy favor for me to grant, considering.

“Good hunting.”

Rachel hung back a moment, walked until we were face to face. Well, face to mask.

“You provided treats that dogs could eat.”
I blinked behind my mask. Bread and honey? Which she hadn’t even fed them?

“Yes.”

She looked at me for a time, then turned and walked away, whistling for her dogs to follow her into the ambulance.

With that, James started the ambulance and drove away.

I made myself a cup of tea, and looked up at the stars.

A week ago tonight, Lung and Kaiser had fought at my instigation.

I had interfered. Helped tip the balance against Kaiser; ensured Oni Lee would not live to fight another day. The civil war within the Empire was, in a very real way, my responsibility.

It hadn’t brought the results I wanted.

Yet.

The Empire held no less territory, counted no fewer street-level members, did no less harm than before.

If at first you don’t succeed…

It would mean taking some of my attention off of Coil. Even though I still wasn’t sure what Coil was up to, what kind of game he was playing. I wasn’t even sure which side he was playing for! But there would be time to address that afterward. I wouldn’t forget about him, but for now… letting the Empire bleed itself out wasn’t working. Time to change strategies, then.

I sighed.
It had been a quiet week.

From the very first time I met Lung, fought him, and lost but for the interventions of the Undersiders and Armsmaster, there had been nine days of constant surveillance and combat, with two days of coma interspersed. That week of determination and occasional terror had gutted the ABB, and started the civil war within E88. Not wasted effort, any of it.

Just… not enough, either, to make the necessary difference.

Seven days since of relative peace, haggling with the PRT, and building the foundations of a new life. Fragile foundations, still. Easily destroyed. I knew that I could lose it all in a single moment.

My old life was evidence enough of that.

I looked around, seeing the farm through my insects where my eyes could not make it out through the gloom. This was a nice place. A place I could come to call home.

Tomorrow I would join the battle once more.

Tonight… tonight I’d drink another cup of tea, and watch the stars in peace.
It was a pleasant evening.

The white noise of the waves could now be heard above the hum of traffic — a reliable sign that she was up too late. Again.

And tomorrow would be a school day.

Still, she leaned out her open window and watched the night, taking in the panorama: downtown on her left, the bay before her, and the ocean to her right.

Beautiful.

Nothing like the full moon two Sundays back: that had been amazing. With so many lights out from Bakuda’s rampage, and the moon so close to Earth… it had been unbelievable how many stars you could see. Emma had been sleeping over that weekend, and they’d laid out sleeping bags on a balcony and looked up at a deeper sky than any they’d ever seen before. The moon had risen just after sunset, and stayed up until the sky was already brightening with pre-dawn light. It hadn’t been the movie and makeover weekend they’d planned — you couldn’t really watch movies without power — but it had been something wonderful and surprising.

Her phone buzzed, and she looked over at it.

Another text message from Charlotte, nominally asking her what she thought about John, and whether he might like Charlotte, like like-like Charlotte. Actually, an attempt to forge a friendship between them — sharing secrets was good for that, if you knew what you were doing… not that who she liked was much of a secret, really. Charlotte was a little crude in the attempt, and trying to take advantage of the recent disruption. The social-climbing ambition wasn’t offensive — somewhat flattering, in fact. But, clear as it was what Charlotte would gain, what would she offer? By now, she should have hinted at her skills, her friends, her charms… something.

Sometimes Madison wondered if other people just didn’t think about how they were socializing at all.

She sighed.
Not replying wasn’t really a choice: that was the kind of thing that would require an explanation tomorrow at school, if she wanted to keep her reputation as a nice girl.

Madison’s thumbs absent-mindedly tapped out a message. “He does like a certain kind of girl, right?” There.

Something ambiguous, for Charlotte to turn over in her mind once it was sent, a mirror for her dreams and insecurities. Wouldn’t do to give her the impression that Madison didn’t have anything better to do on a Wednesday night than reply instantly — that kind of response would only be appropriate for best friends. Or if Madison was desperate, which she wasn’t.

Even if school was different now.

Not lonely — that was just a matter of paying attention, and spending time with people who were in and not with people who were out, and she’d mastered that back in third grade. She was already moving back toward Cynthia and Jane, and it was like old times with them, really. A good example of why you should never cut ties completely. And there were always boys of varying degrees of status or sexiness to flirt with or be followed by. Nothing serious. But nothing needed to be serious for it to be fun, right?

Even the detentions after school weren’t really bad: she just sat in a quiet room and did her homework. And that left her free to do other things when she got home in the evening! Mostly socializing, on the phone. Detention wasn’t a big deal — honestly, it could have come a lot sooner, and it didn’t really hurt her own popularity.

Sophia and Emma had gone for a more adult presentation in their clothing and manners, and that wasn’t always an advantage. Cuteness played out differently than hotness: mainly, in the way you came off as more childlike. More crushes, less lust. And people always assumed you were actually like a child which had definite drawbacks, but did make it a lot easier to be underestimated. Put a cute girl in detention, and it only signaled that she’d ‘made a mistake’ and would need support and guidance going forward.

It also hinted that she might break the rules in other, more interesting ways. Cute girls who stayed wholesome were popular. Cute girls who enjoyed kissing — or more — were popular. Cute girls who might possibly be persuaded… well. Not that she would, but the attention was fun. Her dad was still a little upset about some of the trouble, but she had always been his darling daughter.
He’d come around.

Mom had always been in her corner. She’d taught Madison how to deal with people, and the very first lesson she’d taught was ‘Family first.’

Sure, Mom might be disappointed if Madison weren’t able to bring Dad or the school administration around on her own, and needed assistance… but she would have helped in a heartbeat, if asked.

And then they’d have spent an afternoon out shopping, while she did her lecturing-without-lecturing trick, explicitly discussing fashion and implicitly discussing people, and how to manage them. The afternoon out would have been fun.

The unlecture… not so much. Mom still knew a lot more than she did about how to manipulate people’s feelings, and thought one of the best ways to learn techniques was to experience them yourself. Even odds whether she’d have gone for guilt or humiliation, but it wouldn’t have been enjoyable either way.

At all.

Emma had withdrawn from the school last week: transferring, she said, in one of the few times they’d talked since, maybe to the same school as Sophia and maybe not. There hadn’t been much occasion, really — friends came and went in life, and the school you were at remained.

Emma had been a good friend while she lasted, really, and might be again some day.

The obsession with Taylor had been a little odd, but it made for a great bonding experience. One that only took up a bit of the day. A ritual, of sorts — a moment in the morning, a moment at lunch, an occasional class period when things were boring: it had brought a lot of their year together. More than the principal’s efforts to gin up a rivalry with Immaculata now that they were both competing in the AAAA league had, anyway: they didn’t have a sports program worthy of the name, swim team excepted.

That kind of shared rejection was just the way school always was: you could live on the outside, or find a way to be on the inside… but there was always someone on the bottom.

Sophia had been right about that much — it was easy to see, if you looked.
The pattern repeated everywhere.

Sophia herself had been bound and determined to be on top, and mere weeks after she’d transferred in… she was. She’d gotten together with Emma almost before the school year started, and moved on Taylor just as quickly. And, just like that, the pattern was set: the two attractive, successful, girls forming one pole and the withdrawn loner the other. The rest of the year rearranged themselves like iron filings around a magnet to fit that relentlessly repeated pattern. Madison herself had rearranged her plans to use it rather than fight it.

A lot of life was simple like that, really.

If you paid attention to how people acted, you could almost always get in with them. Liking some of the same things was easy, and sometimes introduced you to new things you would like on their merits anyway. Hating most of the same things was easier: just focus on the flaws. Everyone had something.

You still had to pick your friends carefully, but it wasn’t like friends — or enemies — just happened. You made them. A little attention, the occasional sacrifice… easy. Hard on the outcast, of course, but you can’t define an in-group without one. And really, would you prefer to be in? Or out?

Madison knew which choice she’d make.

Which choice she’d made.

And, the locker thing aside, it had never gotten too-too bad. Taylor had some seriously thick skin: the locker itself had grown out of three months of wondering if there was anything, anything at all, which would draw a reaction from her. And the locker had. Had it ever! She was out of school for a week, in a psych ward... and then she went right back to stonewalling them.

Like it never happened.

The time Emma got her to cry in the restroom was really the only other time she’d seen a reaction on Taylor’s face. She was just expressionless when confronted. Until recently, that had meant almost all the time. It was impressive, in its own way, the sheer bloody-minded endurance involved… particularly since it was totally unnecessary. There had been so many ways out, so many other cliques that she could have joined, or even formed. There were different flavors of geeks, and jocks
other than Track, and the band group was both pretty tight and straightforward to join. Hadn’t Taylor played the flute or something? Or if she didn’t want to solve her issues by adjusting her friendships, there were ways to get the teachers involved, or alternatives to Winslow itself.

Back when it was just getting started, Emma had even hinted that this was all a test, to see if Taylor was a victim or a survivor — with just a little effort, Taylor could have been one of the popular ones. Or at least friends with someone else who was popular, and that was almost as good. Better, in some ways: most of the benefits, a fraction of the work. Emma and Taylor had certainly used to be friends, before.

Instead, Taylor had simply stayed the victim.

For months.

For over two years.

At first, Madison thought Taylor would take it for a month, or two, and then she’d bow out or call in help and someone else would be the designated target… but she just kept coming back for more. Maybe that was the only way she knew to get attention. Or maybe she was just really bad with people.

Maybe those were the same thing. That kind of made Madison feel sorry for her, distantly. How bad did you have to be at life, that you wanted to be the butt of every joke? Someone had to be, but it didn’t always have to be the same person.

Anyway, she was gone too.

The kind of gone where they stopped calling her name at roll call.

There were all kinds of stories about that: she’d gone to an insane asylum, she’d committed suicide, she’d transferred — even one where Bakuda had killed the whole Hebert family.

Madison thought that last one was more than a little beyond the bounds of good taste: Bakuda had killed a lot of people, for real, and turning that into fodder for a new rumor was just... cheap. Some kid was claiming that he'd seen the crater where her house used to be, but — again — Bakuda had eliminated a lot of houses, and Taylor just attracted gross stories.
Especially after the locker thing.

Madison had heard Taylor featuring in stories that she was quite sure never actually happened, all disgusting, from the one where she slept in a dumpster to the one where she ate bugs.

Personally, Madison was pretty sure that Taylor had finally transferred out, looking for a new school where she wouldn’t be at the bottom of the ladder. Easy, if she were willing to even try. Some new clothes, a little more attention to her hair, some makeup, some padding for her bra (because let’s be serious here, she could really use that. Nothing wrong with being tall and rail-thin, nothing at all, but for maximum impact? You needed cleavage to go with it)... and she’d be an entirely different, and much more popular, girl.

She ran the changes through her mind’s eye, imagining what she would change if she’d been giving Taylor a makeover, if Taylor had been a friend.

It would work.

Madison grinned.

And she should know!

Not that she needed to anymore, but last year? Last year she’d used padding herself — not too much, too much was worse than too little. Really, it was just truth in advertising: her mother was evidence enough that her breasts had always been going to come in eventually, so there was no harm in, ah, pre-announcing them. Audience response had been… enthusiastic. And it was always nice to feel wanted.

Hating Taylor had been the price of Emma and Sophia’s friendship.

With them both gone now — Sophia wasn’t even answering her phone anymore, which meant her mother had probably confiscated it — it might be possible. Making friends with her after spending so much time tormenting her would have been quite difficult, even if it would have gone a long way to quelling any future concerns with the school administration. Still, as mother always said, ‘Sincerity is the most important thing for making friends. And once you can fake that, you are made.’
The fact that Taylor probably wasn’t returning to Winslow shifted that daydream from ‘difficult’ to ‘impossible.’

A path not taken.

So it was in a generous mood that Madison raised her phone and pressed send. Perhaps she would take Charlotte under her wing after all.

A vast orange light bloomed across the bay, and she dropped her phone to the floor.

More than thirty seconds later, when the boom could be heard, it was still there.
I was preparing my little Vespa to head into town when dawn broke over the ocean, and I paused the work of my own body to watch it.

Every time I saw it, felt the still dawn air, I thought about rising with the sun more often… but in practice, I usually preferred a little more sleep. It took something important to get me up this early.

Breaking the Empire qualified.

I’d set the spiders and bees to their work for the day, and gathered the core of a swarm — black widows, some brown recluses, and lots of bees. The scooter turned out to have a considerable amount of storage space.

I looked at the “No Pets” sticker for a few moments before deciding that it probably didn’t really apply in this case, and filled it. Then I filled much of my backpack. I had my costume on under loose clothing, but the mask had to go in the backpack. The storage area in my costume was also filled — more with gear than bugs, but I used them to fill it out.

Enough?

No way to tell without knowing what I’d be facing. Certainly enough to provide cores for several swarms filled out with local insects.

When I’d fought Bakuda for the last time, I’d had to enter the room to face her… and, more importantly, Lung. I’d made assumptions about the force my insects could exert; hadn’t had truly dangerous bugs available. I might still make mistakes about what I could pull off, but this time I would have my full arsenal available. And if I didn’t really need them? No harm done.

I raised the stand, straddled the scooter, set off down the hill.

The road unrolled beneath me, the absence of traffic at this hour making a single flowing journey of what could have been a multitude of stops and starts.
Soon enough, I pulled up at the downtown cafe I’d been frequenting lately, in a spot shaded by buildings — my bugs under the seat had been getting a little warm in transit, and I wanted them alive when I needed them. I reached out to the world around me, feeling the dormant office buildings around me… and the mostly sleeping base of Coil’s beneath the tower three blocks west of me.

Apparently, he wasn’t yet in.

Good.

The warring fragments of Empire Eighty Eight were the primary target right now. Lung remained a threat. But I didn’t know whether either of them could be found right now, and I did know where to find Coil… and if he was half the mastermind I thought he might be, he would know where to find them.

It was, at least, worth a shot.

I settled into an omelette, with tea, and waited.

Coil showed up at around eight in the morning, and went directly to his office. I had had my notebook out ever since clearing away breakfast, idly planning search routes; a second cup of tea sat cooling and forgotten before me.

Prepositioned swarms looked at his screen while he started his day.

Flickering noise.

I guess LCD designers didn’t have insect eyes in mind when they considered viewing angles.

Or at all.
Frustrating.

Still, from my experience hunting the ABB, E88 forces were unlikely to believe in ‘early to rise.’ I could afford to delay my search until the afternoon without losing much.

Ten minutes later, he rose and moved to the young girl he only ever called ‘pet’.

“Chance of a problem here within the next hour?”

“Zero point one four three percent.” Her voice was thin, but clear. A Thinker? Another Thinker? And… apparently a precog. Who could give percentage chances. Was that normal? I didn’t really know much about how Thinker powers worked, but that seemed pretty powerful. Especially if you knew the right questions to ask. And… wasn’t Coil a Thinker too?

No wonder he kept her close. And heavily guarded.

“Chance of a problem here before lunchtime, pet?”

“Sixty two point seven zero three percent.”

His voice sharpened.

“Chance of deaths here?”

“Fifty five point five six two percent.”

“Chance of deaths for those in the building across the street?”

“Zero point three one seven percent.”
He paused.

“So it’s not the city, it’s here.”

In my comfortable overstuffed chair in the corner of the cafe I froze momentarily, my pen suspended above my notepad. Someone was going to attack his base? Today?

Before lunch?

With one hand, I retrieved and flipped open the phone I’d mentally labeled as “civilian” and speed dialed one.

A pause, and then it began to ring.

“Chance I survive?”

The phone rang a second time.

“Ninety seven point eight three two percent. It hurts. I want my candy now.”

With that he paused, brow knotting briefly in concentration, and then paced back and forth with long, angry strides.

The third ring of the phone was interrupted by a voice speaking in my ear. “Quinn Calle.”

“It’s me. Can we move our meeting from a 10:15 a.m. brunch to a 1:30 p.m. late lunch?”

“Certainly.”

“Thanks.”
I hung up. I wasn’t sure who would be coming, or in what force, but I’d be there.

Beneath me, Coil’s pacing continued.

“Candy?”

“Later, pet. Chance of deaths here if I deploy soldiers with the lasers? The purple beams?”

“Zero point one eight eight percent.”

He paused again.

“… point one eight eight? Exactly? Pet, chance of deaths here if I don’t deploy my soldiers?”

“Zero point one eight eight percent.”

“Chance of a problem here before lunchtime?” His voice was slow, thick with an emotion I couldn’t identify.

“One point seven two eight percent.”

He froze.

What was going on?

He turned and walked toward the door, a plaintive cry of “… candy?” trailing after him.

Once in his office, he picked up the phone. “Have Mr. Pitter sent to my office immediately. And gather all my captains in the situation room.”
He turned toward the door, passing a thin man with round-rimmed glasses, not even breaking stride as he spoke. “Give her her ‘candy’. Medium dosage. And arrange a full medical workup on her — discretion above all, but otherwise as soon as possible.”

I had trouble following his conversation in the corridors, but I thought I knew what he meant by ‘situation room’ and had already started trying to arrange swarms to overhear him.

“Gentleman. First, move everyone to a full defensive alert. Second, I would like to review with you the dispositions of the known factions active in the city, so that we can be better prepared for anyone who might assault this position.”

One of the captains rose and left the room, voice barking orders as soon as he’d passed the threshold. Another stood and began to outline people, places, numbers, tactical assessments…

My pen raced frantically to get it all down.

With another thread of my attention, I heard Mr. Pitter urging the young girl to sleep with a “Shush, Dinah, shh.”

This was much more than I’d hoped to get.

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By 1:25 I was in a small Italian restaurant downtown, only half full at this hour but still loud with echoes. It was hard to hear someone right next to you, and all but impossible to separate out other conversations in the din. I wondered if that’s why Quinn had picked it, or if it had been for the quality of the food.

No all out assault on Coil’s underground fortress had materialized. No one had died. I was still no closer to figuring out whether he was one of the good guys, undercover, or not — though I hoped Quinn had found some information for me there.
At 1:30 precisely he walked through the doors, moving through the tables with smooth assurance, and seated himself before me, smile flashing in greeting. “Taylor.”

“Quinn.” I nodded at him, and put my menu down.

A crooked finger summoned a waiter, and we ordered. Sparkling water and the off-menu choice of local fish with pico de gallo for him; a Neapolitan pasta ragu for myself.

He leaned forward. “Why the rescheduling?”

I answered with another question. “Any word on Calvert?”

He leaned back slightly, steepling his fingers. “He’s ex-military, ex-PRT, currently working as a consultant, primarily on Parahuman matters with an eye to security. Generally regarded with respect for his competence.”

I nodded. That was consistent with his involvement with Fortress Construction.

“So much is public knowledge. Less public, but known in my circles, is the fact that he wasn’t one of grunts. Thomas Calvert was once a member of the PRT’s special forces: the very few who tried to take the fight to villains directly.”

I blinked. “They do that?”

His head tilted slightly to the left. “Not anymore. But once.”

I nodded. The mercenaries… their tactics, their discipline… that fit too. So he was undercover.

“And known to very few, but known to me, is that he’s one of the very few who survived the assault on Nilbog.”
I blinked. “They didn’t just build a wall around the area?”

“No, not without trying for a more permanent solution first, no. He killed thousands.”

He spread his hands spread palm down, expressive fingers flat against the table. “Relevantly, the only other survivor of that assault is someone you’ve met: Emily Pigott. Which is why I had that information in the first place — we did a thorough workup on her before the negotiations.”

I nodded again. What could be more natural, than to turn to one of your old teammates for assistance?

“He still does consulting work for the PRT as well, and is considered to be on the shortlist for the next PRT Directorship that opens up.”

One of their best, then. Well, we could certainly use that here.

We paused as the waiter came, bearing food and drink, and that pause lengthened as we began to eat. The food was good enough that I thought that maybe Quinn hadn’t only been thinking of anti-eavesdropping measures when he chose the location.

Quinn set down his water goblet, and fixed me with a look. “Now can you tell me why you’re contemplating doing business with a consultant like that?”

I chewed. Swallowed. Thought about it, and decided there was no harm in elaborating.

“One of the villains tried to get me to take on Coil, and his Bond-villain underground fortress filled with mercenaries. With laser guns.”

His fingers tightened briefly around the stem of the goblet.

“So I looked into him. And, along with noticing the underground fortress and small army of soldiers, I noticed he had a PRT phone… which was the first clue to realizing that he’s actually an undercover hero, so I’m glad I didn’t just try and take him and his gang out of the picture.”
I thought about my (theoretically) bulletproof costume, about lasers, and about how my first costume hadn’t survived Bakuda’s firebomb.

“For several reasons.”

Quinn’s voice was stiff. “Taylor, that’s not how it works.”

I blinked, another forkful of pasta and sausage halfway up to my mouth.

He leaned forward, voice lowering, communicating in something softer and more urgent than a whisper. “Taylor, the PRT does not run entire gang territories as an undercover operation.”

I thought a moment, and said “How do you know?”

While he was chewing on that, I started back in on my pasta.

He drummed his fingers long enough for me to finish my meal, and for the waiter to take our plates away and leave the check.

Eventually, he spoke. “Look — I can’t guarantee they’re not doing that. I can guarantee that it’s illegal. Incredibly illegal. I’ve had to deal with evidence gained from undercover operations, in some of my cases out in Las Vegas, and I tell you that there are rules and guidelines which govern what the PRT or Protectorate can and cannot do. What you’re describing breaks every last one of them. If this is a sanctioned operation, then the command staff of the Brockton Bay PRT have gone rogue. And if it’s not, then a criminal has infiltrated the PRT.”

He paused, and took a drink of water.

“Dealing with corrupt law enforcement isn’t impossible. It’s just very hard to do so safely: this is exactly the kind of case where witnesses disappear. My advice to you is that you leave the state — maybe the country — and lie low for a while.”
I held his eyes with my own. “I don’t like running.”

He shook his head. “It would be almost impossible for me to raise this through the proper channels without leaving open the chance that Calvert would hear of it. But…”

“But?”

“But I’m owed some favors. I can get a face-to-face with Chief Director Costa-Brown… but not quickly.”

I frowned.

“Days?”

“Weeks. Maybe a month or two. I could work faster… but not without attracting a lot of attention.”

I shook my head. If Coil was, in fact, a villain…

“He’s got a prisoner. A girl, maybe twelve years old? Named Dinah. Another Thinker — at least I think Calvert is also a Thinker. He’s giving her painkillers. I thought they might be medicinal, but…”

Quinn’s lips tightened. “First, if he’s parahuman then that automatically would get him booted from the PRT. Can’t have the watchers and the watched being the same people. Second, I don’t know how you’re getting this information, but I can get you out of jail. I cannot get you out of a morgue.”

“I’m not taking any risks.” I smiled, or tried.

The tightness around his eyes stayed. “Third…” he produced a much fancier phone than mine, one with a touchscreen, and fiddled with it for twenty seconds, before holding it up to me.

I leaned in, looked at it. “That’s her.”
He nodded, replacing his phone in a jacket pocket. “Dinah Alcott. Relative of the mayor’s — the firm had a table at a charity ball last week, and since I was in town, I attended. He’s quite concerned about her recent kidnapping. It was… one of the major topics of gossip.”

Despite the loud echoes throughout the restaurant a moment ago, it felt like the world beyond our table had simply faded out of existence.

I met his eyes.

We stared at each other for a long moment.

When I spoke at last, it was slowly, with each word carrying equal emphasis.

“I will not let this stand. Not in my city.”

He exhaled, closing his eyes, blowing the air out as if he’d taken a gut-punch.

“Are you with me?”

His eyes reopened, grey and steady.

“You’re the client.”

I nodded.

“Then let’s get to work.”
Most of the rest of the afternoon was eaten by a discussion about what kind of precautions I could take against a corrupt PRT. Quinn had said he’d need to talk to some other lawyers, but he thought that there were things that I could do with trusts, corporations, and ownership structures generally that would make it harder to freeze my assets or attack me through the legal system.

Dealing with an outright cape assault on me — or by me — remained outside his competence.

I was pretty sure that the PRT would have a hard time freezing assets held by the Number Man, though there were other worries there. A quick phone call had gotten me wiring instructions which should baffle further investigation and which I’d passed to Quinn as ‘a probably safe account, to be used for some but not all of my assets.’

He hadn’t asked any questions about where that went, but only if there were any other income sources I wanted to try to protect.

I took a break from the enormous stack of signature pages before me to sketch out my ‘bee vitamin’ recipe.

He took it, and looked at it, then looked across the conference table.

“Taylor, have you even heard of Colony Collapse Disorder?”

I shrugged in between signings.

“Something that better bee nutrition might help with?”

He sighed. “Something like that, yes. Maybe. It might or might not be part of the total collapse of agriculture as we know it — at least for the plants relying on insect pollination. It’s…”

He paused a moment.
“It’s one of many problems that people blame on the Simurgh. Not that there’s any real certainty that it’s going to be a disaster instead of an issue, not that there’s any evidence that the Simurgh was involved, but…”

I nodded, continuing to sign page after page. “We’re being paranoid, but…”

“… are we being paranoid enough?” he finished the phrase for me. It was, spoken or unspoken, the unofficial end to any discussion about the Simurgh’s activities.

“I don’t know if you remember, Taylor, but there was a time when some parahumans tried to change the world rather than… fight crime. Or the Endbringers.”

My hand traced another signature, all but illegible at this point.

He tapped his phone, absently. “Ideas. Innovations. The hope of a technological answer to problems, to powers… to the Endbringers themselves.” Softer. “Even if only by running away.”

The papers rustled as I shifted a stack to the side. “Sphere.”

He nodded slowly. “Alan Gramme was once the final hope of humanity. That, even if we lost, here… our descendants might survive elsewhere, in a habitat of his design.”

There wasn’t really anything I could say to that. I hadn’t been old enough at the time to really pay attention to the tragedy.

“The Simurgh put an end to that. Openly. And while other, stronger, Tinkers have arisen since — Dragon is probably the greatest Tinker ever to live — they no longer focus on wider changes. Only on fighting.”

“The Endbringers need to be fought.”

His eyes closed. Opened. “So they do. But there’s more than one way to fight; more than one way to make a difference.” He gently folded the piece of paper with the recipe on it, and placed it in an inside jacket pocket. “I’ll see that this gets tested.” His usual smile returned at last, bright as ever.
“And if it does what I think it might, I’ll see you get paid appropriately for it too.”

I nodded, and thought about the tasks I’d set myself. The foes I’d have to face. The name he hadn’t mentioned, the man who often, even today, was still titled ‘the greatest Tinker ever to live.’

Hero.

One of the earliest heroes, he’d taken that archetypal name for his own… and kept it.

Few of us capes could get away with wearing an actual cape — it took something weightier than dignity to make it look real instead of like a bad joke.

Fewer still could have managed a name like his.

He bore it the way he had worn his gold plate on blue mesh armor: with an easy smile and a gadget for every occasion. And for all that, when his name was spoken today it wasn’t usually about the good he’d done, the Protectorate he’d helped found, or the Tinkers who followed in the paths he’d blazed. No, mentions of him today tended to focus on the bitter truth taught by his end: no matter how great or beloved, heroes die.

“Should I be making out a will?”

“You’re still underage. We’ve talked about the nominal purposes of the trusts that I’ll be setting up for you — that’s as much estate planning as can be done for you right now.”

I nodded again, and stood to stretch.

The conference room’s windows behind me faced out toward the Bay; reflected on the windows of the other office towers was the redly setting sun.

“Time to go.”

He stood, and walked me to the elevator bank.
“I’ll see about that referral. And… take care.”

The elevator doors closed, and I shut my eyes and reached out to my swarms, mind already on the fights ahead.

As evening approached, I made my way to the northern part of downtown, to where Coil’s men had thought Krieg laired.

Last night, Tattletale had thought he had the greatest concentration of force among the E88 factions, and Coil’s threat assessments concurred, and that made him top of the list right now. Ahead of Coil at the moment only because I still had no idea what Coil’s power really was, and finding out in a fight was… a bad idea.

If I had to, I’d do it that way.

Not otherwise.

I pulled my scooter into a parking spot several blocks away from my target, pulled out my current disposable flip-phone, and pretended to text someone while I reached out, searching the address they’d named.

The Regency, Fenrir’s Chosen, the unaligned E88, Lung, Coil and his cape(s?) and mercenaries… who wasn’t I at war with?

Purity’s faction?

I owed her a conversation, first. If she really was trying to fight crime, to atone… sure.
I knew what it was like, to have something on your conscience. Something that couldn’t be fixed, couldn’t be taken back. Not just my father, but all the rest of Bakuda’s victims.

The Merchants?

No, they were definitely on the list.

Faultline’s crew of mercenaries?

Hadn’t even heard of them doing anything local. Maybe that meant they weren’t doing any harm; maybe it meant they just weren’t getting caught.

Something to worry about later.

Much later.

The Undersiders?

I owed them, and they me. But if nothing changed, could I still turn a blind eye to their actions?

I snorted. If I got that far down the list, well… I’d worry about it then.

There!

Krieg was, as advertised, running his section of Empire Eighty Eight out of the back of a grocery store. I guess the plan was for all the skinheads to blend into the normal shopping traffic? Though… looking around with my bugs, there weren’t that many present.

A couple of guards and the man himself, sitting at a desk and working.

Well, I could wait and watch for an opportunity that wasn’t right next door to several dozen
shoppers. And there was a bookstore across the street where I could wait in comfort.

Two hours later, I was wondering if it might just be simpler to flood the room with insects.

On the one hand, I was pretty sure that if I methodically removed every cape who stepped up to keep the Empire together, it would eventually fall apart.

On the other hand, bystanders.

The surveillance wasn’t even producing anything useful! He wasn’t plotting strategy or taking calls, he was sitting there doing paperwork. And not the useful kind of paperwork, the kind that discussed E88 operations or personnel. The kind where he was carefully doing the accounts for the Rotisserie League Fantasy Baseball League which he ran.

Before my patience could snap, his little walkie-talkie beeped. Twice. He carefully finished the entry he was on, closed the binder, and stood, grabbing his black greatcoat as he exited.

A white panel van waited for him in the parking lot, and I carefully spread some bugs throughout it, registering another three in back plus the driver. Another man, and two women. Night, Fog, and Fenja?

As they pulled out of the parking lot, I got my scooter and followed.

They made their way east almost to the coast before turning north, into the industrial areas around the docks which gave that whole neighbourhood its name.

The streets were very quiet.

Ever since the Boat Graveyard was established, when the shipping industry was collapsing and some
unpaid sailors and dockworkers had attempted to hold the ships then in port hostage by blocking the exit with a container ship, there hadn’t been much activity in this part of town.

The attempt hadn’t even worked: the abandoned boats simply rusted in place, written off for whatever their insurance might cover. Today, even if there were demand enough from shipping companies, clearing the docks would take the kind of time and money no one had to spare.

I’d been following them from near the limit of my range, uncomfortably aware of how few other vehicles I saw on the streets, and when they stopped at a T-junction in front of a shuttered compound, so did I, wheeling the Vespa out of sight behind a building.

I’d have to walk the rest of the way, but I could do that.

Outer clothes off, and into the Vespa’s cargo space as the insects left it.

Mask on.

I felt my pouches: collapsible baton; taser, cellphones, three; epipens; homemade pepper bombs, six; combat knife; pepper spray, three; handcuffs, two; bugs… lots.

Meanwhile, I’d been assembling swarms where the van had stopped to give me eyes on them. The van had stopped briefly to let Krieg exit with the three others before driving on. I tagged the vehicle and driver, but let it go. I wasn’t here hunting Krieg’s driver. They exchanged brief words — too far from my swarms to hear, yet — and Fenja began jogging off into the compound. I tagged her, but she was out of range quickly. Night and Fog stood with Krieg. Waiting.

I considered, and began to move closer. Quietly. Stealthily. Insects watching every alley, every street, every window.

No one.

As I crept closer, I picked up Fenja again: she was atop one of many squat cylinders, each several stories high, a little to the east of where Krieg waited. She was carrying her sword and shield, and I knew from the fight with Lung that she could leap down from such heights safely… but it still seemed odd. Fenja was a melee specialist, a bodyguard. And right now, Krieg was too far from her for her to act in his defense.
I stopped two blocks south of them, and one east. More than close enough. I ducked down an alley — out of sight, good escape routes — while I gathered most of the insects in my range into swarms, filtering out some of the nastier types that I’d brought along to add punch to the locals. I left dustings of insects behind, enough to maintain awareness of the area. I closed my eyes, to shut out a source of distraction — it wasn’t as if I couldn’t see myself from three different angles right now anyway.

Krieg was waiting for something. Or someone?

Who?

I swept my awareness wide, checking more thoroughly.

A lit window drew my attention to a small office deeper in the compound to my right, a small and cramped space. A single individual at a desk, moving from a computer to machinery and back. I tagged him. Off to my left, three men sleeping in different doorways. At the edge of my range west, someone closing a garage door on a room filled with exercise equipment. A gym? I tagged him anyway. Another man smoking a cigarette in a doorway. Tagged. Two women getting into a car. Tagged.

This part of the city was almost entirely empty.

No witnesses.

Just the four of them. Could I take them? Make them vanish in the night?

I shook my head. Fenja was tough enough that I couldn’t guarantee anything with her. I didn’t have enough of a handle on Night’s power to be sure of putting her down. And Fog’s power was basically to turn into superpowered bug spray.

No, I’d have to wait and watch for now.

I heard a rumbling through my swarms before I heard it with my ears. A motorcycle. Loud one, too. From the north.
I focused the eyes of my swarm on them and on Krieg’s group, on the other approaches to the intersection they were meeting, and on the approaches to where I was… all at once. Dizzying, but easier with practice.

The motorcycle proved to be Hookwolf on a Harley, with Cricket riding behind him. He pulled up, cut the engine.

If the apparent three to two odds troubled them at all, neither showed it.

“Say your piece.”

Krieg smiled beneath his round, small sunglasses, hands clasped before him. “There’s nothing to say, Herr Hookwolf.”

“You put it out throughout the gang that we needed to meet under truce for nothing?” Hookwolf was very nearly growling.

The smoker stepped out of the alley, and on to the street approaching the T-junction from the west, giving me my first clear look at his face.

Lung.

Walking toward the meeting.

Of course this wouldn’t go smoothly. On the upside, it looked like someone else was already working on thinning the E88 for me.

“I didn’t say it was for nothing. Merely that it wasn’t to talk. There is a distinction, yes?” Krieg’s accent was faint but distinctive.

Cricket cocked her head, and looked west.
“Trap!” Hookwolf erupted into a tangle of sharp-edged steel.

Lung threw his cigarette away, and there was a brief burst of flame. Only ashes hit the ground.

Krieg’s smile never wavered.

“Oh yes, Herr Hookwolf. A trap. But not for you.”
The mass of hooks and spikes that Hookwolf had become paused. Seated deep within, protected by a screen of whirling blades, a torso emerged.

“Who?”

“As you said, I put the word out throughout the gang. Others would hear — not all of our rank and file are as committed to the cause as they should be, yes? And of those others, who would dare to strike at us together?”

“Lung. You’re mad if you think you can beat him in a fight.”

The villain in question continued his walk toward them, just slightly over a block away by now. He still looked entirely human… for now. And, depending on when his improved senses kicked in, he might already be able to hear them.

“Herr Hookwolf, you have a touching fondness for straightforward conflict. It has its uses. But, if you have an enemy you cannot beat in a fight? Then do not fight him.”

Cricket’s head was fixed on the approaching Lung. Had she heard him? Over the argument? She tapped Hookwolf’s steel leg twice.

Everyone turned to face the walking man.

“And here’s our guest now.” Krieg’s smile broadened, and he raised his voice to carry. “Lung! Careful with the flames, yes?”

Cricket and Hookwolf turned to stare at him momentarily.

I didn’t blame them.

The fact that Night and Fog weren’t staring was either proof that they knew what he was up to, or

Misconceptions 5.3
proof that they were just that cold. He fiddled with a radio a moment, then said “Ready, Fenja?”

A burst of static and noise indistinguishable to my swarms’ ears answered.

“Excellent.” He interlaced his fingers, stretched them out before him, shook his hands, squared up to Lung, and gestured upwards, pulling.

Lung launched into a high arcing trajectory, flailing in the air as he went. Fenja, atop her squat cylinder, surged to her full height — but with shield and sword still slung. Little cracks of fire detonated among the E-88 group as Lung passed over, Krieg turning to track him visually, hands making small movements to direct his flight. In the four or five endless seconds that Lung flew through the air, I heard a faint sound through my insects.

Krieg was humming.

Beethoven’s Ode to Joy.

Finally, he shoved both hands to the right, and Lung, some fifty feet above the ground flew toward Fenja. She caught him with both hands, and slammed him down through a hole at her feet, before shutting a hatch over it and twisting the lock.

Krieg turned back to Hookwolf and continued in an unruffled tone. “Do not permit him to gather his strength, and he is just another Brute, no?” He glanced at the squat tower that Fenja was even now leaping off of, waited a few heartbeats, and then smiled again. “Though cunning enough to not activate his flames immediately in a strange situation.” A quick double tap of his radio was answered by another double burst of static, and then a triple.

Gesturing grandly to the south, he spoke. “Shall we adjourn to the biergarten I have rented for the evening? The facility to my left is where they store the bunker fuel left over from when the port was in operation, and at some point either Lung will try his flames… or a breach will be detected, and Victor’s explosives will go off. A sight like that is better enjoyed from a distance, yes?”

“Victor’s with you now?” Almost a snarl.

“Fear not for your wounded Stormtiger. Victor is… not so much with me as against Lung.”
Hookwolf shook himself as he shrunk back down. “You really think that’ll kill him?”

“Oh. As to that, I cannot say.” The smile again, broad beneath the gold-rimmed circles of his sunglasses. “But I am willing to find out! And to try again, as may be necessary.”

Hookwolf nodded, greasy hair spilling over his mask. “You know it looked a lot like you stabbed Kaiser in the back, at the end.” His voice was casual.

“I know you think that of me. Just as I suspect Purity, or whomever her source really is… if there ever were a ‘source’ other than Purity.” Krieg’s hands were behind his back now, and he stood in parade rest.

Fenja jogged up to group, nodding to Hookwolf and Cricket. Cricket nodded back, but Hookwolf never looked away from Krieg.

“Couldn’t figure it. You’re a lot of things, but I never figured you for a traitor. And not her, either.” The same slow, casual, speech.

“Nor am I one. Might we continue this at the biergarten? Victor will have already started transferring additional fuel to that bunker, and the minimum safe distance is only getting larger.”

Victor, here? On site? I began shifting swarms, angling for a look at the man in the office, searching out other places.

“You were always the planner. Why didn’t we try this the first time?” His voice, his body… he could have been discussing the weather. But his eyes! They burned.

Krieg bowed his head briefly. “The Kaiser of honored memory rejected this plan. He sought something more public, more dramatic, more personal… and with less collateral damage. And so I gave him a second plan. And it should have worked!” With the last sentence, Krieg’s voice had risen for the first time I’d heard. “If only Oni Lee had truly been dead, if only we’d been a minute faster in using the crane, if only Kaiser hadn’t been thrown into the air by someone…” His smile now was wider than a human’s mouth should go, and had nothing of joy or happiness in it. “Who will receive their just due in time…”
He sighed, a long gusty exhalation.

Well, Krieg was on my list anyway — the fact that he’d kill or torture me if he could wasn’t really going to move him higher on it. The kind of thoughtful planning he’d just showed would and did, though. Seeing that Lung couldn’t be fought successfully, and seeing how to beat him without fighting… I’d have to learn from that. Krieg wasn’t dangerous because of his power. He was just dangerous.

And if he did manage to kill Lung, that would move him up further, by simple process of elimination.

My insects saw up the white van returning from the south, a dozen blocks away. Krieg’s ride.

Another swarm got a look in through the sole tiny window: the man in the office was indeed Victor. I had felt him, but not recognized him, just as I’d seen Oni Lee and looked right past him the last time the Empire tried to ambush Lung.

Something to work on.

It wasn’t enough to see everything, I had to understand it too. Or I’d keep getting caught out on things like that.

Fine.

So what did I need to understand? The situation was that the Empire had arranged a truly titanic improvised bomb, thankfully in a part of town where few lived. Even so, could I disarm it? I could use my insects at maximum range, probably safely… for me. But the bombs were, per Krieg, set to go off on tamper in order to fail-deadly to Lung.

Maybe. Insects could in smaller places than you might think, Victor was no Tinker, and I was pretty sure standard explosive triggers weren’t designed to resist intelligent swarming insects.

Maybe.
But I wouldn’t bet on it.

Cricket tapped Hookwolf’s shoulder.

He half-turned. “Hear something?”

“Opposite.”

His eyebrows rose.

Mine did too. I checked through my swarms.

Nothing.

Should I detonate it early? Try to catch most of the Empire’s parahumans in the blast?

No. Krieg had picked his position not knowing whether Lung would light up the bunker on being tossed in — he planned for that, and expected to survive it. The only one it would be sure to hit would be Lung, and maybe Victor… and I agreed with Krieg that leaving him out of the fight as long as possible, filling the bunker as much as possible, was the way to go when fighting him.

Even then, it might not be enough.

Victor was isolated, and while he probably could do that ‘kill a fly with your chopsticks’ trick, I was pretty sure he couldn’t effectively fight his own weight in bugs. Or ten times that, if necessary. If I wanted to try and kill him, I didn’t need to set off the bomb.

Should I try to kill him? He was on the list. The Empire he served had done a tremendous amount of harm to the people living here. But… deliberately killing someone, in cold blood would be something new. Bakuda I’d killed in a cold rage. Oni Lee I’d killed in self-defense. Kaiser… Kaiser I’d jostled at a critical moment. But even then, I didn’t know whether he would kill Lung or Lung would kill him.
All the innocents, and the ABB members too, who died when Bakuda’s deadman switch went off… I hadn’t had any idea that I was sentencing them to death when I killed Bakuda.

And yet… I told myself I wouldn’t let things get that far. That I’d cut problems down before they got that bad. Did that mean having to kill in cold blood? Could I restrain him, call in the Protectorate? Force him to disable his own precautions? Or… was that the wrong calculus?

Was the death of Lung well worth the kind of damage this would involve? Should I rejoice, that my foes fought among themselves?

My internal debate was interrupted when Krieg’s white van, one block from the waiting group, launched itself almost straight up, pinwheeling into a nearby building.

What?

A shimmer where it had been, and suddenly there was an enormous monster truck with a cowcatcher sized for Fenja, roaring like a dozen ships’ diesels, and glowing with neon lines of lights everywhere, with two enormous man-shaped figures clinging to the sides. A vaguely man-shaped giant, who looked to be made of sand. Mush? A robot, or man in bulky powered armor. An unknown, but I could guess that he’d hit hard.

It was being conned more than driven, with a large open platform atop it, carrying what looked like cannons… and two people. A man in a cape — not one of the ones who could pull it off. Skidmark. A woman, overweight and underdressed, at what looked like a ship’s wheel and a panel of levers and buttons. Squealer, the Tinker whose singular lack of taste led to… this. And probably to me being blindsided: apparently she could manage an invisibility / inaudibility field if she wanted.

Tinkers.

The truck drove most of the way through the intersection before coming to a stop, Empire capes diving out of the way. The Harley crunched under one of the tires and emerged a crumpled piece of scrap.

I stood, and stepped outside my little hide. Should I try to intervene in the fight? Or consider this chaos success enough? No bystanders that I could sense, really. A few at the very edge of my range.
Skidmark shouted through a microphone. “Steal what’s mine? Pay up, assholes!”

One strand of my attention registered the profanity-laced rant that followed while another noted the quick aside between Krieg and Hookwolf.

“Dead?”

“And quickly. Nearby conflict might revive our first guest.”

Hookwolf nodded in reply, and metal sprang up all about him.

Fenja erupted to her full height, sword snaking out toward the armored man. It glanced off his forearm, and he continued moving toward Night, who was backing up. Fog had already gone gaseous, and was rising, drifting toward the platform. Hookwolf also leapt for it, leaving Krieg alone against Mush, landing on the blue-glowing edge and being launched back off. Cricket… Cricket was moving at a deceptively swift run towards me.

Super-senses of some kind. Probably hearing, from what Hookwolf had said earlier.

Well.

Next time there’s a fight, go for the sensor first. Fighting from range, through my swarms, wasn’t going to do me a lot of good if someone could just find me. Of course, I didn’t remember Cricket’s wiki entry listing her as having superior senses, just very quick reaction times. I had a brief mad vision of trying to update it accordingly and being told that I needed to cite a published reliable source, since original research is deprecated. She was moving more quickly than I could, and my Vespa was a few blocks away.

So… fight it was.

I diverted one of my rooftop swarms to her path, pacing it, and then falling down to engulf her, directed them to sting and bite.

A booming noise sounded out, and I took a moment to focus on the main fight. Fog was attempting
to drift onto Skidmark and Squealer, but being blown back by something. Skidmark’s power at
work? The metal man was methodically slamming Night into the ground. Fenja was flat on her back,
and actually injured. Squealer’s cannons? Hookwolf was ripping at a steadily deflating Mush, who
was flailing ineffectually. And Krieg? Krieg was on his feet and smiling. He reached out both hands
and pulled: Skidmark flew toward the edge of the platform. On reaching the glowing bands of his
own power, he only accelerated. Another pull produced a similar result with Squealer, though the
truck started moving slowly forward and to the right.

Unenhanced humans could survive falls of twenty feet, or indeed considerably more. Sometimes
even if preceded by being flung headfirst into a wall at those speeds. In the middle of combat like
this… neither of them would make it out.

Then I lost resolution, my bugs scattering. Some kind of sound, disorienting them. Centered on…
Cricket.

Wow.

Had she gone out of her way to hide her real powers?

I admired that a little, even as I thought about how, exactly, I was going to go hand to hand with a
pit-fighting veteran and live. Hide? Hope she couldn’t sense and disrupt at the same time? Disrupt
her concentration, and try bugs again? Try to win with tools alone?

While I was thinking about that, my hands dove into my backpack, retrieving the taser and the baton,
which I promptly shook out to its full length.

She rounded the corner and I raised the taser. I couldn’t get the bugs to obey me right now, but I
could still sense them. And that meant that I could mentally draw a perfectly straight line from my
hand to any of the bugs still on her. More: I could use all the bugs on her, refine my targeting. I
aimed to split her beltline — one dart above her belt (if she’d been wearing one); one below — and
fired.

She spun her kamas and knocked the darts out of the air with the blades.

She didn’t even break stride to do so.
So, I guess at least the wiki information about her having inhumanly fast reflexes was accurate.

I dropped the taser, one-shot wonder that it was.

Well. Plan A: ‘don’t get found’ was a bust. Plan B: ‘bugs!’ not working. Plan C: ‘taser’ also no-go. Plan D… working on plan D.

If I got out of this, I was going to have better contingency plans.

I readied my baton, and swung as she closed with me. A sharp impact to my left hand, followed by a series of blows. The good news was that the costume was still knifeproof, and Cricket didn’t have some kind of super-sharp blade power up her sleeve (though at this point, I would not have been surprised). The bad news was that the experience was exactly like being beaten all over with some heavy sticks, by someone strong and vicious.

Sparks flared across my vision as one of my lenses cracked under a particularly heavy blow, and I tried to fall back under her assault.

To buy space, buy time.

She let me, slowing into a slinky walk that was as much performance as gait. I continued crabbing backward, opening the range to just over ten feet while I thought.

Why?

She liked to play with her victims, to play to the crowd. Habits from pit-fighting?

Memories of Sophia, of Emma, of Madison of being someone else’s toy to torture rose up, were discarded in the urgency of the moment. I needed an answer now, and badly. She would disassemble me in close combat. Any ranged attack would be knocked aside. My bugs were useless. No one else was near enough to intervene… and actually, everyone else in the area was an enemy anyway.

Working solo could have issues, apparently.
What did that leave me with?

I scrabbled in my pouches with my working hand. Pepper spray? Range of 5-8 feet. Dodgeable, given her unearthly reflexes. If she could chop taser darts in mid-air…

There. My hand closed round two hard twists of paper, and I stood. She kept to her pace. I threw, and the kamas blurred, slicing the paper apart… and spreading the pepper within.

She burst into a series of uncontrollable sneezes… and my bugs stopped feeling/hearing that disorienting noise. I set the ones on her to biting. I sent the ones on me to join in, as I limpingly jogged past her. She’d dropped to the ground, apparently having difficulty fighting the bugs and the sneezes… but my window wouldn’t last long, and she was unlikely to fall for the same trick twice.

I grabbed the taser, and turned back to Cricket. Three hobbling steps, and I jammed it into the small of her back and pulled the trigger, holding it down while the battery discharged.

Eventually, it ran out, leaving me standing over an unconscious woman.

My precautions against Bitch’s dogs tracking me turned out to be more widely useful than I’d thought.

Fine.

Lesson learned.

Prepare more contingencies.

While I dwelt on that lesson and picked up my baton, my swarms showed a picture of the intersection: the Empire was victorious. The armored man was skating away on what looked like steam-powered roller skates built into his armor, the other Merchants were smears on the ground — literally — and every Empire cape in the intersection looked upright and uninjured. Even Night, who last I saw had been nearly dead. She had healed herself? In that short space of time when I didn’t have eyes on her? She was supposed to be a Changer, so it wasn’t impossible.
I dragged Cricket off the street, handcuffing her to a fencepost. I could call the PRT for pickup later, when half of E88 wasn’t standing there ready for another fight.

Well, the Merchants had been broken tonight. I wasn’t sure why they’d charged in like that, but I couldn’t complain about the results.

I was halfway back to my scooter when a bright light threw my shadow out before me.
I hadn’t slept well, and when I woke to the sound of my alarm I just lay there for minutes.

I felt guilty, and worse: ineffectual.

I set my insects to work, of course, but I didn’t really feel like moving. Even for a hot shower, and that usually helped me shrug off anything. It would definitely make me feel better about all the bruises I’d picked up last night: the black eye was the most spectacular, but I was pretty sure I had a deep bruise on one of my thighs. And my kidneys hurt again. More than the physical pain, though, I was worried about whether there was a way to drive the gangs out without massive collateral damage.

Last night, I’d made a mistake — again — and it had come with a cost.

Again.

Bunker fuel — fuel generally — doesn’t explode. It burns.

Something I’d failed to understand in time.

There’d been an initial boom, as the fireball from the fumes and the first flame burnt off, and few seconds of creaking, cracking, snapping noises as the structure collapsed. Possibly that was when Victor’s explosives went off. After that, there had been a horror show: thick black gunk, on fire, flooding the streets for blocks around, and then a surge as the other bunkers released their contents.

The resulting fire was, technically, still going on.

There had been a lot of fuel left in there when the port was shut down, uneconomical to transport except by tanker ship… and with the approaches to the docks choked off by that container ship the protesters had sunk in place, no way to get something so large in. Abandoned in place, like so much else in or around the docks.

People included.
Maybe Victor had had plans for a balanced fuel air mixture, or maybe he’d thought that immersing Lung in a sea of sticky burning sludge was a better bet than a single massive explosion.

Maybe he hadn’t known enough about what he was doing, either. The fact that he could have any skill he wanted didn’t mean he knew how to use them well… and I was willing to bet he hadn’t been able to find someone with experience in turning a fuel bunkerage into an improvised explosive.

It didn’t change the result.

The Ship’s Graveyard now had an onshore counterpart. The media was still settling on what to call it, but it looked like the leading candidate was the Scar.

Lung hadn’t been seen since, alive or dead but — particularly with the fire still going — that didn’t really mean anything.

This was already being called the biggest non-Endbringer fire in a U.S. city since the Texas City disaster. Casualties had been much lower, thankfully. The area within my power was nearly empty, and quick reactions and distance had been enough to save many. Not all. And the property damage was off the scale. Almost two square miles, burning. It would have been worse if the bay hadn’t bounded it on the east, absorbed a lot of the spilling bunker fuel.

That did mean that a sizable chunk of the bay was on fire right now, but there wasn’t the same fear of it spreading.

The initial rush had been terrifyingly fast… but the compound was large and I’d been blocks away from the chain-link fence surrounding it. All in all, it had taken just over a minute for the flow to reach where I’d parked. I’d had about one hundred and fifty yards to go when the fireball went up, and I’d never run faster in my life. Once out on the road, well… it made for an unforgettable image in my mirrors, but it wasn’t fast enough to catch the Vespa.

I was pretty sure most of E88 had gotten out.

Hookwolf could laugh something like that off, and one of the last things I’d seen from my swarms at the intersection before pulling out of range at maximum speed was Fenja, at her full height, wading through chest-deep burning fuel with her hands above her head, tiny figures cradled high and out from harm. It had been a scene right out of Ragnarok, after Surtr sets the earth aflame.
Trainwreck — I’d looked him up, after getting home — had gotten away well in advance.

Victor… I had no idea. He’d set it up. He must have had contingencies. He still would have been very close to the blast, and to the flood that followed.

Cricket never had a chance.

Was it something I could have stopped? I thought about recognizing Victor earlier, going for him from the start… but no.

Could I have mitigated it? Vista and Clockblocker were getting some major press for their efforts establishing barriers, checking the flow, and Aegis, Browbeat, and Gallant had gotten coverage for their search and rescue efforts: Gallant finding trapped survivors, Aegis and Browbeat doing the heavy lifting.

Maybe I could have helped with search and rescue — the search part of it anyway. I hadn’t thought of it.

At the time, the area around the bunkerage had been clear, and I hadn’t dreamt that it would spread like that.

Next time I’d have to do better.

The only sure way I could see to have prevented this would have been to keep Lung out of the trap… and I’d rather see him dead, if I could manage it. Bakuda had done what she’d done to please him.

I hadn’t forgotten, and I wouldn’t forgive.

In the long run, the only way to prevent something like this… would have been to kill Lung or break the Empire faster. Was this the necessary price? Would it be worth it?
I thought about the kind of harm the gangs had done. The outright assaults. The drugs. The kids, some of whom I’d known, forced into service. The way whole sections of the city were abandoned, written off as unsafe. I thought about weighing all that up against the kind of violence that was bubbling up once the status quo had been disturbed.

But, ultimately, that wasn’t what drove me.

The status quo had been the choice of the gangs.

And they didn’t get to win.

I’d try and prepare better for next time, to get this done more quickly, and more cleanly, but the goal remained: drive the gangs from Brockton Bay.

And that meant getting up, even if I hurt, even if I didn’t want to do it.

So I did.

Coffee didn’t help much.

I ate an omelette, not because I was hungry, but because I knew I needed the fuel. Chewing hurt. Then again, sitting hurt.

I sat at what was becoming ‘my’ table and brooded.

Blocks away and underground, Coil was starting his workday.
He’d positioned a screen over by Dinah sometime since I’d been there last, and when he walked in the door he went straight to her.

“Good morning pet. Chance of problems by lunchtime?”

She blinked, and covered her eyes against the overhead lighting.

“Chance of problems by lunchtime?” His voice sharpened.

“One point five zero eight percent.”

He nodded.

“Then let’s begin again.”

He fiddled with some kind of hand-held control, and the screen brightened.

“Major thinkers or precogs: Accord. Appraiser. Astrologer…”

It was a pretty long list. Some of the names I recognized, most I didn’t.

“Chance that any of these is acting against me?”

“Five point seven six percent.”

He sighed, and fiddled with his controls again.

“Individual S-Class threats: Behemoth, Leviathan, Simurgh, Nilbog, Sleeper, Eidolon, Scion.”
I guess from his perspective, they were as dangerous as it got.

“Chance that any of these is acting against me?”

“Most of these I can’t see. Can’t see them anywhere.”

He nodded.

“The ones you *can* see.”

“Zero point seven nine six percent.”

“Collective major threats: the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Three Blasphemies, the Yangban.”

“Chance that…”

She interrupted him.

“He’s the one.”

More clicking, and the screen flickered once, and then again, before Dinah nodded.

“He’s the one who ends it.”

“Ends what?”

“Everything. Everyone, everywhere — almost. One hundred percent chance, if he lives.”
“When?” Coil’s voice was low and urgent.

“Two years, ten… it changes.”

“If he’s dead first?”

“It still happens, but… later.”

Not the answer I’d been hoping for.

“If he’s captive?”

Coil didn’t believe in giving up. Under the circumstances, I was grateful.

“Still happens. Twelve years.”

Coil turned and paced.

“Fine. Second priority on Jack. First… on living long enough to worry about the apocalypse.”

“Chance of any of these is acting against me?”

“Two point five one five percent.”

He sighed.
“It hurts.”

“One last question, pet. Chance I survive attending the truce meeting at Somer’s Rock?”

I blinked. So James had been right — there would be a truce meeting. And Coil would be out of his base. The timing fit, if I could just…

“Three point four repeating percent.”

He shook his head.

“Candy?”

“Soon, pet. Soon.”

He left her room and returned to his office. Picking up the phone, he called for Mr. Pitter and for his captains again.

This time, he stopped to talk with ‘Pitter’.

“No symptoms you can detect?”

“None, sir.” Pitter was thin and stoop-shouldered, but his eyes and voice were firm as he answered.

“When can she have a full workup conducted?”

“Not sooner than Saturday, sir. Some of the equipment we’d want is heavily booked.” A pause. “I could force a rescheduling, but you’d said…”

“Discretion above all. I remember. Saturday will just have to be soon enough. Watch her. Watch her closely.”
With that, he strode out to see his captains.

The meeting was disappointingly brief.

“Captains — retain your squads at full defensive readiness. A Thinker new to Brockton Bay has targeted us: accordingly, we must present minimal openings. Operations more broadly go well: the Merchants have been extinguished, and the Empire has yet to reunify. We will await our chance. As you were.”

I stayed, but the only useful thing I got from the rest of the morning was confirming that he had his lunch brought at noon precisely — just like yesterday.

The afternoon sunlight glanced off the windows of a low-slung office building on the southern fringes of Downtown.

I squared my shoulders and walked in.

The receptionist sent me to a conference room, and I looked it over, comparing it to the only other one I’d seen recently.

Not quite as sleek, but still nice. A little more worn. A scuff at the corner of the table; a scar where the door had been opened too forcefully. A selection of drinks, and a selection of pastries laid out. Legal pads. Pens. The view was of the hillside sloping away, and the city beyond it. Nice, but not equal to the high-rise view of the bay.

I took a water, a pad and a pen, and sat down. I’d thought about sitting facing the door, but with my power I could tell when someone was coming anyway. Instead, I chose to look at the view.
A tall woman, blonde, well dressed in a pantsuit and self-assured, entered the room and shut the door.

“Ms. Hebert.”

Her handshake was firm, her eyes steady.

I resumed my seat, and she took the one opposite me, laid out a pad and pens, and looked at me.

“I confess, the prospect of a referral from Quinn Calle is… puzzling. I spend too much of my time on my other activities to be the best lawyer I could be. It’s true that I’m local, and there are times that’s of use. He said only that you’d explain.” A tightening around her eyes. “And I can certainly understand a desire for confidentiality, given your history.”

I nodded.

“Mrs. Dallon, I’m not actually here for your services as a lawyer…”

“Then you’ve abused my trust.” Her voice was firm, her brow furrowed.

“Please. Do you know Dinah Alcott?”

She paused, halfway up to standing, and sat back down.

“I know the Alcotts to say hello to. Nothing more. I know she’s missing.”

“Kidnapped, held, drugged… and to be moved Saturday.” I placed my palms flat on the table before me, the legal pad between them, and smiled as calmly as I could.

“So why go through this rigamarole? An appointment under a false name, the real one told to me in a personal visit by your lawyer…”
“The man who holds her has infiltrated the PRT.”

That rocked her back. Literally: the chair she was sitting on tilted back a moment.

“What?”

“Coil is Thomas Calvert. And he is a Thinker of some real power. He has arranged for an extra Endbringer shelter beneath the Heritage Insurance Tower, and filled it with armed mercenaries.”

She blinked, rapidly.

“I’ve met him — you…”

“Please.”

She paused, gathering herself.

“I’ll need to know details. Like the source of your information…”

“Personal inspection.”

That stopped her cold, and she eyed me again.

“You work for him?”

I blinked. Shook my head.

“No. My power…”
She nodded.

“A Stranger, then. And a strong one.”

I shrugged. Not so far from the truth, some ways. And Cricket had taught me a painful lesson on the value of keeping your powers hidden. Not that I had other powers, but I might keep people looking for a different power than the one I did.

“I owe your daughter a debt. I’m not sure taking her family into Coil’s lair is the right response…”

“… but you can’t see another choice.”

“No.”

She bowed her head for a moment, then brought it up. Her eyes were as steady as before, but a new intensity danced in them.

“We’ll have to plan this out.”

The internet had helpfully provided a listing for Somer’s Rock, a bar in a run-down part of the Docks.

Far enough away from the actual docks that it wasn’t on fire.

I found another bar, walked in, and took a table. The food didn’t look to be fantastic, but it would be hot… and filling.
I looked to be a third of the average age, and nearly the only female. I felt a little nervous about it until the broadest of the men, a man with a beard wider than my shoulders spent an uncomfortable ten seconds staring at me, before turning away and speaking in a voice like distant thunder. Whatever he said rippled through the crowd, and they left me to myself.

Did he know me?

Did I know him?

I set the thought aside, and ordered a shepherd’s pie, my mind a block and a half away, in almost totally deserted and even seedier bar, where several tables had been pushed together to form a single large one.

Krieg and Hookwolf were already there, sitting next to each other. Had they made up? I gathered more insects, and listened in.

“It’s not her style, and not her power.” Hookwolf sprawled in a chair as if he owned the bar, comfortable in a way I’d never seen him.

Krieg’s hat was tall enough that it should have looked ridiculous — the whole leather-and-skulls Nazi motif should have — but he pulled it off.

“You know she can control the direction of her lasers, the kinetic force they transfer.”

I thought back to my first encounter with Purity, when she’d cracked concrete without cracking spines.

“What you do not know is that the Kaiser was considering taking custody of their child, at last.”

I blinked. Purity had a child with Kaiser? No wonder she had issues with fighting Empire Eighty Eight.

And they were just discussing this in the open?
Hookwolf was nodding slowly when the waitress came by with a pad on which they scrawled orders—beer, in both cases. Was she deaf? That would explain their comfort in just talking.

“Not that the beer here will be worthy of the name.” Krieg’s voice was light.

Hookwolf snorted.

Their discussion turned to some longstanding argument over Krieg’s beer snobbery while I thought furiously. Purity, taking the blame for Kaiser’s death? Because, in part, she couldn’t point to her ‘source’ for information?

I owed her for her help with Bakuda. And I owed her a chance to go straight—or at least vigilante. On the other hand, even in costume, walking into that meeting was… well, risky was the politest way to put it.

*Stupid* would have been accurate too.

I turned options over in my mind.

My bugs on the roof picked up a rapidly falling star. Well, there goes the attempt to keep her out. Which might have only made things worse in the end anyway.

Purity walked through the door without a hitch in her stride and took her own seat, head inclining to the other two.

Behind her came the Undersiders—Grue took a seat at the table while the others filed off toward a corner booth.

A colorful group—literally, in the case of the man with bright orange skin and a tail—was next. Faultline’s crew, I thought. The woman herself paused to look at Tattletale before taking a seat at the table; her associates took another booth.
Behind them came Coil, alone and without backup, who promptly took a seat at the table. I felt through the neighbourhood: no snipers on rooftops, no vans filled with mercenaries.

I blinked.

That made no sense.

Absently, I turned and thanked the waitress handing me dinner while I thought. I had heard that prediction myself. If he came to this meeting, he had a 96%+ chance of dying! He might think that something was off with Dinah’s predictions, but this was still an extraordinary risk to take. What kind of power did he have, to do this? Was ‘he’ a body double? I gathered swarms all about the building, thought about ambushing ‘him’ as he exited, thought of the afternoon’s planning… and decided to wait.

A troupe of strangers came next. Fancy costumes, professional looking. The four-armed hairless gorilla walking with them drew the most attention, and I felt an idea niggling at me, but I focused my attention on their leader in mask, top hat, and formalwear. I’d seen it before once, on a mannequin. He introduced himself as ‘Trickster’, claimed he was visiting, and took a seat at the main table… but all I could think was four more capes who serve Coil.

Fuck.

Well, that answered the question of where his backup was… if that even were ‘him.’

At this point I was betting body double and some kind of reverse trap to find out who was after him.

I chewed mechanically while I thought. Four? Was he already beginning his recruiting? Was an assault on his base only going to end in more destruction? While I was focusing on how, exactly, I was going to deal with the growing Coil empire, my bugs alerted me to another arrival.

Lung.

He walked through the door and stood there a moment, smiling — or maybe baring his teeth — while every conversation stopped dead.
He looked *awful*, with no hair, burn scars all over and blisters which occasionally popped to ooze a clear fluid. On the other hand, for someone who’d been dropped into a sea of fuel which had then been set on *fire*, he looked… alive.

He locked gazes with Krieg, still smiling, and tilted his head slightly to the left. Then he walked straight to the other end of the table and sat there, lounging magnificently.

Coil was the first to speak. “Now that we’re all here…”

I knew my cue.

I took all the swarms I’d massed around the building when I’d been thinking of trying for Coil, clumped them together into something vaguely humanoid, and shuffled through the door.

The reactions were mostly surprise.

Krieg steepled his hands and spoke. “The use of one’s powers on truce-ground is a breach.”

The words hung there a moment.

‘I’ shrugged, and spoke with a chorus of chittering buzzes. “The gorilla-ish one and the orange one are permitted.”

At that, his head tilted slightly, and glances were exchanged among all those already at the table. He nodded, and the tension lessened… and then ramped up again as I moved toward the last seat at the main table, between Faultline and Purity.

Hookwolf slammed a fist down on the table. “This is the big boy’s table. Take a booth.”

I rotated the swarm slightly to face him, setting up a counterrotation within the body. “Lung will vouch for me.”

At that, he coughed. A strangled laugh? Choking in surprise?
“The first time we fought, I took his manhood. The second, the hand he’d use to touch it.”

Lung’s smile was growing real now. He flexed his right hand, turned it to inspect his fingernails.

“I heal.”

“Or ask Bakuda or Oni Lee. If you can get Glaistig Uaine out of the Birdcage to ask them for you.”

Lung’s eyes glittered as he rumbled “Or Kaiser.”

I’d just as soon keep the Empire focused on Lung for that, rather than blaming me… or Purity.

The column of bugs dipped in what I hoped looked like a nod.

“I told you where to find Kaiser, just as I told Purity where the Empire could find you.”

“Because you thought you couldn’t beat me.” His smile was vicious and playful.

“You’re hard to kill.” I tried for a shrug. “So far.”

“I will kill you.” His voice caressed every word.

“Not here, and not tonight.”

He snorted, but tossed his head upward in agreement.

Again I moved my swarm toward the chair, and this time no one objected. James’ advice about rep had held true, as had Quinn’s advice about disrupting expectations. Undersiders aside, the only ones who even knew I existed were Lung and Purity… and with Lung confirming my fights with him —
and kills — that ignorance only magnified my reputation.

Living up to it would be a challenge, if I had to keep this up for any length of time... but so far so good. With luck, the revelation that she did indeed have a source who wasn’t Lung should keep Krieg and Hookwolf from targeting Purity. And Lung, with his openly murderous intentions toward me might have discouraged them from fingerling me as the mysterious help Lung had had in his fight with Kaiser.

Maybe.

At least if they went looking for me, they’d be looking for someone with an insect body, or possibly a Changer.

Possibly.

Besides, when you got right down to it, I had contributed directly to Kaiser’s death. Better that the consequences fall on me than Purity, particularly since there was a child involved.

Coil’s voice rose again. “If that’s everyone? The topic for tonight is publicity. This much is bad news... for everyone.”

Nods all around the table.

“The worst offenders have been the ABB... though I understand we have the Empire to thank for last night’s fire? Krieg?”

Krieg smiled easily. “Lung is indeed a difficult beast to kill, Herr Coil. You will understand that we must keep trying, yes?”

Lung snorted.

“But must you try so dramatically?”
Faultline chimed in. “It causes problems for all of us. And…” a jerk of her head toward Lung’s end of the table “it didn’t work.”

“Frau Faultline, you speak truth. And we will indeed endeavour to keep it quieter on our next attempt.” He spread his hands. “There. Is there any further business?”

Coil’s voice was calm, even if his words weren’t. “Krieg, you cannot think that dismissing the problem so quickly will solve anything. Nor, with your internal disputes, can you afford to face the rest of us, if it comes to that.”

“No? Hookwolf and I have resolved our differences.” Hookwolf, grinning in a near snarl, clapped Krieg on the back hard enough that he paused to readjust his glasses.

“And with the, ah, eradication of the Merchants last night, I believe Purity is free to look for new targets.”

Silent still, she took a moment and then nodded.

“And Frau Faultline will not wage war for free, yes?”

Her voice was warm. “As long as you don’t make peace more expensive still, Herr Krieg.”

Krieg clapped his hands. “So! Herr Coil, you stand alone in this, if stand for this you still do. Unless our guest, or newer members would like to weigh in?”

Trickster, feet on the table, spoke “I’m just here to get a sense of the city. No reason to pick a fight, either way. Quiet would be nice, though.”

Grue, voice echoing impossibly through his power, followed up. “Less heat would be better all round. But I won’t go to war alone.”

‘I’ shook ‘my’ head.
“Then I believe our business for the night is done, yes?”

Coil couldn’t — or perhaps simply wouldn’t — push it further. He nodded.

Faultline stood, and as she passed behind ‘me’ I felt a small card slipped into the swarm.

Something for later.

No disaster. No fight. And no one had even attacked Coil, either, which had me thinking about those predictions.

But for now… for now I’d call surviving that a night, and go to bed early.

After all, I had a big day planned for tomorrow.
I woke early, well before dawn, set my insects to their day’s work. I hurt just as much as yesterday — more, if anything — but it didn’t hold me down the same way.

Yesterday was past.

Today?

Today, I had work to do.

I looked at my costume — the armor was still intact, but the lens was still cracked. I pulled it on anyway. I’d have to fix that tomorrow. And get spares: no point getting caught out this way again. Actually, I could stand to stock a lot of other things: food, water, crafting supplies, defensive tools (I had only had one spare battery for the taser). I hadn’t really furnished the place yet, and I’d hardly even begun to address the apartment in the city. Hadn’t imported the bugs I wanted. Hadn’t even identified half of the ones I could use!

So much to do.

Faultline’s card had just had an address, a number, and a single line: “There are others like you. Would you like to know more?”

I’d copied the information on it, and left the card itself in a dumpster — probably no tracking device involved, but why risk it?

Something to address later.

It would be interesting to meet her, and her people. Her reputation was one of competence, the kind of ‘working smooth’ that Grue had probably modeled the Undersiders on. Pretty much the opposite end of the villain scale from the gangs, and verging on rogue territory. I wasn’t even sure if she did heists for herself, or only for her clients… and she’d take legitimate jobs too.

I repacked my utility compartment, making new pepper bombs to replace the ones I’d used on
Cricket. I set new darts and a new CO2 cartridge in the taser, then replaced the battery. Tested it. It crackled nicely. I checked charge on my several phones, adding one I’d never used before. There’d been a text from Tattletale on my ‘villain’ phone while I was asleep, asking for a meeting soonest.

I thought about my plans for the day, shrugged, and texted back “Nine?” while I filled every carrying space I had with the most dangerous bugs I had.

I could fit her in before things got too crazy. It would be nice to see a friend.

And, behind all my plans for the future was the thought I’d been avoiding. Depending on how things went, there might not be a later.

...........

Another breakfast at my table, light this time. A bagel, and some cream cheese. Had to save room for seeing Lisa.

Coil was as punctual as ever.

“Chance of trouble by lunchtime?”

Dinah was rocking back and forth, knees clasped to her chest. It didn’t look like she’d slept. Stress?

“Too many questions. It hurts.”

He nodded.

“Pet, it’s necessary. There’s someone out there hunting me. Hunting us. And if it comes down to it, I’ll take away your candy.”
She twitched at that, a full-body shiver.

My hand clenched around my napkin.

“Chance of trouble by lunchtime?”

“Zero point three seven seven percent.”

He nodded, and turned to the screen. He clicked his controller, and it brightened.

“Chance that this person is working against me today?”

“That’s not a person, that’s… what is that?”

“He — or she — goes by Skitter. And not all capes look human. Chance of anyone looking like that working against me today?”

“Zero point seven nine four percent chance.”

He sighed.

I sighed.

That, right there, was the best argument for concealing my identity I could imagine. A bullet dodged. And one I could have seen coming — I knew he used pictures to prime her for his questions, and I hadn’t even thought about it before walking into that meeting! But I didn’t really look like that, did I?

Three lessons learned. One, I wasn’t prepared enough. I’d have to try and fix that. Two, routine precautions matter. Three, it’s not what you don’t know…

Another click, and the screen flickered.
“Chance that Cauldron is working against me?”

“Zero point three eight seven percent.”

Cauldron? I’d never heard of them, but if they were in the weight class of the other threats he’d discussed… I’d have to fix that.

Later.

“Major Trumps…”

I half-tuned out the list. That exchange earlier settled the question of why, exactly, he kept her drugged. It wasn’t just to mitigate the headaches that went with her power. It was to control her, too. Could be worse, too: I wondered if there was any difference between making a credible threat to a precog of her caliber and carrying it out. But… his power, whatever it was, had been strong enough to capture her.

How do you catch a precog off guard? A question with some pressing and practical applications for me at the moment.

I was hoping that knowing the questions he was asking — and the answers he was getting — would be enough.

Either way, it wouldn’t be long now.

If things went well, she wouldn’t have to endure any more of this. If they went badly… well, I’d gone to war with Brutes and Shakers before. A Thinker might be more dangerous, but… if in doubt?

More bees.
Lisa walked through the door and waved at the barista. She knew the place?

She took a seat across from me and glanced at my face, her almost universal half-smirk vanishing for a moment.

“Black eye.”

I nodded. “Cricket.”

“Empire problems?”

I thought about whether they’d be coming for me… but if they did, it wouldn’t be on Cricket’s account.

“Don’t think so. She didn’t make it out of that fire.”

Lisa’s left eye twitched.

“But you did.”

I nodded.

A pause while we ordered — waffles and hot chocolate for both of us — and she looked at me again.

“You’re taking risks.”

I nodded.
“I try to minimize them, but this isn’t exactly a safe job.”

She sat back, looking me over.

“You could sit back. Enjoy life. Most people get a little less active after they buy their farm.”

I thought about it. A veiled warning that I could die? I knew that. There were worse things than death, I suppose. It was my last hope of seeing my family again. And, whatever my thoughts on it, it might be taken out of my hands entirely by one of the villains. It was true: I could die any day now.

But not while I had work to do.

I looked her in the eye.

“I can relax when I’m done.”

She held my gaze for a long moment, broken by the delivery of our breakfast.

I went for butter and syrup on mine; Lisa liked strawberries and whipped cream instead.

Halfway through my first waffle, I broke the silence. “That was the urgency? Seeing me after I crashed the truce meeting?”

She waggled a hand. “Half of it. That stunt you pulled has people buzzing.” She grinned. “Pun intended. Someone mean enough to fight Lung and subtle enough to evade notice until now… there’s a lot of rumors on the street right now.”

“Any I should worry about?” I took another bite.

Another hand-waggle. “Not really, not yet. Lung wanted you dead anyway, and the Empire is more concerned about Purity’s faction, and what will become of Victor’s, though it really does seem like
the Empire’s pulled itself back together. Hookwolf and Krieg together? The rest will fall in line.”

I chewed. Swallowed. More work for later, then.

She studied me a moment. “It was for Purity?”

I nodded. “Krieg thought — thinks? — that she worked with Lung to set up Kaiser. Part of that was that no one had ever heard of her ‘source.’ ”

She hadn’t been taking my calls, but I really couldn’t blame her. Separated, divorced, whatever the situation had been — and it had been bad enough that Kaiser had plans to use the child as leverage — I’d killed the father of her child, and in a way that might leave her feeling responsible.

That wasn’t something that you got over easily.

I knew.

How much of what I was doing, was I doing in the memory of my father? To make his empty grave a monument, a marker for the moment when the future of this city changed?

I looked up again. “I owe her for the hunt for Bakuda. Letting her, her kid, take the blame for something I did… would have been a poor way to repay that debt.”

Lisa shook her head. “Still risky.”

“Had to be done. Other rumors?”

“The Merchants are gone” — she paused to smirk at me — “but I guess you’d know about that already.”

I took another bite rather than answer.
“And Coil? Well that brings me to the other reason I’d asked to see you — besides the chance to share waffles. He doesn’t really care about you right now. He’s convinced there’s some new heavyweight Thinker in town, and has offered some real money to anyone who can put a name to his nightmare.”

She paused to spread some more whipped cream on her waffles. “Which makes a change from his usual superiority schtick. You’ve been pretty well-informed, lately. I didn’t think you’d finger a hero — but I can tell you, whoever they are, they’re not Protectorate — and I did think you might enjoy a chance to set one villain against another… and get paid handsomely for it.”

I thought about it, about Coil’s concerns, about my own suspicions about what was going on with Dinah’s predictions, about Tattletale doing contract work — or more? — for Coil. But ultimately, it was easiest to just tell the truth. Besides, while I still didn’t know what Lisa’s power did, the name practically screamed ‘don’t try to lie to her.’

“A couple of the E88 villains came out of retirement for the civil war, but I don’t think any of them are Thinkers. And I don’t know of any new villains who’ve come to town, besides the Travelers.”

Who worked for Coil anyway. Well, at the very least, their leader worked for Coil. So, probably not a mystery he wouldn’t have already checked.

She smiled a moment, and then nodded, stretching her arms above her head.

“Say, I’ve been thinking about going shopping today. You want to come? Make a girl’s day out of it?”

I tilted my head. That was the kind of thing you did with friends, normally, wasn’t it? It had been… a very long time.

I nodded. “Sometime after lunch. In the afternoon, maybe?”

Her grin sharpened, then softened into a smile. “I’ll see you then. And if I’m not shopping now, then I’ve got some work to get out of the way.”

She set down a couple of bills, tipping generously.
When I protested, she simply said that “I called the meeting. Next time, you can get it.”

I settled back into my seat and waited.

A quarter to noon.

I checked my phones, rechecked my sense of the people within Coil’s base. Thought about what would need to be done. Thought about it going wrong.

I started, and grabbed my ‘civilian’ phone, speed dialing 1.

“Quinn Calle.”

“It’s Taylor. This is important. If, for some reason, I can’t make our next meeting… tell the Protectorate: if Jack Slash lives, most of humanity dies within the next decade. Probably within the next two years. If Dinah makes it, have them ask her for details.”

“Understood.” His voice was the same even, unruffled, tone he always used.

I envied him that calm.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”
I hung up.

Twelve more minutes. I began concentrating swarms. I’d kept them to the minimums I needed to sense, until now, with others hidden between the walls, or in the vents. No sense risking early discovery. Now? Now I needed to have punch where it might help. I focused on areas where I might need to intervene: Dinah’s room. The ceiling above the bottleneck. The back ways out.

Places where I could stop him from taking a hostage, or making an escape. The mercenaries weren’t the target: they were just in the way.

The base had two main entrances — one for small groups, and quite discreet, and another much larger one that looked to be for delivery or construction vehicles — but both bottlenecked shortly afterward. I hadn’t studied infantry tactics, but that long hallway, with sandbags piled at one end and very large gun mounted pointing over it… well, it looked like they planned to hold that corridor.

There was a back way out from his office, which led into the municipal sewer system, but I’d take care of that. Spider silk could be extraordinarily tough, and that of my spiders seemed tougher than usual. I wasn’t quite sure why, but I suspected it was the same reason the honeybees appeared to harvest pollen more efficiently when I directed them: my power provided… guidance. Whatever the source, I was glad of the result.

Right now, it meant that that emergency exit was going to be shut tight. It could be opened… but it would probably be easier to just go through the wall instead. And if he did that? Well, there were a lot of insects in the sewers. I wasn’t sure how much good they’d do against someone who could walk through walls the hard way, but I’d find out.

Ten minutes to go.

The guards were on their normal rounds, with most sleeping in their barracks. Coil had apparently decided that 48 straight hours of high alert was enough, and had stood down to normal amounts this morning. None of the Travelers were present.

I wasn’t complaining.

Coil was still in his office. The phone rang — a rare occurrence. Generally, he called people, not the other way around.
“Yes, Tattletale?”

My heart froze.

“Yes?”

Fuck.

Fuck.

No time for that. I grabbed the as yet unused phone, flipped through my notebook.

“This is a soft target, considering your skills. You shouldn’t need my support.”

I paused, the number Brandish had given me half-dialed.

“Indications within the Protectorate of increased patrols?”

No way to hear the other side of that conversation.

“I’ll remind you that you work to my schedule, and that being kept on standby for two days is nothing more than earning your retainer, even if it makes the job harder. The Travelers should provide ample distraction.”

He paused, listening. Nodded once. Twice.

He looked at the clock on his wall, considered it a moment.

“Very well. Go in… now.”
Huh.

I’d figure that out later, there were barely six minutes till noon!

I dialed.

“Brandish here.”

“I’m here. He’s in his office. Guards are at half-strength from yesterday — same number in the base, but more in the barracks and less on post. Straight up fifty-percent reduction across the board. No capes visible, aside from Coil and Dinah.”

“Go.” A pause. “We’re moving. Target’s dropped security levels…”

She must be wearing a headset. I turned my attention outward, keeping a corner of it focused on the base.

There!

A white panel van (the choice of villains and heroes alike, apparently) turned the corner and entered the parking garage for the Heritage Insurance Tower, circled round to the lowest parking level, skirted the orange cones blocking off the lowest level, and came to a stop near a corner. The driver climbed into the back, trading a uniform and a baseball cap for a green on white costume. Eight parahumans were in that van, a significant concentration of force by anyone’s standards.

Noon.

“Ready?”

“Ready.” There was an odd sense of echo, hearing the response through my phone and through my insects both.

Coil’s lunch came through the door, borne by Mr. Pitter on a tray.
Chicken Caesar salad today, apparently. Sparkling water.

I waited for the tray to be deposited on his desk before I said “Go.”

Seven parahumans piled out, only four of them bothering to walk. Manpower led the way through the small room, into the cage behind the electrical equipment

Panacea remained behind, alone. I wondered at that — was she just too valuable to risk? Was she incapable of healing herself as she healed others? Was she simply incapable of fighting?

It couldn’t be that last. “The dose makes the poison” was one of the most ancient principles of medicine, and she had a power of astounding scope and flexibility. Whatever she did, doing enough more of it would have to be deadly. And if she had the fine control to match her power (and rumor said she did) then she could kill with a touch as easily — more easily — than she could heal.

Maybe that was why she didn’t fight. I could respect that kind of dedication.

The guards at the main entrance fell almost immediately.

Maybe if the vault door had been shut… they were, after all, very well trained. Good training meant that, with no alarm given, they went from complete surprise to having put a three round burst each into Manpower’s chest before he reached them.

More than enough to stop any human in their tracks, even if it didn’t kill them.

Not nearly enough to stop a Brute. He was on them and they were down, limbs cleanly broken.

I guess if you’re assaulting a base of highly trained mercenaries and you have Panacea on tap, you could go for faster incapacitations than normal.

I felt through the base, noted reactions. The guards at the chokepoint — four in number, two on the heavy gun — were looking down it. One was reaching for his radio.
"They heard that. No alarm yet."

I could hear Brandish repeating my words.

New Wave came up on the corridor chokepoint and paused. Globes of light grew in Flashbang’s hands. He nodded, once, and threw them down the corridor. They bounced like rubber balls, ping-ponging across it before they reached the guards… and burst, throwing all of them down. A third bouncing orb, larger than the rest, and hurled by Manpower turned back into Brandish on arrival, who manifested what looked like lightsabers. Right down to the ability to amputate a hand, which she demonstrated on one who went for a holdout weapon. Lady Photon was only seconds behind her, fist glowing with light, and Manpower led the rest of the team to join them.

The mercenaries here too were promptly incapacitated.

Less than a minute from exiting the van.

I hadn’t seen the kids fight yet, but the adults were more than competent.

Skilled, as anyone who lasted more than a decade at this had to be.

Practiced, with the kind of teamwork that showed just as many years of fighting alongside each other.

They’d taken the maps I’d given them, the descriptions of guard rota, the security assessment he’d had on them (it could be summed up as “dangerous in a straight fight; would have to be handed one gift-wrapped”), and turned it into a tactical plan… which they’d just executed as if they’d practiced it a dozen times before.

It was easy to forget — the bright white costumes, gradient-fill emblems, and tiaras (for the women) made it easy — that there had been a time when New Wave had seemed like the natural successors to the Triumvirate. Not in raw power, but just as the Triumvirate (in that lost, golden age when they numbered four) heralded the rise of the Protectorate, the unmasked families of New Wave had seemed to be a new way in truth, a new model for the caped community. And if they didn’t have the sheer power of the Triumvirate, they’d still lasted years with public identities, open targets for every villain they’d ever fought, with only a single death among their number.
The Triumvirate themselves had done no better, for all their titanic power.

A strand of my attention twitched. The two in the security room were beginning to react.

“The security room has seen you.”

“Glory Girl, go.” She rocketed by as Brandish moved down the corridor at a jog. “Our friendly Stranger reports that the alarm’s probably about to go off. Same plan, just faster, ok?”

Nods all round, and Laserdream accelerated away, followed by Manpower and Flashbang at the best pace they could set.

The alarm was loud, more like an Endbringer alarm than anything else — perhaps repurposed from one.

Coil jolted upright from his desk; Dinah curled into a ball and hid beneath her bed, in a corner behind the door. He moved toward her room and I readied the swarms I had on the ceilings there: if he tried to take her hostage, I’d take him down first and worry about the consequences later. But three steps away he paused, and turned away.

Had he sensed me? Why now, and not before?

“He’s not moving to take her hostage yet. I’ve got her covered if he does.”

Glory Girl had reached the security room, and she simply smashed through the door, pinning one to the wall before picking the other up and slamming back into the wall. I had to wonder if that was a skull fracture… but either way, they were both out. She made a slower return to the chokepoint and floated there, arms crossed, barring any exit.

Coil paused a moment, locked the door to his office, and went back to his desk, and picked up the phone.
No answer.

“Trickster? The base is under assault.”

I followed his conversation. “Coil’s calling for support — the Travellers.”

“How soon?” Brandish’s breath came in the metronome-regular breaths of an athlete.

“Don’t know. I’ll be able to give you warning when they get here.” I thought about the general area, as insects surged to lay down a wider network. “At least a minute of warning, maybe more.”

“Then we’ll just… have to be… faster.” Again she turned into that ball of light, and Lady Photon grabbed her and increased the speed of her flight.

Coil was dialing again.

No response.

The barracks spilled into a hive of activity at the sound of the alarm, people waking and going for their weapons. Laserdream, floating near the ceiling, poked her head into the doorway and unleashed a stream of independent lasers so dense they looked like jellyfish tentacles, flailing across the room and scourging the soldiers within. Again, their training was good, and a brief hail of shots poured through the doorway — most far too low to reach her. A stray or lucky pair of shots did pop her forcefield, and she pulled out of view for a moment.

A buzz from my backpack. My ‘villain’ phone. I ignored it.

What remained in the barracks was smoking devastation: if no one was dead, it was by her skill and mercy both. Even by the time Manpower and Flashbang caught up with her and took the door, none were stirring. Those still conscious had apparently chosen the better part of valor. The three heroes began a cautious room-clearing procedure, working their way through the kitchen, storerooms, and other parts of this section of the base.

Shielder broke off toward the vault, jogged forward far enough to see it, and simply set up a
forcefield blocking the entire corridor off. The two soldiers guarding the vault emptied their clips into it without visible effect — he was living up to his name.

Brandish had agreed with me that, whoever or whatever was in there, the time to find out was not in the middle of an assault.

Another buzz from my backpack.

Lady Photon flew into the anteroom before Coil’s office, took several shots to the forcefield, and replied with lasers; Brandish transformed back. They began to hunt for some way to open it.

I was starting to understand why the PRT, and the nations generally, had abandoned efforts at fighting capes with armed forces. Given surprise or overwhelming force, it wasn’t futile. Let the capes have either advantage, let alone both, and you had a one-sided slaughter. The mercenaries hadn’t even had the odds with them: thirty in the base, but only eight on duty to face the seven heroes.

Coil blinked. “The secret exits too?”

I checked my swarms. Still undisturbed. How the hell had he found out about that?

He steepled his fingers a moment.

“Surrender?”

He rose and went to the massive vault door that guarded his office reached out as if to open it… and then turned away.

“Or revenge?”

He returned to his desk and began typing.

“New Wave?” His voice was incredulous.
Could he access the surveillance system from there?

He removed a pistol from a drawer, and set it on his desk.

“He’s identified you. Armed with a handgun.”

A grunt was my only answer from Brandish: she was too busy trying to carve a hole in the vault door with a long blade that looked like it had been cut from a bolt of lightning. I’d give Coil this much credit — he bought vault doors Lady Photon couldn’t just blast through.

A buzz from my backpack. I took out the phone, looked at it. Another text. “Pick up. Life or death. T”

I muted the line on one phone, and called Tattletale on the other.

“This is not the best…”

“Coil has to die.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“If he gets out of his base alive, he will kill the both of us. And probably all of New Wave.”

“What?!”

“His power. He’s a strong Thinker, in some ways the strongest I’ve seen. He took Dinah, hell — he took me. All he needs is time to think and a tiny chance, and he can make it happen!”
“We’ll have to talk.”

“Fine — when we’re shopping! But he can’t leave alive.”

Did I trust Tattletale? In some ways not at all. She was a villain.

In other ways… when I was at my lowest, she’d reached out to me, with no reasonable hope of reward.

Did I trust her? If she’d been working for him, he might give testimony against her… I wasn’t sure.

I was sure that I owed her, and extending her the benefit of the doubt wasn’t half the debt.

Fine.

I thought about it. I could try to talk New Wave into it.

If they didn’t agree? Could I kill Coil, in cold blood? Knowing that he’d kidnapped and killed? Believing that he’d do more, that a PRT prison couldn’t hold Thinker who’d infiltrated the PRT?

I still had swarms positioned at the chokepoint, he’d have to come past there. If they didn’t agree…

Then I would see him dead. Panacea was near, but she couldn’t raise the dead and she didn’t do brains. The fastest way would probably be through the eyes… but safest to try all the approaches simultaneously.

I thought back to what he’d said. Revenge.

“If he didn’t have a chance to escape, would he try to take everyone with him?”

“Shit. Yes.”
“How?”

“How?”

“Self-destruct, probably. Or Noelle.”

A mad joke ran through my head: ‘a self-destruct going off when the villain died? This really was a Bond-villain base.’

“Noelle?”

“Noelle?”

“She’s in the vault.”

“On it.”

I hung up on Tattletale — and we were going to have words, later — and unmuted the other phone.

“Brandish? It looks like he may be trying to take you with him. Just found out there’s a self-destruct.”

“Self-destruct? Earlier would have been nice.” She had most of a doorway carved out.

“Didn’t know about it earlier.”

“Fine. GG! Get over here! Everyone, our friendly Stranger has just informed me about a self-destruct. We’re getting Dinah out fast, along with Coil, and we’re leaving. The PRT can send in bomb techs afterward.”

The seconds while Glory Girl rocketed through the corridors were long indeed. I thought about mentioning Noelle, but her door was still locked… and the correct response would be the same anyway.

Fire alarms are a even easier to pull than deadbolts. I had a swarm set off the fire alarm for the tower
above. ‘Self-destruct’ could mean anything from ‘room-clearing charges’ to ‘hole in the ground.’

On arrival, Glory Girl began slamming into the door outline, pausing for a second to fly back in between charges. On the fifth one it crumpled into the room. Gunshots rang out — Coil’s accuracy was impressive. But with Lady Photon there, forewarned, he only hit force-field. Which was odd… wasn’t Glory Girl invulnerable? Then again, probably hard to let your niece get shot, even if she can take it. All three heroines entered, Lady Photon breaking left and into Dinah’s room. A moment more, and she had the girl in her arms and was flying for the exit; Glory Girl and Brandish remained, backing the villain up against the back wall.

“Surrender?” Brandish’s voice was calm; the way her weapon crackled in her hands, forming jagged edges, wasn’t.

“Tried that.” Coil’s voice was as calm as ever.

What? When?

“Afraid I’d rather you kill me. Quicker.”

She nodded, and decapitated him.

A vast and furious roar rose up.

“I recommend leaving now.”

Brandish paused to vanish her weapon. “Don’t intend to leave you behind, Stranger.”

“I’m clear. Go!”

I was sitting in a cafe almost half a mile away. I was fine.

They, on the other hand, were trapped in a base with whatever Noelle was… and a lot of explosives. And a bunch of incapacitated mercenaries.
Flight lets you *really move* when you need to. Even Shielder took to the air. Panacea moved up to the driver seat of the van, and had it running for when they got there.

They were two blocks clear by the time I felt the first explosives go off, and the tower was largely evacuated.

At the time, I even thought that was the end of it.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, Bully047

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed.
- Ten posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history.
- Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

You have zero infractions and three warnings. You have never been banned.

♦

Topic: The Endbringers, Thread XXXII

In: Boards ► World News ► Main

Lasersmile (Original Poster)

Posted on May 1st, 2011:

Starting a new topic because the last one hit post limit.


The Simurgh attacked Canberra, Australia on February 24th, 2011. Thread here.

Estimated time for next attack is May 17th, 2011. This time is not exact, and is likely to deviate by as much as 15 days.

Official speculation points to the North Atlantic as the next likely target.

(Showing page 9 of 9)
Answer Key

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

Anyone think they’re coming for Boston? Big coastal city, not yet hit by any of them… I’m thinking Leviathan.

Could be ugly.

Miss Mercury (Protectorate Employee)

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

They’re all ugly. We’re gearing up to hold the line anyway, same as always.

One of these times, we’ll have a new cape, or a Tinker will crack the puzzle.

Until then, we do our job.

♂

Laser Augment

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

Boston would be ugly?

Brockton Bay would be worse. Have you seen what’s going on here?

Answer Key

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

At this point, would anyone notice if an Endbringer did hit BB?

/jk

End of Page.
Look, there's something interesting going on almost everywhere. And, when that something involves capes, I try to find out. It's what I do. Look at my badges. And watching a lot of television, surfing the internet, and out-and-out asking sources usually does the trick.

But sometimes, I just can't make the pieces fit together. Maybe I'm missing a piece, or maybe I'm missing sleep. Either way, it feels like something's funny.

Look at this timeline of recent events in Brockton Bay:

- April 15th: **Bakuda rampage.**

  Hundreds dead, thousands wounded, City Hall leveled, main highway interchange leveled, power out for days, and Lung released. Was the worst disaster in the city's history since the Dock Riots, maybe ever.

- April 19th: **Lung eats Kaiser and Menja. Alive.**

  Civilian casualties nil, but damn scary all the same. We've all seen the footage: the Little League game cutting away to glimpses of the fight a block away.

- April 27th: **Great Docks Fire.**

  E88 wipes out the Merchants, with collateral damage of a couple hundred dead or missing and almost an eighth of the city up in flames. Oh, and the bay was on fire for a while. Also a candidate for worst disaster in city's history: wins on property damage, loses on loss of life.

- April 29th: **New Wave beats Coil.**

  Coil blows up a skyscraper in the middle of the day. New Wave hit the fire alarm in advance, but we're still looking at dozens who didn't leave their desks, plus however many henchmen Coil had down there. Any other city, or if the fire alarm hadn't been pulled, this would be the worst disaster anyone local can remember. In Brockton Bay, it's apparently just lunch hour.

- May 2nd: **Attack on New Wave?**
Someone or some group goes after New Wave at home. At this point, all we know for sure is that they(?) set half the neighbourhood on fire and they didn't stop until Eidolon himself came to town and put on one hell of a lightshow.

Sure, we don't have all the details on the more recent events yet, not the full list of casualties, not even who the cape(s?) going after New Wave was. Sure, further details will emerge in time. Sure, we'll probably never know the whole story.

That's normal.

Know what's not normal? This kind of violence. You could go a year in New York without seeing a single event like that. The casualties and property damage involved is simply unbelievable — nothing like an Endbringer fight, but otherwise off the scale. And if you drop below the big, headline-getting events, the pattern holds. Know how many times a typical Ward gets in a fight or assists in disaster relief? Once a month on average, and with backup there. Know how many times the Wards ENE have been in fights or doing disaster relief, exclusive of the big events above? Just from the police blotter, they're averaging just over two fights / hazardous environmental situations on things that never make the headlines per week. And the statistics for the Protectorate look the same.

So, what happened to turn this sleepy little city by the sea into an ongoing war-zone?

(Showing page 21 of 22)

► IDoLater

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

Think about it: a Master with some kind of mind-control ability explains everything, from the way the gangs all start fighting among themselves to the rumors about New Wave fighting among themselves, or fighting Eidolon.

I bet they’re trying to take over the city.

► P-Cost

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

You think a sufficiently powerful Master or Thinker is the answer to everything. When you're not thinking it's all the Simurgh's fault, which is really the same thing only less funny. This kind of obsessive thinking is why "tinfoil hat" isn't a compliment.

You know, sometimes things just happen: not a plan, not a conspiracy, people independently acting
on their own individual hopes and plans, following their God-given free will. Looking for one person or group of people who are secretly making it all happen is just being lazy.

"The greatest trick the Simurgh ever pulled was convincing the world she was behind it all."

OP wanted to know why everyone's fighting? Simple. There was a balance of power, and then Bakuda blew it up, and until there is a balance again everybody's going to be trying to come out on top.

► Ekul

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

@Laser Augment

There aren't any rumors about new capes on the streets here, really. Talk about some of the E88 capes unretiring, talk about the fighting on the streets, sure, but talk of some new mastermind claiming territory? No.

The closest I've even heard are those same old cheap Halloween scares about a living mass of bugs.

► IDoLater

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

If New Wave had gone villain, the Triumvirate wouldn't have left any of them free. If the Triumvirate had gone Villain… same result. But there was fighting!

It's mind-control.

Or possibly all about secrets. Brandish had something on Fortress, something worth killing her to cover up.

Or how else do you explain that press conference with Fortress Construction?

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Or how else do you explain that press conference with Fortress Construction?

Edit: Double post, sorry. It's the lag!
Reave (Verified PRT Agent)

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

Proud of how everyone's stepped up in the face of this, glad to see someone's noticed the tempo we've been running. The bigger stuff makes the headlines, and we're out there doing disaster relief when it hits, but the captures are something to be proud of too. Alabaster, Barker, Ballistic, Trainwreck, all in the last two weeks. These aren't the biggest fish, but we're working down the list at a rate of progress anyone would be proud to own.

Hell, we got Lung once before all this kicked off, and we'll get him again.

Don't count this city out.

White Fairy

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

@Ekul

Not every cape looks human. If those rumors are out there, why isn't that the place to start in looking for a new cape in Brockton Bay?

XxVoid_CowboyxX

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

What kind of rankings do you think a bug-cape would have? Changer 7? Stranger 2? Maybe a low level Brute or Mover rating, too. And maybe bug-powers in human form, like Spiderman.

Could be really cool! I mean, not beat-Eidolon-cool, but cool.

Chilldrizzle (Moderator: Events America)

Replied on May 5th, 2011:

@XxVoid_CowboyxX

Take hypothetical powersets to the Vs. board before it poisons the thread.

And have an infraction for being off-topic.

Ekul

Replied on May 5th, 2011:
Sure, and if I thought there were an actual cape involved, I'd be more polite. But the versions I've heard are all "True story, I know a guy who knows a guy who saw some bugs in the area when it all went down..."

Just bullshit, half the time from people so drugged up that spiders are the least weird thing they were seeing.

I'm betting there's an arachnophobe with nothing better to do behind this.

If you want to know who really did what and why, look at who got what they wanted. E88's the last gang standing, and Krieg's running the show.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 20, 21, 22

You have no Private Messages.

John leaned back from the screen and stretched, feeling the muscles in his back and arms bunch and twist.

Not that he needed to stretch any kinks out, but it was a nice reminder of how far he'd come.

And it wasn't as if he had anything better to do than stretch or surf message boards.

At this hour — just past two in the afternoon — the odds of anything actually happening were almost nonexistent. That's why he had comms duty now, instead of later, and why he had yet to do a solo patrol.

Not enough experience yet.

He wasn't really sure things would change once he had more, though.

Before... before, he'd been the kid in the corner of the room. The loner. Often enough, the victim. Always, the one unable to make a difference.
It had gnawed at him.

Eventually, like one of those old Charles Atlas ads, he'd gotten ripped in response.

Idly, he flexed a bicep larger than his thigh had been back then.

Funnily enough, the bullying slowed and then stopped as he started putting on muscle mass. Hadn't had to throw a punch, even. Being muscular, being a successful jock... things just changed around him. Less bullying of others, too, at least while he was around. People listened to him, after, and sometimes that was enough. When it wasn't? Bullies could be bullied too, and if they didn't really understand why he was doing what he was doing, at least they understood that he'd make an issue out of anything he saw.

Anything he heard about.

More than the handful of beatings he'd handed down, it was the ripple effect from someone taking notice. The knowledge that bullying wasn’t ‘cool’ anymore, the possibility of punishment from a source the bullies actually respected. He’d been set above them, by the crudest of measures, and had tried to use that.

It worked.

Made a difference.

He’d been proud of that difference. Proud enough to go out and try to make a bigger difference, too, to pick a name that memorialized what he'd done, and pointed toward what he hoped to do for the city as a whole.

Not too proud to admit, a month and handful of outings later, that he needed help.

Having the body of a world-class athlete was genuinely satisfying: it was hard to remember all the little ways in which muscles and joints stuck or didn't quite go right until there was a comparison available. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten tired, or been unable to sleep, or felt sore, or suddenly itched... being able to tune up your own body to peak functionality was incredible, and if it took months or years to build lasting results, it was time well spent.
And those results did interest the ladies too. He'd never even had a date before, and being wanted — physically — well, that definitely had its satisfactions.

He knew that it was shallow, but there was an honesty to it too. People saw a man great in size, and hoped he was great in other ways too. Something to try to live up to. That, as much as his pride at what he’d done, had been what took him out to hunt the streets.

The first four times he'd gone out, he'd found nothing real.

The fifth time... he'd found too much.

Being able to heal quickly was part of the biofeedback trick, and it was why he was still alive. The body of an Olympic decathlete, and strength far beyond even that, didn't mean all that much to a gun.

So he'd swallowed his pride and signed up to learn how to do this right, only to find himself set apart again. Unable to make a difference, again.

All too often, forgotten.

Maybe because he was the new kid; maybe because the constant patrols took up the time when they would otherwise have been doing group training exercises in which he could have participated; maybe because, after all those years of being on the outside, that's still the pattern he fell back on. At school, he was learning a new way to deal with people, but that mostly relied on them being impressed by his muscles.

Capes still felt awe, but not for something like a killer set of pecs. No, drawing out that kind of response required power. And, on the kind of scales capes were used to thinking about, an Olympic decathlete didn't even register. Sure, he could hit harder and lift more than even this musculature would justify — but by cape standards? Barely noticeable.

Worse, going up against other capes meant facing threats that made a pistol look like a squirt gun.

John didn't like to think of himself as a coward, but the logic was clear: if a gun was too dangerous for him deal with, then what was he doing even thinking about fighting a serious villain?
All of which meant that, here, he was still the kid in the corner. Everyone else on the team brought something unique to the table, something useful. Something that made a *difference*.

He brought… muscles.

For that, they could just bring another agent.

It’s not that the other Wards were bad. They were all good people to hang out with, at least these days. Encouraging, and friendly. Kids trying to grow up to be *heroes*.

It wasn’t their fault they could make a difference and he… couldn’t.

Maybe time, experience, and training would change things.

All those factors counted for something, after all. Miss Militia was even more fragile than he, and she made it work, and work *well*. Both she and Armsmaster could still take him in hand to hand on the basis of skill alone, and that wasn’t even the focus of their powers.

For now, he'd wait, and train, and see. But if he ever thought that he wasn't going to be able to make a difference here, then he'd walk away from it all.

Go back somewhere where he could make a difference.

Browbeat scanned the screens again.

Nothing.
I spent the rest of Friday at the farm, watching the news and sipping hot chocolate, while my swarms continued to work and breed.

Initial theories focused on it being another of Bakuda’s bombs, with some theorizing that she’d left behind a number of time-delay surprises. The investigation into the cause of the dockside fire was still ongoing, and the talking heads spent a good fifteen minutes tossing around potential explanations as to why she would have had some high property damage, low casualty showpieces waiting to go off. The consensus was coming around to the idea that she might have wanted to be able to make a demonstration in support of a ransom demand or something similar.

I shook my head.

I knew firsthand how both the fire in the north and the collapse downtown had come to be, and Bakuda hadn’t had a hand in either.

Besides, even with only having met her once before her death, I knew her well enough to know that the idea of a low casualty demonstration was completely foreign to her way of thought. She was willing to kill her own minions for any reason or none. Sure, when I found her, she was experimenting with a lower-casualty method of handling recruitment and discipline… but I was pretty sure that was only because she knew Lung was on his way out of lockup, and she really didn’t want to have to explain why she’d damaged something of his.

Understandable caution.

Killing random civilians… was something that she would only ever have cared about to the extent that someone made her care about it.

I sipped my hot chocolate.

One of the quicker reporters managed to confirm the rumor that the fire alarm had apparently been pulled on-site, and discussion turned to the mystery of just who could have pulled the fire alarm. It was nice, hearing reporters talk about how ‘all of those who got out owe their lives to this anonymous hero.’
Nicer, at any rate, than hearing the argument that the bomber had pulled the fire alarm ‘himself’.

From there, things progressed into dueling experts. One channel had someone claiming that, barring parahuman involvement, the evidence was conclusive that ‘the explosives were distributed throughout the building during construction. This was a carefully planned demolition — look how cleanly it collapses down into its own footprint. That’s a professional at work, and not something hastily improvised on the spot. If someone wanted to kill people with this demolition, they could have toppled the building into its neighbours, started a line of dominoes going.’

On another channel, someone else was claiming that no properly built building would have collapsed this way, and that this was clearly insurance fraud on the grandest of scales.

I shook my head.

This would be why I watched the news so rarely.

Smaller stories on the crawl at the bottom of the screen included the start of the fire investigation at the Dockside Scar, a jewelry store robbery at lunch, and the continuing Cinderella story of Clarendon High’s baseball team.

Almost forty-five minutes later, the story shifted to the rescue of Dinah Alcott. Lady Photon gave a statement from the hospital, taking credit for a successful assault on the base of Coil, regretting Coil’s destruction of the Heritage Insurance Tower, warning the media to not disturb the Alcott’s, and mentioning that they were pleased to have had an opportunity to help the PRT with their ‘internal investigations.’

Huh.

The morning seemed altogether too early. It wasn’t that I’d slept too little; the almost eleven hours I’d managed might have been the longest I’d slept… since I was in a coma. Still, everything seemed to hurt a little bit more, ache a little bit more deeply. The beating Cricket had given me, the pressure wave from the bunkerage disaster, the long days and short nights spent in pursuit of the various
I creaked when I got up to fix myself breakfast.

Enough so that I went for a hot shower first, and pulled a swarm inside to fix it for me instead. That was relaxing: the hot water pounding on tight muscles, the near-scalding weight of soaked hair against my scalp, even the way the bruises twinged pointed toward eventual relief. The simultaneous challenge of making breakfast, in a kitchen built for people, rather than swarms of cooperating bugs… was also relaxing. Figuring out where I could use a utensil with bugs, and where I needed to improvise something with arrays of silk and counterweights, was very soothing.

A sense of effortless flow, like the moments when a puzzle came together and everything just clicked.

And being able to watch the oatmeal cook and stir while taking the shower took away all the concerns about burning it. I could simply wait until the kettle hit a boil, and then step right out. I’d thought about letting the kettle cool and making green tea for a change, but the way I was feeling this morning… I wanted my tea hot.

Black it was, then, without even the usual splash of milk.

And a hot shower, followed by hot oatmeal and hot tea, was in no way overkill.

I still hurt afterward, but I felt passably human.

Letting the insects tidy up their arrangements of silk and the lighter and cooler things, I did the dishes with my hands and stepped onto the porch with a second cup.

I still had to replace that cracked lens, and get more ammunition for my taser. And there was that discussion with Lisa…

I turned back inside and went for my phones. A half-written text to Lisa was derailed by the discovery of a text on the phone I’d used to call Brandish. “Same place, ten am.”
Something urgent? A loose thread, Coil’s subordinates? A trap?

Only one way to find out.

Ten.

I’d have to move quickly then.

Lisa could wait until lunch.

The law offices were as I remembered them, but quieter on a Saturday.

I was directed to a different conference room this time. The cubicles which normally held secretaries or paralegals were all but empty; the offices along the wall were almost two thirds full.

I wondered how many of the remaining third were working from home, or traveling for work.

These idle musings about what kind of hours lawyers worked popped when I passed a door marked Alan Barnes.

Emma’s father.

Not here today, thankfully.

I wondered about what he was doing, what Emma was up to. I hadn’t thought of her for a while. Hadn’t really thought of Sophia since my effort to push the PRT to investigate her. Hadn’t thought of Madison… for longer still. Something to look into, sometime. See if any consequences had found
I might even do so personally… after dealing with the Empire.

And possibly any successors.

There’d be new gangs moving in at some point. Easier to deal with; harder to find.

But first… the Empire.

Krieg had to go.

Hookwolf seemed to be a fighter, a leader even. What he wasn’t was a thinker, in either sense of the word. Power, enough of it, could do a lot of things. The fact that Lung still walked free was proof enough of that. And while Empire Eighty Eight could survive losses, I was betting they couldn’t survive being losers.

Krieg, like Kaiser and Allfather before him, was smart enough, careful enough, to keep the overall reputation of the Empire intact. To pick the fights they could win, avoid the fights they couldn’t. To frame events in the most useful way, to turn defeats into heroic last stands, draws into moral victories, and victories into the promise of conquest. And as long as the promise was believed, more would come. Enough to make it a self fulfilling prophecy? Probably not.

Enough to make for a constant blight on the city?

It had been in the past.

So.

Krieg had already proven himself willing to set a large chunk of the city on fire. If he kept that up there would be a heavy-handed response. Perhaps if he’d taken credit for the fire, it would have already happened.
Right now, the official word on the fire was ‘causes unknown’, and the closest E88 came to being linked with it were reports of people seeing Fenja walking out of the fire, carrying the others. Given the various powers involved, all that meant was that speculation inclined to E88 having been fighting someone who did use fire or explosives. Given the disappearance of the Merchant capes at the same time, people were focusing on Squealer… but there was a minority holding out for Lung.

Even having been there, I wasn’t sure either theory was wholly wrong.

My last glimpse of Squealer’s monster truck placed it moving, uncontrolled, into the bunkerage compound. The chain-link fence guarding it wouldn’t even have slowed that juggernaut down, and it was massive enough that it could have breached a bunker by ramming. Or one of the weapons placed on it could have gone off. Or Lung could simply have called forth fire the instant he felt the conflict ebb — Krieg had theorized that even a nearby conflict could let him grow stronger — in a bid to trigger the trap while he was at his toughest. Or Victor could have made a mistake.

Hard to say what happened, exactly. I hadn’t had my usual panoramic view because Cricket had been jamming my swarms at the time. Also, hitting me.

Hard.

However the fire had been touched off, the plan had been Krieg’s.

Another reason to deal with him. How should I…

I would have walked right past the conference room if not for my bugs. While I thought about Krieg, and ways to end his power, I could simultaneously feel the building and people around me — not that I was splitting my concentration, not really. More that I could feel both things at once, really both at once, not juggling them.

Within the conference room sat Brandish.

Or, since she was wearing a suit instead of a costume, Carol Dallon.

I closed the door and took a seat opposite her.
She pushed a sealed envelope across the table to me.

I opened it, finding a single sheet with my name on it. I looked back at her, one eyebrow arched.

“A precaution.” She smiled. “The thought that your information was a trap… had occurred to me. If I didn’t make it out, there needed to be someone who knew enough to send the heroes after you.”

“You thought it was a trap, and you went anyway?”

Her eyes were steady. “We couldn’t just stand by.”

Heroes.

And all I was doing was skulking around, and avoiding straight up fights. So far I’d mostly let conflict among the gangs do most of the work, and both the Scar and the rubble downtown bore witness to the results of that strategy.

Still less destructive than handling Bakuda personally. Even so, there had to be something I could do differently, some way to achieve my goals less wastefully…

I’d think on it another time. And I’d think about precautions and failsafes. I’d left word with Quinn Calle about Jack Slash, but there were likely other ways I could prepare for a defeat. Death didn’t have to mean failure, if you knew what you were doing. But…

“Why not just tell someone?”

“Ethics and logic both. You came to me as a client, remember? If the PRT has been infiltrated, there are few places secure. And the only sure way to keep a secret… is to tell no one. Or at least no one except those who must be told… and, if you were telling the truth, no one else needed to know. So I wrote that letter, sealed it, and told no one. The law firm has your visits as two different false names, potential witnesses on different cases. I’ll write off the time, won’t bill it to anyone, but there shouldn’t be a trail to you here. Even the family only knows that a ‘friendly Stranger’ provided us with the target and on-scene intelligence. Right down to the self-destruct.”
I winced. “I hadn’t seen that ahead of time, and I should have. It’s exactly the kind of thing someone like him would do…”

She waved. “You do what you can… and you did get the fire alarm — unless there was another Stranger running around in that building? Despite everything, yesterday was a win. Dangerous villain down, kidnapped child saved. Giving the envelope to you now is a bit of an apology… though I do recommend staying hidden for a while. The PRT’s rathunt is ongoing, but I don’t know if they’ve gotten all of Coil’s spies. And I know that there’s no way to begin being sure they have, not so soon.”

I nodded. “That’s why your sister was announcing PRT cooperation.”

“One of the reasons. No need to make enemies there, and giving them some of the credit for catching their own infiltrator means that their reputation will fare better. Mostly, they do good work, and the reputation is part of that. And it’s never bad to be owed another favor.”

“You could have suppressed Coil’s connection to Calvert entirely… wouldn’t that have been a bigger favor?”

She waggled a hand. “Arguably. But what’s good for the PRT isn’t always what’s good for the world the PRT is supposed to protect. New Wave was founded on the belief that sunlight disinfects. The fact that you could come to us is proof enough that, sometimes, the Protectorate needs the help of independent, accountable, heroes. Kicking the PRT while they’re down doesn’t help… but neither does hiding their mistakes, not in the long run.”

I thought about it.

She continued. “Besides, there’s more than one way to make a difference. I didn’t stay a lawyer just because I wanted a life outside the costume. Brockton Bay’s had a rough month… a rough decade, if we’re being honest. But Coil being Calvert, and the base he had, say some interesting things about Fortress Construction. And with the right lever…”

She smiled. “I can move the world.”

I stayed to listen for a time.
Lisa was, as arranged, in one of the retail areas at the south end of the Boardwalk. No sign of any of the other Undersiders, no sign of mercenaries, no sign of the Travelers…

No sign of anything but people going about a Saturday’s shopping.

Paranoid, perhaps, but she had just asked me to kill.

We settled down with our trays in one of the booths in the back of a soup and sandwich place.

“Thanks.”

“For Coil?”

“His death meant freedom in a couple of different ways.”

I thought about that. One, I knew. The other…

“He had a hold on you?”

She shook her head. “Just the threat of death. He found me, made me the proverbial offer you can’t refuse.”

I thought about what I knew of her.

“And you took it?”
Her smile was meaner than I’d ever seen it. “It’s easier to stab someone in the back if you get behind them first.”

I nodded.

“From the moment he told me to serve or die, one of us was going to have to go… it was just a question of when.”

I dipped the edge of my sandwich into the tomato soup, and took a bite.

“And whom.” She sighed.

I ate another bite.

“So yeah, I’m glad he got to the top of your little list. I’m glad your lawyer was pushing for a low Tinker rating with the PRT for contract-scale reasons, that you’ve kept a generally low profile, and that the bastard never condescended to put me on finding you until the very end, when it was too damn late.”

She paused. Inhaled.

“Anyway. Thanks.”

I nodded.

“What now?”

She tilted her head. “Food. And then I’m going to spend some of my new freedom shopping. For clothes. After that… I’ll have to talk to the others.”

I chewed. I had no idea of what Coil’s financial resources had been, beyond immense — a base like that and mercenaries like that were not things he could have gotten with his power alone, money must have been involved at some point — nor what fraction Lisa could have seized in the aftermath.
Passwords, account numbers, safes, hiding places, bailees… I did not doubt she could have reached some of it. Enough to retire on? Enough for all the Undersiders to retire on? What did they want from life, anyway?

I could afford to let that settle out. Best case, taking out Coil had also removed the Undersiders from the scene. Worst case… well, I’d worry about Krieg and the Empire first.

It occurred to me that Coil had described other bases, staffed with detachments, and that there was now a fair-sized group of highly competent mercenaries at loose ends in my city. If they were wise, they’d take this opportunity to melt into the background. I could go by the bases I’d identified, check on that.

Later.

Shopping with Lisa was *exhausting*.

Not physically — I’d vetoed most of the outfits she’d suggested, or I wouldn’t have been able to carry my own bags. Some of the first batch called for cleavage I didn’t have, and wouldn’t ever develop without serious surgery. Most of them stood out more than I’d like, but she had a definite eye for fashion: the clothes she’d picked worked with me, and with each other. If I’d wanted to look good, to look sexy, or wholesome, or sporty, I suspect she could have found a way to let me pull any of those looks off. I couldn’t tell if her Thinker power applied to coordinating outfits as well, or if she was just good at fashion.

Still, anything that exposed skin meant vulnerability. And anything that was covering, but tight, meant I couldn’t wear my armored costume beneath it.

When had ‘can I wear my armored costume underneath it’ become my primary criteria for choosing clothing?

I did take note of a few designs that offered more stylish coverage. Maybe, eventually, I could make versions from reinforced spider silk: just as safe, and flattering enough to wear out as myself.
I also managed to pick a new lens to replace the one Cricket had broken — several, actually, as I wanted to have spares on hand. High grade ones, too: Trivex tinted lenses. I would have to pop them out of the frames they were currently in, but buying them loose might have attracted attention I didn’t want, and buying several identical sunglasses at once apparently only indicated that I wanted to have a set accessible in several different locations.

We parted ways as the afternoon slanted toward night, she with her load of clothes, me with my few bags.

I made my way to Walker’s, afterward. I had spare cartridges of darts (though extras would be nice) and I definitely needed extra batteries for my taser. The old man wasn’t there, and the clerk working in his place was decidedly less chatty. I shot a few practice rounds with the taser, again noting the way that I could simply point to any of my bugs. With either hand, at the same target or different ones, simultaneously — nothing more difficult than touching both earlobes at once. I thought about the pistols there… and rejected the option. Not legal to buy, not at my age. I’m sure I could learn how to clean and maintain them, and I was equally sure that I could obtain some either by purchase or by hitting an E88 operation… but I wasn’t really sure what it would gain me. If I wanted to kill, I could do that with my swarms.

Still.

Contingencies.

For later, though.

Right now, I had to find Krieg.
Krieg wasn’t at the grocery store I’d found him at last time.

He also wasn’t at the beer garden he’d mentioned to Hookwolf.

Or at the location Coil’s reports had had Hookwolf operating out of earlier this week.

Maybe I should have saved Coil for last: having access to his intelligence reports had been helpful.

Then again, I’d run down Bakuda and Lung on my own, and I could do the same for Krieg. Lacking a better place to start, I thought I’d get two birds with one stone and started my search by looking through the section of E88 territory that supposedly held one of Coil’s bases.

This turned out to be harder than I’d expected.

The notes I had on Coil’s smaller bases just weren’t precise enough. Knowing about ‘the Temple Street base’ left a lot of Temple Street to search. Worse, I couldn’t even be sure it wasn’t already abandoned, meaning I couldn’t just look for the place full of suspiciously fit men (and a few women) cleaning their guns.

I could have looked for a place with cameras and security doors… but that was just good sense, in Brockton Bay. They weren’t universal — and certainly not in the poorer neighbourhoods, both because those kinds of security measures were expensive and there probably wasn’t much to steal anyway — but they were common enough that it would take most of a day to check each such location in the area I thought that base might be in.

Most of Saturday night was wasted in just such a fashion, searching the city for Coil’s Temple Street base.

I did find various Empire thugs, resuming street operations like they’d never gone to ground.

Krieg was working fast.
I took notes. Notes on where they were, notes on where they were coming from and going to, notes on what they were doing. Nothing that led to any of the capes, not yet, but perhaps a foundation to build on.

There was something about leaving Coil’s bases unexamined that bothered the tidy housekeeping part of me, the one that insisted on rinsing out my mugs immediately after use, but at this rate I really couldn’t afford to give them a once-over before turning to Krieg. A whole evening, spent searching for and not finding one of his bases?

While I rode back to my farm, tiny sliver of a moon low on the horizon, I thought about my search patterns.

Coil had claimed to have a ‘dozen’ satellite bases scattered across the city.

Some would surely have been fallback positions for his own use; others had likely been for his various puppet capes. I still had no idea how many he’d controlled: the Travellers had numbered four, from what I knew of them, and the Undersiders were another four. Did that mean that Coil had another team on his payroll, or had planned to acquire one? Or that he was instead rounding out the numbers by recruiting solo villains? Or, worse, that the planned lair-to-villain ratio was less than one?

He’d included E88 on his threat assessment list… but he’d included the Undersiders and Travellers on it too. And Faultline. And, well, everyone I’d ever heard of in the city, as well as a number I hadn’t known much of before then. Paranoid? I didn’t think so.

An Undersider had helped kill him, in the end.

Just before it all kicked off, Tattletale had done something to him, asked something of him. He’d described it as giving his ‘support’ to their raid on a jewelry store. His Thinker power? I still didn’t know what it had been — still didn’t know what Tattletale’s was either. The Undersiders’ threat assessment had only discussed it indirectly, mentioning that they could be expected to avoid contact or identify and exploit weaknesses, ‘guided by Tattletale’s Thinker power.’

Whatever that support had been that he’d given, it had focused his attention elsewhere just before the attack went in. Tattletale had known what I was doing, and had manipulated events to ensure that Coil died then and there.
I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, yet. Glad she was out from under Coil, sure — the way he’d treated Dinah was enough to make my skin crawl. Killing him, though… I’d killed Bakuda, deliberately. I’d killed Oni Lee in self defense. I’d arranged Kaiser’s death at the hands of Lung, and even helped it along. Cricket, and so many of Bakuda’s victims were dead because of what I’d done, but not *solely* because of what I’d done, nor because I’d *intended* their deaths.

Cold comfort, that.

Had Coil needed to die?

Tattletale had thought so.

Brandish had thought so, too.

Was that enough for me to concur in their judgment? I would be surprised if those two agreed on much else in life. And while I wasn’t sure, even now, if there hadn’t been another way, I *was* sure that — without knowing his power — there was no way to hold him securely. Despite those doubts, I was also a little reassured that Lisa had *asked* me, instead of just playing me the way she’d played Coil.

At the back of my mind, though, I was more than a little worried about how she’d known what I was doing, known it in enough detail to seamlessly intervene.

I parked the Vespa, and a part of my mind turned to my swarms, assessing the day’s work they’d done in my absence, rearranging them to fix small inefficiencies that had sprung up without my oversight.

Like the bugs I controlled, I was insignificant. Squishable. What I’d managed, I’d mostly managed by giving other, stronger, capes a target, and standing back. That had worked — *so far* — because the only one who knew enough to target me in return was Lung… and he’d been waiting for me to do something about Coil.

That grace period expired yesterday.

From what I knew of him, he wouldn’t spread the word of who I was and what I’d done… he’d just hunt me down and kill me with his bare hands.
Which left me in… exactly the same position I’d been in two weeks ago.

Well, I’d just have to find him before he found me.

Krieg first, though. The Empire was a cancer on the city and Lung — as he was now — was just a personal problem, another bullying problem.

A larger bullying problem.

I settled in on the chaise longue I’d claimed as my bed, and reminded myself one more time that I ought to go shopping for furniture at some point when things settled down.

Later.

Coil had believed in being early to rise.

E88 thugs didn’t.

Inconsiderate of them.

Four hours of riding around, stopping for breakfast, sitting in place and waiting… and nothing.

Eventually, the streets ceased being the exclusive province of honest folk, and I found some thugs to follow.
It was slow, painstaking work, following these idiots around, watching them do their damage… and not intervening.

But I wasn’t hunting for footsoldiers, not today.

I wanted Krieg.

Two skinheads, done dealing for the day, gave me my first break. Apparently, after depositing the take, they intended to take their earnings and wager it on some dogfights.

I remembered Rachel’s words about how the Empire ran dogfighting pits, and thought about what I knew of its capes. Street-level drug dealing wasn’t the kind of operation that would command the personal supervision of a cape, let alone Krieg himself. Very little was, I suspected, and while I probably could trace the lines of responsibility up until I found someone who regularly reported to Krieg in person… that would take time.

On the other hand, I was pretty sure that Hookwolf and Stormtiger were big fans of pitfighting, whether for human gladiators or dogs… and Hookwolf couldn’t possibly report to anyone but Krieg.

So I left off tracing the money and drugs — for now — and followed the thugs as they looked for bloodsport.

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The dogfighting pits were a horror. Blood and death, whimpering cripples, and all of it to cheering. It did look to be a profitable horror, though, and it was certainly a popular one: the warehouse was crowded thick with people jostling for a view of the ring or access to the bar.

Money changed hands rapidly, with bets on everything: from which dog would win, how, how quickly, what kind of injuries would be sustained, to conditional bets based on elaborate combinations of the above. Ominously, there was another board, next to the one listing the dogfight matchups.
The only thing listed on it was ‘Promotion test: Michael.’

I didn’t have long to wait — Michael’s match came after the first round of afternoon dogfights, and before the second.

He stepped into the hammered dirt ring, stripped to the waist, lean and corded with muscle, arms raised to the cheers of the crowd.

He couldn’t have been that much older than I was.

He was walking around the ring, almost dancing really, soaking in the cheers of the crowd.

A man dropped from the rafters, landing in the center of the ring, and silence spread.

Hookwolf stood, greasy blond hair spilling around the edges of his metal mask.

“You all know we’re expanding, taking new territory. Mike here thinks he’s got what it takes to run some.”

A pause, while Hookwolf slowly turned, surveying the crowd, ignoring the youth squaring up in a boxing stance.

At last the man came round to face the boy once more.

“One way to find out.”

The initial clash was startlingly quick: the boy closed the distance with floating steps, opening with a lightning jab — slapped aside — followed by a harder jab — slapped aside — and a cross which missed cleanly as Hookwolf sidestepped.

Undeterred, he launched another all-out offensive.
This time, Hookwolf just stood there and absorbed the combo. One, two, three… jab, cross, hook. The thudding gut-punch impacts were audible above the crowd’s noise.

Hookwolf held up his hands, then fisted them.

And waded in. He wasn’t faster than the kid, if anything he looked slower. But he was never quite where the kid struck, and while not all of Hookwolf’s punches landed, the ones that did were solid, forcing stumbles in the otherwise glass-smooth footwork the kid displayed, splitting lips, cutting his brow.

I thought one of the body blows might have cracked a rib.

Thirty seconds of Hookwolf bullying the fight around the ring, seeming to move half as much as his younger opponent, and he got tired of boxing. A quick jab, a spinning half step forward, and a roundhouse kick to the torso took the kid off his feet entirely, sending him skidding into the wooden railings.

“If you get up, I stop taking it easy on you.”

The kid, one eye closed to keep the blood out, stood.

A many-jointed threshing machine nightmare of hooks and knives unfolded behind Hookwolf’s right shoulder with startling speed, and swept the kid across the ring and through the barriers, before folding upon itself and vanishing beneath his skin once more.

“Kid, there’s tough and there’s stupid. Which are you?”

He got up anyway.

Silence, the crowd itself holding its breath.

Hookwolf looked him over, nodded. “See Othala later.”
He turned to the crowd, arms up. “Mike drinks free tonight!”

The crowd cheered, swarming in to replace the barriers for the next set of dogfights. Two blonde girls settled in on either side of Mike, one sponging the blood away and the other holding beer for him.

But my focus was on Hookwolf, who walked untouched through the crowd to the exit, and then to his motorcycle beyond.

Hookwolf’s new motorcycle was another loud Harley — less fancy than the last. Not enough time to get it customized since Squealer ran the old one over?

Even without all the extra chrome, it was anything but subtle. Was he really that hard to find? Or was the Protectorate just that overstretched?

Technically, he did take his mask off. Was that enough? Were the customs around unmasking strong enough to substitute for an actual disguise?

Either way, he wasn’t doing anything to keep me from following him on my Vespa.

He went straight to an office building on the eastern edge of downtown, stepped through a fire exit door, and hit the stairs at a run.

Hookwolf was fit. Twelve stories up, and he took the stairs two at a time the whole way.

I don’t think he was even breathing hard.

If it was his power doing that, it was subtle — metal beneath the skin?

Still, fast as he was, he wasn’t faster than thought. By the time he’d reached the roof, I had gathered a small swarm there, able to watch and listen.

Hookwolf shouldered the door open with bang and echoing crash as it rebounded; the man already
on the roof didn’t twitch. He just stood there, ramrod straight, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out at a skyline painted orange by the setting sun.

*Krieg.*

“Looking out on your city?” Hookwolf’s voice was a growl.

“Not mine. The cause’s.” One hand rose, waved forward. “Join me.”

Hookwolf stalked forward to rest his forearms on the railing, long hair hanging down around his unmasked face.

“Still pretending that you’re holding it for Kaiser’s brat?”

A shrug lifted the black greatcoat. “I know my strengths, and their limits. I can lead an army, perhaps conquer the city… but rule it? No. One of the Kaiser’s get may prove worthy, in time.”

“If not?”

“If not, one of mine. Or one of yours.”

A coughing laugh. “Like I’ll ever have any.”

“As if you’d know if you had.” Krieg was facing away from my swarm on that roof, but the swarms on adjacent roofs let me see him smile all the same.

“Fucking’s fun. Fighting’s better. Fathering… wouldn’t know how to start.”

“Finding the right mother, perhaps. It’s for the cause, you know. The next generation belongs to those who show up for it, and for those of us with powers…” he brought his right hand before him, and made a black-gloved fist. “… the obligation is redoubled.”
“You trying to set me up on a date or something?”

“No. Something, as you would have it, _better._”

Hookwolf’s smile was eager.

“ABB… is all but gone. The Merchants… are gone. Coil… is gone. The city — the whole city — is ours at last, if we but reach out and _take it._”

“Lung?”

“Is vulnerable at the start of a fight, and has no safe ground to which he might flee. If he engages, we’ll give ground… and track him back to his hole. If he hides, we’ll track him down all the same — have Stormtiger do nothing but sniff him out, yes? And then we will… _experiment._ Nothing showy, nothing risky… just the fastest ways to inflict the most damage. If one fails, withdraw. Try the next when he is weak again. We do not have to fight him — just kill him.”

“Like last time?”

“The Merchants’ ill-timed intervention saved him, to our cost and their _greater_ cost. The strategy remains sound.”

A grunt.

“There will also be probes from out of town. The Teeth are stirring. The Fallen. Others.”

“Let them come.”

“Let’s be ready when they do, hmm? Firmly entrenched throughout the city. Reinforced — I’ve spoken to Gesellschaft; you put the word out among the pitfighters.”

Hookwolf nodded.
“We’ll leave no sliver of territory for them to claim as a foothold.”

“The Protectorate?”

“Avoid. We’ll still hit Alabaster’s transport out — we do not leave our own behind — but in a straight fight? Even if we win the battle, we lose the war.”

“Giving up?”

Krieg shook his head. “There are other ways to fight. Bribery. Blackmail. Election. I think, with time and care… the Protectorate might find itself transferring resources away from a peaceful city, and to more pressing trouble spots.”

A snort.

“Oh, but it will be peaceful, my friend. We shall see to it. No violence but ours. First the city. From there…” His arms spread wide, then lowered to his sides.

“From there, it will be the task of our children, likely enough. For now… take what was Coil’s.”

Hookwolf stood and stretched, rolling his neck.

“You always did talk too much.”

“And you too little. Good hunting.”

A grunt, and Hookwolf was off, his long stride carrying him to the stairwell.

Krieg remained alone on the roof for a minute longer.
I thought about trying for him then and there, began thickening my swarm on the roof… but a bright light fell from the sky to land beside him.

Had Purity rejoined the Empire?

He turned to face her, and made a formal sort of half bow, one hand on his breast and the other still at the small of his back.

“Frau Purity."

“Krieg."

“I appreciate your willingness to meet, and your discretion earlier.”

The woman-shaped blob of light shifted from one foot to another.

“No niceties then. Will you return with Crusader? For all that we are nearly the last force standing in this city, we have not achieved this without loss.”

A pause, and then the light rippled in a headshake.

“Then if you will not help us, can we help you on your crusade against the filth of the city? Information, targets, healing…”

The pause was long.

“Why?”

“Why should any of us who seek to cleanse the world oppose each other? I chose my name with care, and would be the last to deny that a necessary evil remains… evil. You disagree about the path the Empire should take; do you think I did not have my own concerns?”
Krieg had extended his gloved hand to her during the speech. It hung there for a time before he let it fall.

“It was easier when the decisions were not mine. When I could simply trust the Kaiser.”

Her glowing head bobbed in a nod.

“I did not build this Empire, and I can only hope to hold it in trust. Will you permit me to teach Theodore?”

“He’s not part of this.” Her voice was low, her right hand fisted.

“In time, it will be his choice whether or not to serve the cause. He has the power; the rest is in whether he grows to take up the legacy of his forefathers. All I ask is to arm him against that day.”

Again, silence.

Krieg sighed, removing his gold-rimmed glasses to polish them with a handkerchief.

“Of all the Kaiser’s talents, it is his charisma that is the gravest loss. He could have brought you round.”

Purity shifted. Was that a nod?

“There is time yet to consider your reply. Will you answer the call if we find Lung?”

“Yes.”

“Until then, I suppose.”

He turned, walked halfway to the stairwell door, paused, spoke softly.
“You will always have a place with us.”

The moment the stairwell door clanged shut, Purity launched herself into the sky once more.

Krieg was alone.

Could I capture him?

Given the right circumstances, I might be able to use the taser on him. Or try to suffocate him enough, but not too much. Or hit him over the head just right. Risky, all of those paths. Could I hold him long enough for pickup from the Protectorate? Contingencies… what if I tried and failed? Or if Krieg simply used part of his one phone call to get the word out?

I could stand having the Empire hunting for me, even killing me. What I couldn’t stand was the possibility of failure, and leaving the Empire in undisputed possession of the city was failure. They were in a position where they might take over city, in significant part, because of what I’d done.

So I’d have to see it through.

At the moment, that meant finding a way to act tracelessly…

Should I kill him? That would be one way to answer the issue of what he might see. I had been willing to kill Coil; did Krieg somehow deserve less?

Did I have the right to make that choice?

This wouldn’t be self-defense, this wouldn’t be in defense of an innocent hostage on the scene. Just a man, killed from ambush. Wasn’t lying in wait one of the things that made a killing murder in the first degree?

Did he deserve more consideration because his minions were harming innocents all across the city, rather than in his presence?
I still didn’t have an answer when Krieg stepped out on the fourth floor, and from there over into the parking garage. I had to act swiftly to start my scooter and follow his SUV, paralleling its course a half-block back on another street.

Perhaps I could follow him, take him as he slept.

Easier to prevent him seeing anything he shouldn’t, that way.

Just let him wake up trussed, foamed… in custody.

He drove to a good neighbourhood in a quiet suburb, and as the sun slipped below the horizon, he parked in the driveway of a house at the end of a cul-de-sac.

It had white picket fences.

He went in, hugged a woman, and sat down to dinner with her and three small children — two girls and a boy.

I could feel the insects in the area swirling, eager under my command… but no.

Not like this.

Tomorrow.
I hadn’t slept well last night.

What little I had slept, anyway.

Dawn found me cupping my mug of tea in my hands, looking out at the city below.

Seeing nothing but memories.

Memories of last night; memories of my old life.

Last night, I’d followed a villain home, looking for an opening, a way to capture or kill him… and found a family dinner.

The comparison to what Bakuda had done to me, to my father, was painfully clear.

They weren’t the same thing, at all — Krieg and all his family were still alive, to start with — but it was a terrifying thought. A fresh nightmare, to add to the ones about how my parents had actually died. It seemed unfair, somehow — dreaming through the same scenario as victim and as monster, one of those alternatives had to be… not better… less bad than the other, right?

As far as I could tell, each was worse than the other, some kind of M.C. Escher spiral of guilt and betrayal and loss that only went one way.

Down.

I squeezed the mug in my hands, letting the lingering warmth soak through, feeling my swarms stir at the shift from night to day.

Not useful.
So focus on what *would* be useful.

What were my options, anyway?

I could wait. Watch for the arrival of the Teeth, of the Fallen, of whoever else might come. Continue to set villain on villain, and wear away at the Empire. I could get better, but even now this was a game I knew how to play. I could make those skirmishes *cost*.

But.

But that relied on the Empire not reinforcing faster than they were assailed, relied on the Empire not simply crushing an incursion before it became a threat. Krieg was careful, thorough, and unafraid to take a risk where he thought it would bring victory. The whole point of bringing down Kaiser had been to let the Empire fragment without a competent leader, and it wasn’t working. Whatever Krieg thought about his comparative lack of skills, his inability to bring Purity back to the service of his cause, a week ago the Empire had been ripping itself apart, with Krieg the leading suspect for betraying Kaiser.

Now, it was on the verge of holding the entire city. Firmly united under Krieg. He’d managed it without any casualties lost to the civil war, and even the losses to opportunistic attacks by the PRT, by the Merchants, by *Lung*… had been in the service of victories. I wondered, briefly, if Kaiser would have lived had he let Krieg take the lead on Lung.

No, waiting for Krieg to make a mistake would be a very bad plan.

Besides, the very first lesson I’d learned — from Bakuda — had been about the importance of seizing the initiative. She’d acted faster than anyone could have expected, working on rumor and a handful of facts… and had come closer to killing me than anyone ever had, before or since. Lung included.

She *had* killed my father.

I’d responded with equal suddenness, and had enjoyed success beyond my wildest dreams.

Or nightmares.
Too much success could be its own problem. The third lesson Bakuda had taught me, the one she’d never learned herself.

If I wanted to keep setting other groups against the Empire… did I have other options? The Travellers? The Undersiders? Faultline’s mercenaries? Lung?

A straight up fight against the Empire would involve casualties — not even Lung had achieved his victory over Kaiser without sacrificing Oni Lee. I didn’t think any of the villainous groups would take on a fight on those terms. Villains, after all, tended to be in it for themselves. And Lung… the Empire would simply refuse battle, and attempt assassination until they found something that worked.

Assuming I could even talk to Lung without him trying to kill me; with Kaiser gone, I didn’t know of any other enemies he wanted dead more than me.

That left the capes who weren’t in it for themselves, who would take on a fight even if it did involve casualties… if the cause were just.

The heroes.

I thought about the Protectorate I’d met.

Of Battery’s calm professionalism, and Armsmaster’s unswerving focus — the way that both of them had spoken of their job almost as a calling, something that brought meaning to their lives. Of the way those examples resonated throughout the city, the way old Pete Walker stood up straighter and smiled more when he was talking about Dauntless or Miss Militia. The trust he had, that things would get better, because they stood as champion for him and all like him. He hadn’t been able to shoot the Marquis when they met, hadn’t been able to avenge his granddaughter, but he told that story with a smile these days instead of shame.

Because the Marquis was in the Birdcage now.

The heroes had won.
And Pete had faith that they always would.

I’d trusted like that too, once. Had an Alexandria lunchbox and Armstrong underpants, when I was younger. Not just because they were cool, but because they were a promise: that, despite everything, the best of humanity could outweigh the worst. Overcome anything, in the end.

Even the Endbringers, someday.

I hadn’t so much lost that trust as started to see what it looked like from the other side, the sheer weight of the responsibility. The lives lost because I’d acted too quickly, the lives lost because I hadn’t acted quickly enough. And the Protectorate heroes I’d met hadn’t flinched at the burden, just shaped their lives in an effort to meet it.

I thought about New Wave, and the way they’d demolished Coil’s soldiers.

Of Carol, disciplined and fierce, laying out her plans for Fortress one day after beheading Coil with a crackling blade of light. Of Amy, who’d healed me when I was at my lowest; friendless, hiding beneath her hood, left behind in the raid’s van. Of Victoria, superficially brassy-bright at tea, flirting with Gallant and sweeping up her sister; calm and focused in the fight, trusted at her mother’s back for Coil’s death. I didn’t know the rest of New Wave, but if I wanted to guess at how dear they were to each other I only had to feel the raw wounds left in me by the deaths of my own parents.

Finally, I thought about the Wards I’d met, the team I might have joined.

Aegis, diligent and protective, watching over the team like his namesake. Vista and Kid Win, younger than I was and desperately trying to seem older. The odd duo of Clockblocker and Gallant, the one who’d make a joke of anything and the other who always played it straight: both of whom had disobeyed orders for me. No, not just for me: because that was the right thing to do. It’s one thing to fight a villain; another to stand up to your boss. They did both with mismatching smiles.

Heroes.

I thought about doing something that would get some of those heroes killed.

And it would, it would have to. The Empire was still larger than any local group of heroes. Very nearly larger than any two. Given the unretirements, given the recruiting efforts underway, they
might soon be larger than all three combined. The fights I’d arranged, the fights I’d seen, all had one thing in common: they’d been unfair. Tilted in the direction of my choice. Ambushes, surprises, numbers, overkill… I’d used any advantage I could find. Life wasn’t one of those debates about who would win in a fight: a single mistake or bad luck could be the end for anyone.

It nearly had been for me.

The Empire was large enough that any all-out fight would be very difficult to control. Very difficult to keep unfair. I could try to set up a smaller series of fights, take them bite by bite… but I couldn’t see any way to do that and keep surprise for the later fights. What kind of odds would I need to guarantee success?

New Wave had outnumbered Coil seven to one in capes. They’d had total surprise and real-time tactical information. Even so, if Lisa hadn’t confirmed the self destruct… how many would he have taken with him? In the building above, hundreds. Of the heroes? They didn’t all have forcefields. And not only was Panacea incapable of raising the dead, she would have been caught in the collapse herself.

We’d come closer than I liked to think about to absolute disaster that day. Brandish had waved it off as a win, and it had been, but I didn’t like winning through luck. Over time, that was the same as losing.

The Empire was large enough, strong enough, that any fight with them would spiral out of control. I’d miss something.

And then heroes would die.

To clean up my mess.

Well.

That clarified things nicely.

I rinsed and racked the cup and went to put on my costume, now patched and with the new lenses inserted, and then the street clothes I’d wear over it.
If I couldn’t wait, and I couldn’t hand it off to someone else… then I’d just have to solve this myself.

Somehow.

Krieg got up *early*.

He was gone from his house by the time I got there, and the sun was still touching the horizon then. His car had had a ‘Reserved Parking’ sticker for a building in the Medhall complex so, for lack of a better clue I headed there. There were more people than I expected at work already — as in, *anyone* — but still few enough that it was easy to pick out the active offices: I found Krieg in one of the corner offices, high up. I picked a bench on which to wait for the nearest convenient cafe to open — technically, more of a sports bar, but proximity to the office complex meant that they opened for breakfast and lunch, with a thriving takeout business. I settled into a booth in the back, laid out my notebook, and pretended to write while I worked to get eyes and ears on Krieg.

From what I was hearing, apparently, he ran a pharmacy chain. In his spare time. When he wasn’t running a criminal Empire.

Maybe it was a money-laundering front, and he wasn’t really doing the work for both.

Then again, the meeting he was in was about his work as interim CEO of the Medhall conglomerate itself (their CEO was incapacitated, and he was laying out contingency plans for what happened if he didn’t recover). So Krieg was running at least *two* companies in his spare time, and the Empire.

He ought to write one of those time-management technique books: “Secrets of Highly Successful Supervillains.”

I’d buy it.
I could use a book like that. I had spent nearly every waking hour since the coma trying to remove the gangs, and so far all I’d managed to do is change which gangs held which territory. Still, cleaning up a city was the kind of project which you might expect to take more than a month, so maybe it wasn’t going as badly as it sometimes felt.

Getting vision turned out to be a little tricky: I needed a critical mass of insects if I wanted to see or hear through them. Coil’s base had been furnished in something best described as ‘Cold War bomb shelter’: enormous air vents, designed for regular manual inspection; rough concrete; exposed piping and lighting. Easy to assemble my bugs in various places. Krieg’s office was ‘design minimalism’, all glass and brushed steel. That still left a lot more places for insects to hide than I would have imagined before I could sense them, but not as many as I’d like. Sound wasn’t so hard — just find a place in the walls, or under the floor. Vision, though…

I resolved it, eventually, by assembling multiple swarms on the roofs of nearby buildings. More eyes, more widely spread, let me see farther. And more sharply. Didn’t have the full three hundred and sixty degree coverage of everything in his office, but it was a nice trick.

He looked different, out of costume. The high-peak officer’s cap he wore as Krieg lengthened his face, emphasizing a sharp nose and pointed chin. Without it, the receding hairline made it all look rounder, focused attention on his nearly-constant wide smile. And when he spoke, he sounded English, like a BBC actor. Was the whole German accent just part of the costume, a way to hide one distinctive accent beneath another? Or were both accents assumed?

Working out a way to use my bugs as a telescope array had taken me up to lunch, a time period during which I’d also thoroughly mapped out the Medhall complex.

Procrastination.

I stirred my bowl of chowder absentmindedly, and ripped off a piece of sourdough to dip and eat.

I’d wasted the time because I was still working on how to deal with Krieg. I’d been looking for something elegant, and hadn’t found it yet.

One of the televisions cut away from local news to a press conference from the ruins of city hall. The mayor was there, on a stage, with a man in a suit. No backdrop, just the ruins behind them. On the edge of the shot I recognized Carol, in a crowd of other suits.
Fast work.

I focused on that television. I had swarms in my vicinity as a matter of habit, but I hadn’t had any on that television and it took a moment before I could hear it clearly through the noise of the bar.

“… pleased as I am to welcome… Fortress Construction…”

“… you, Mr. Mayor… committed to… humanity against… Our shelters… forty percent… research… millions of people. It’s a record we’re proud of. And we’ve done well for our shareholders in the process. Today, though, I want to announce a new way for Fortress to help humanity. We’re launching the Fortress Global Reconstruction Initiative, because we believe that our expertise in heavy construction has broader applications, and because we want to give back to the communities who’ve trusted their protection to us. We’re here in Brockton Bay because this is a city that’s been hit hard recently. And there are things we can do here: rebuilding the Scar; roads and rail, buildings and infrastructure; even dredging and reopening the port.”

He had to stop talking because the reporters present were cheering too hard. I smiled, and dipped another piece of bread.

Hands outspread to quiet the crowd, he continued. “Obviously, this will cost money. Billions. And while I can’t discuss the specific amount that Fortress is pledging for this city’s project at this time, or discuss what other cities will be a part…”

I tuned him out. Around me, people were already ordering drinks — the bartender had given a round away on the house. It had been a while since Brockton Bay as a whole had cause to cheer for the future.

I thought about Quinn, telling me “there’s more than one way to fight; more than one way to make a difference.” Of Carol, telling me that with the right lever, she could “move the world.”

This wasn’t a victory won with superpowers.

She’d taken Calvert’s connection to Fortress, and run with it. As she’d explained it to me Saturday, a lawsuit would take years; a settlement could take days. Even though some details remained to be hashed out, this was already a commitment to something big. Dredging the harbour might cost a quarter billion dollars. Or twice that: those were the kinds of numbers bandied about the last time it was raised. Add in the other things… rebuilding the city wouldn’t be cheap. But it could be done.
And that had been the plan she’d laid out for me on Saturday.

Carol said that sunlight disinfects, but that only helps if you’re throwing light on a wrong. The PRT being infiltrated by a villainous Thinker was a failure: dealing with parahumans was, precisely, their job. Fortress had been taken in by a powerful Thinker — no shame there. Their job was building things. Legally, the answer was much the same. Calvert had been a consultant, not even an employee, and a villainous parahuman to boot — why, when you looked at it, Fortress was really the victim here. With all of that, it would be very hard to lay liability against Fortress in a court of law. She’d told me all of that, how she didn’t have a prayer of doing anything useful with a lawsuit.

And then she’d smiled.

The court of public opinion was a different matter. Fortress relied on government contracts for the bulk of its twelve-figure revenue stream, and something like this could quickly spiral out of control, could be taken as a betrayal of the united front humanity tried to present against the Endbringers. For her own part, Carol wasn’t willing to risk disrupting the ongoing work of building Endbringer shelters.

But she had bet Fortress wasn’t willing to risk disrupting the ongoing profit, either.

She had bet that they’d waver if blitzed, that the moral authority she could bring to bear as the heroine who’d uncovered the lair they’d built for a villain would tip them into action, that the opportunity to satisfy their fear and their desire for a good reputation would lead them into doing something. And, at that moment when they were casting about for something to do, she might be able to make a suggestion. A forceful one.

Blackmail? Maybe.

It had worked.

That kind of money and effort could revive the city, or give it a fighting chance, and I’d never dreamt this was even a possibility.

It wasn’t a cure-all: that kind of money would draw villains too. Or let existing ones entrench themselves, go semi-legitimate.
Which brought me back to dealing with the Empire.

Not involving the heroes meant that the Empire would just be fighting *me*, and that only went one of two ways: I could go to ground and hide… but that meant giving up my efforts to clean out the gangs, at least until they forgot about me. If they ever did. Not something I could work with. Or, I could fight… but at those odds, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t walk away. Better than getting some of the real heroes killed, but still a failure. Dying to make things right… well, there were worse ways to go. Dying, and *not* making things right… no.

Not acceptable.

I kept thinking of things I couldn’t do.

What *could* I do?

*If you have an enemy you cannot beat in a fight? Then do not fight him.*

I could hear Krieg’s clipped, precise words in my memory. His answer to the riddle of Lung.

And instead of a fight… what?

*We do not have to fight him — just kill him.*

Could I do that?

There were parahumans so dangerous that it was considered ‘self-defense’ if you shot them while they were sleeping.

With artillery.

That’s what a kill order meant. Even though the Protectorate heroes usually put down such villains,
anyone could do so, and it wasn’t murder. Just carrying out the sentence.

It could be very lucrative, even: victims, or their families, often contributed to a bounty fund, and the PRT itself did so sometimes. Even a villain could claim such rewards under temporary amnesty. Not that anyone really made a living at it: too risky.

So there was precedent for skipping straight to lethal force.

But…

There was no kill order out on Krieg.

There wasn’t even one out on Lung. Getting one took something beyond day-to-day villainy, something special and ongoing. Like the Slaughterhouse Nine: by now, joining that group automatically brought a kill order with it.

They had a lot of turnover.

They were still at it.

Krieg wasn’t even in the same league as those villains — Grey Boy had been a member of the Nine, and arguably not the worst.

No one had yet found a way to put his victims out of their misery.

Jack Slash, who led the Nine as much as anyone did, was apparently going to end the world. Implausible for anyone, let alone someone with a power as simple as cutting things at a distance… but then he’d lasted years with the Nine, more than a decade.

Most members lasted months.

Whatever he did, it worked.
With such horrific exceptions aside, not all villains needed to end their story dead or Birdcaged. Purity was at least trying to turn things around. The Undersiders might just retire on whatever Lisa had salvaged from Coil. The Travelers, too, maybe. I didn’t know that Coil had forced them into service the way he had Dinah Alcott and the Undersiders — but it was how he worked.

Had worked.

The city was better without him.

Would Krieg repent or retire?

How many risks did I have to take to give him that chance? He was dangerous, not just in his power but in his care and skill. Dangerous to me. Dangerous to the city.

Would Brockton Bay be better off without Krieg, too?

Yes.

Could I bring him down without killing him?

Every alternative I’d thought through which involved taking him alive and putting him in custody ended with open war between the Empire and the heroes. The Empire might — would — lose that fight. But the Protectorate and the city would lose, too. Could I keep him hidden? For how long? And was kidnapping better than killing? Given his powers, it was definitely more dangerous.

Did I have the right to decide whether he should die?

I wasn’t sure. But it was the only alternative I thought I could live with. I couldn’t live with doing nothing, with inadvertently having helped the Empire take the city; couldn’t live with calling for help, and heroes dying to clean up my failure.

That left living with this question, and living with acting without a perfect answer to it.
So.

I began eating, methodically.

How? If I was going to do this, I’d make it *count*. What could I do that would hurt the Empire most?

... *that wonderful blend of certainty and uncertainty necessary to inspiring proper fear*...

Bakuda, explaining what Lung had taught her about the uses of fear.

Fine. I’d take that lesson and apply it.

Certainty and uncertainty?

Two options: ‘natural causes’ and ‘vanished.’ Either would provide useful uncertainty; his removal would provide certainty.

Could I even pull off ‘natural causes’? A tripwire on the stairs, maybe. The density and kind of insects I’d have to use to make it lethal wouldn’t be natural at all. Unless he was allergic? Too much left to chance.

Vanished, then.

The corner of my mind that had never stopped paying attention to Krieg’s office noted that he had meetings scheduled late into the night.

I could wait.

And prepare.
An hour and a half ago, the sun had set. The moon had set just before it, and the sky was dark. Streetlights made puddles of light, and the windows of the few occupied offices shone bright against the night. Krieg was still at his desk, still working through a spreadsheet. Budgets, if I was reading the foreshortened screen correctly through rain-streaked windows. The building was all but empty. He stretched, yawned, and stretched again.

Stood.

Was he… he was leaving.

He shut off his computer, cut the lights and went toward the stairwell.

Good.

I’d prepared for the elevators too, of course, but he’d taken the stairwell when I’d seen him last night, and that’s where I’d focused my primary preparations.

He started down the stairs, briefcase in hand.

His car was on the second floor of the parking garage — I had time.

The fourth floor was completely empty: there’d been a construction crew there earlier, probably working on tenant improvements for whoever was leasing the floor. No one there, very few on the fifth and third floors.

He was just reaching the landing above the fourth floor, the farthest point from any of the stairwell doors, when I struck.

An enormous blob of bugs dropped on him from above, massing twice what he did. It knocked him
flat, attached silk-strands to hold him in place, and immediately set to biting, injecting venom and simply trying to rip its way through his eyes, up his nose, down his throat — to enter anywhere there was an opening, and make an opening anywhere there wasn’t. Another, still larger group covered the floor, emerging from the underside of the landing and stairs, and piling on.

He struggled, flailing mindlessly for long seconds before recovering himself with what must have been a remarkable effort of will. An out-thrust arm sent a spray of bugs forth. Again, so violently that many became smears on the concrete.

The swarming mass was hardly diminished. I did detail some of my reserves to clean off the walls — no point vanishing someone if you were going to leave evidence, and it wasn’t as if there was room to use them offensively at the moment.

He changed tactics, trying to clear his face off. He had some success, but by this point I had an entire swarm’s worth of bugs beneath his skin.

Some of the choking noises were rhythmic: I wasn’t sure what he might have been trying to say. Something about the cause he’d served? His family?

He clung to life far longer than I’d expected.

Minutes.

But in time, his body grew still, the only movement that of my insects.

I stood and paid my bill from dinner, leaving a generous tip at the sports bar where I’d spent the day.

My swarms bustled, cleaning the wall and floor of stains, devouring Krieg’s flesh. Each insect could only take so much, of course, but if you rotated them efficiently it could be done more quickly than I would ever have imagined, before. What remained were his clothes, his personal effects, and his bones.

That had been… simple.
It wasn’t because he was weak.

In a fight, he could have killed me from blocks away, launched me into a wall with neck-cracking force. I’d seen him kill Skidmark and Squealer in just that way, not a week ago, with a glance and a wave of his hand, seen him rock Lung with a gesture. Bugs could survive falls from extraordinary heights: he’d propelled some of those on him with force enough to smear them across concrete. If he’d done that to a person in a fight, the only possible reason for his foe to not be similarly smeared across the concrete would be if Krieg had simply put him through the concrete.

And rebar.

My spider silk costume was tough… but, against that, it would have done nothing but provide a funeral shroud.

So, I’d learned the lesson he had to teach: I hadn’t fought him.

I’d killed him, as carefully and efficiently as I could, and now I’d use that death to destabilize and terrify his gang.

I had my living carpet of bugs pop the battery out of his phone, and then convey what was left of him, the things my bugs couldn’t eat down the stairs to the ground floor.

There was a security camera covering the exit and alleyway. A small patch of silk was lowered into place over the lens, and I walked into the alley and levered up the storm drain access grate, using my baton, careful not to touch anything with my hands. A pair of threads held it suspended, and I went on my way toward my scooter.

After I’d turned the corner, the stairwell door opened and the chitinous tide swept out, carrying its burden into the storm sewer. Two spiders severed the lines, dropping the grate back into place, and then cleaned up after themselves; another pair of spiders removed the cover from the camera and departed.

My bugs and their burden moved down the storm sewers; aboveground, I paralleled their course on my Vespa.

Ten minutes brought both routes to the beach.
I parked the Vespa and walked out onto the pier. Below, where the storm sewers emptied into the ocean, a handover was taking place. I scattered the insects, and a fresh procession of crabs took the duty, bearing Krieg’s remains and his effects out to sea. There, as deep as I could reach standing on the edge of a pier, the crabs cracked his bones with their claws and buried them; shredded his clothes and buried them; crushed his phone and watch and buried them too, all scattered in dozens of caches scattered across the ocean floor, with rocks piled above them.

Come the morning, the Empire would find that Krieg had simply vanished.

I looked out at the ocean for a time, dark as only a cloudy and moonless night can be.

Even so, there were spots in which I could see the reflection of the stars.

Eventually, I turned and walked away.

I was halfway back down the pier when I realized that, for once, things had gone smoothly.

No self-destruct, no deadman switch, no unexpected Oni Lee at my throat… this had actually gone according to plan.

I was still thinking about whether that was a good thing or not when three miniature suns bloomed amidst a thicket of lasers in the hills off to my left.

Oh, come on.
The lightshow was *spectacular*.

Lasers, miniature stars, forcefields, explosions, all of it glowing eerily through the rain... and mixed in among it, seven figures flying, weaving dazzling patterns in the air as they sought advantage against one another, or stooped to strike some target on the ground. I couldn’t really see what was happening that low: too much dust and smoke. It looked like the fight was taking place above a residential neighbourhood, some of which was definitely on fire, rain or no rain.

I shifted swarms in an effort to get a closer look, forming another crude array telescope, even as my body broke into a jog toward my scooter.

Six of them looked like New Wave — the color of the lasers, the texture of the forcefields, the way they flew — which was more fliers than I’d thought New Wave had. Also, they seemed to be fighting each other. A group of two, and a group of four.

Cousins? Something stranger?

The seventh was unmistakable, even from this distance: Eidolon.

Green-lit cowl and cape billowing in the sky, thick with muscle beneath his skintight suit, he took what should have been a cliche and turned it into something heavy with the promise of power. The strongest hero in the Protectorate, and — perhaps barring Scion — strongest in the world. The man with whatever power — or *powers* — he needed.

Frankly, he could have worn whatever he wanted — Scion had been flying around naked for *years* before donning his white suit — and people would have taken him seriously; the fact that he, like Alexandria, was one of the few who could make an actual cape look dignified only added to the effect.

Tonight, apparently, the powers he needed involved some kind of flight, and maybe a Thinker or possibly a Trump power: he was floating through the hail of lasers and projectiles untouched, not doing anything I could see. I wasn’t even sure if he was getting wet in the rain.

One of the two fliers zigged when she should have zagged, and passed near one of the erratically
moving balls of flame. She came out the other side in an uncontrolled tumble, and Eidolon turned his head, one hand palm up. She slowed, and dropped to the ground, the follow-on lasers always just off. Telekinesis? Aerokinesis? And was he dodging for both of them right now?

With the aerial fight now one on four, it grew more desperate still, a remarkable display of midair agility and lasers, the misses setting fresh fires on the ground beneath. Eidolon remained a man apart, undisturbed by either misses or direct attacks.

Eidolon clapped his hands, and suddenly there were only two capes in the air — and four small sets of expanding concentric circles, neon-green in color, where the other fliers had been, the clouds above separating as if the ripples shoved them away.

A slight warm breeze reached me, defying everything I knew about how blast fronts worked.

_Someone_ was still active on the ground: the miniature stars continued to swing toward Eidolon.

They didn’t hit him — again, he didn’t seem to do anything but drift, but they missed, and came round again, giving the impression that they were simply in very eccentric orbits.

He gestured again, and the stars careening about the sky vanished, the large blue one just before the pair of smaller red ones.

A moment, and then the New Wave flier by him dove for the ground, no lasers preceding her.

The fires crackled, but there was no sign of further parahuman combat.

Eidolon hung there for almost half a minute, and then rotated in place. Where his gaze fell, the fires snuffed out. That done, he too descended.

I reached my scooter and started it, pulling out of the parking lot.

Whatever that had been, it hadn’t taken long. A few minutes, perhaps, plus whatever had taken place before it got so very visible.
I thought about heading there, but it looked like it was under control. I turned my wheels toward home.

I’d call Carol in the morning and get the story then.


I still wasn’t sleeping well.

No reason I should, really.

Still, I’d take bad dreams over deaths among the heroes or the innocents.

I just hoped that it worked. So far, I’d done a lot of damage, but I wasn’t sure that I’d made any lasting difference. And last night… was there any real difference between what I’d done to Krieg and what I’d done to Kaiser? Beyond it being more personal last night?

The Empire ruined lives, and killed. I had personally seen Krieg kill people last week. That… was one of things that made him a villain.

Was I one?

I had personally seen Brandish kill someone last week, and I didn’t think of her as a villain.

Why not?

Was it the offer to take Coil’s surrender? Was it her catching him red-handed with a kidnapped little girl?
Did the fact that I didn’t think I could make Krieg surrender, or even safely ask the question, matter at all?

I didn’t have an answer. I wasn’t sure that I would have an answer anytime soon.

I wasn’t sure my lifetime would be long enough to reach an answer.

I hoped it would be long enough to let me find a way to sleep soundly again.

Well, no way out but through.

Time to get up or give up.

I rose, showered, and dressed myself. Fixed a simple breakfast — tea and toast, with different honeys — and sat down to think.

I could move against E88… but it wouldn’t really help much. Right now, I needed to wait. To let them realize that Krieg was gone, to fragment. If they fragmented. Kaiser’s death had been a very public failure; Krieg’s disappearance might not be confirmed for days. Hookwolf might take over as interim leader and be firmly established by the time a new official leader was chosen, leaving no room for another round of civil war. Worst case, it might not even disturb their ties with Gesellschaft. And then what?

Hookwolf would be a hard one to disappear.

On the other hand, for all his skill in personal combat, I didn’t think he was a tenth as dangerous as Krieg had been. Waiting for Krieg to make a mistake would have been a bad risk. Waiting for Hookwolf to do so… might be a good strategy. Too early to tell — not that I’d ever know for sure, except in hindsight.

I swirled the tea in my mug, feeling the warmth spin round within my hands, and looked out at the drizzling rain.
Two days.

I could spare that much to observe the impact of removing Krieg, see how the Empire reacted.

What to do, in the meantime?

I could keep working on silk production, but I’d do that whether or not I was physically present. Most of it was breeding the spiders to breed the spiders to breed the spiders that I’d use to make the silk. Black widows could have several hundred offspring per egg sac, all of which could survive if I suppressed the cannibalism, and lay a little more than an egg sac per week if I pushed it… but they still took almost two months to reach adulthood. At which point I could start the process again. Even taking a personal hand in it, not all of them would be good spinners, so the numbers weren’t quite as exponential as they looked. And if I was trying to make costumes for the entire Protectorate, and maybe the PRT team-members too, I needed all the spiders I could get.

And next week, when my Darwin’s Bark spiders arrived, I’d need to think about retooling. And I was pretty sure they’d be more finicky to handle in every sense of the word. Best known silk in the world, though.

I rested my head on the table before me. Maybe I could just save that for my own costumes, maybe a few special orders? Use the black widows for the bulk production?

I might even have to start shipping in food: I’d been managing the local insect ecosystem to provide sufficient protein for my spider ranch, and I could always recycle the spiders which didn’t make the cut, but outfitting everyone who needed it would take a lot of spiders.

On the up side, Quinn had gotten a ‘half-down, half on delivery’ structure into the contract. The initial order had been small, testing the waters, but even so… I had a lot of money, now.

Not enough to dredge the harbor, or anything like that, but enough that I didn’t really need to worry about money anymore.

Though I did now need to pay people to worry about my money for me: taxes were apparently a real issue. And not just once a year, either!

Quarterly.
So what to do with this day off?

Groceries. I had bread, hot water, tea leaves, and more oatmeal than I wanted to think about… and not much else, beyond the honey of my bees.

Maybe start furnishing this place, or the apartment.

Starting with a proper bed.

Two hours later, I had a bed picked out, and sheets, and towels and… well, there were a lot of little things I could do to make the farmhouse more livable. And they’d be delivered Friday, which beat trying to cram all of that on my scooter. It could have been a larger load, even: I was trying to take it slow, not to spend money just because I had it, but it was nice to take a day away from the hunt, and simply focus on ways to make the house more of a home.

I stopped in the parking lot.

Home?

Is that what it was?

Is that what it would have to be?

A minute later, I wiped my face and made my way to where I’d parked.

I dialed Carol, holding the phone inside my hood and out of the rain, but it went straight to voicemail.
I’d try again later, or hear about it second-hand.

Meanwhile… what next?

Faultline.

I still didn’t know much about her at all, and while the Empire was still at the top of the list, it couldn’t hurt to do a little work on my day off.

Faultline laired in a sleek nightclub two blocks off of Lord Street: Palanquin.

Just before lunch wasn’t exactly a nightclub’s peak time. I ducked out of the rain and into one of the many restaurants on Lord Street (Indian, for variety), and began to search through the nightclub with my insects.

By the time my samosas arrived, I had a sense of the place. Looking at the door arrangements, it was clearly divided into an ‘outer’ section and an ‘inner’ section. The nightclub, and a less easily categorized melange of rooms. Most of the building was a nightclub, but I focused my attention on the inner part: some offices; a residential section; what looked to be a very well equipped gymnasium, arranged primarily for something other than the usual machines, weightlifting, or aerobics. Training her people in the use of their powers?

Much more organized than anything I’d seen outside the Protectorate.

And therefore more dangerous?

Better to take precautions accordingly — overestimating someone was embarrassing; underestimating could be lethal. Absentmindedly, I noted the security camera coverage: decent externally, exhaustive
in the nightclub, nothing in the inner area. Hacking concerns?

Faultline didn’t make the headlines much. She ran a team of mercenaries who weren’t above taking criminal jobs, but took legitimate jobs too and didn’t commit crimes independently. It was a fine line to walk, one which kept Protectorate attention focused on her employers instead of her employees.

It was also exactly the right kind of air of apparent-but-not-real danger to sell a nightclub, even without the rumors that at least one of her employees could make novel — and safe — intoxicants.

I wondered which of her business ventures was primary.

Well, no time like the present. I bit down on a samosa, pulled together a swarm clone in one of the blind spots in the alley behind Palanquin, went to the service door, and ‘knocked.’

Turning a knob when what you have to work with is a very large group of insects, some flying, some not… proved tricky. Not impossible, though it did involve a great deal of precise coordination. It proved simplest to wrap the knob in silk and then pull it to generate rotational force, recollecting the silk afterward, but some of the more elaborate constructs would have been interesting…

Though nothing would have been simpler than to slip in through a crevice, and assemble my swarm within the building without bothering to go through the door. Two things stopped me: that wasn’t a capability I wanted to reveal, and — since I was invited — there was no call to be impolite.

The door opened, giving a view on a very basic kitchen.

The kitchen assistant cleaning out the deep-fryers turned at the sound of the door opening, screamed, and fainted.

I felt slightly offended. None of the staff at Somer’s Rock had even batted an eye.

Three more people barreled into the kitchen in quick succession, piling up in the door as they arrived.

The swarm-clone buzzed “I’m here to see Faultline.”
That calmed them down, a little. One of them turned around, presumably to pass the message, while the other two employees stayed in the door, keeping an eye on me. I wasn’t really sure what they thought they could do, and was disappointed that no one had moved to help the kitchen assistant.

The minutes that passed while they figured out what to do were enough for me to finish my samosas and decide on palak paneer for lunch.

Eventually, the orange one I remembered from the truce meeting came down and told the other two to grab the kitchen assistant. After they’d cleared out, he smiled.

“Newter. Glad you came by, sorry about the screaming welcome. This way.”

Handsome enough when he smiled, about my age, and fit enough to carry off being shirtless and barefoot. Blue eyes matching blue-dyed hair, bright orange skin, hairless and unmarked except for a stylized tattooed ‘U’ just above his heart… and a tail, threaded through a rip in the back of his jeans. He didn’t offer to shake hands.

As I followed him through corridors and up a set of stairs, I landed a bug on his shoulder. It promptly fell off, twitching.

This would be the one with the hallucinogenic sweat, then.

I put tracking bugs on his jeans, instead.

I could feel where he was leading me towards — an office. A woman, presumably Faultline, had left and returned in the last few minutes. Changing into her costume?

Either way, I was let into the office. The furnishings were quite nice: oak desk, comfortable leather chairs. The quality was nicer than Carol’s law firm; not as nice as Quinn’s. No windows. Was she concerned about surveillance?

Behind the desk, wearing the same costume — a funny mix between a dress and a gi, with body armor incorporated, and topped off by a stylized welder’s mask — that I’d seen her in at the truce meeting, was Faultline.
She stood as I entered.

“Skitter. Welcome. Have a seat?”

‘I’ nodded, and moved to one of the chairs before the desk. Behind me, Newter shut the door and went into another room just down the hall. Two others were gathered there, a very large man and a small woman, and as Newter entered the man bent over to tap something on a table.

For a moment, I was distracting by hearing Faultline’s voice doubled, as she spoke to my swarm clone and the words also came out of the speaker. I blinked, and thanked the waiter bringing my palak paneer and naan.

“Life can be difficult for those who seem different.”

‘I’ nodded again, my mind occupied with the implications of that room — backup, in case there was a fight? Another set of ears, to catch what she might miss? A pre-scripted interruption to help what was already shaping to be a recruiting pitch?

The silence stretched.

“I wanted to establish a channel for communication, perhaps discuss common interests. Some of my employees are similarly changed, and are interested in the company. Also, I had some questions — I don’t intend to pry into your life, but do you recognize this symbol?”

A drawing of Newter’s tattoo.

“No.”

“Are you sure? Could it be somewhere on one of the insects, or on one of the original insects that were part of you?”

I thought about that.
“I’m pretty sure the first time I’ve ever seen that symbol was Newter’s tattoo.”

Faultline put the paper back down on an otherwise bare desk and steepled her fingers.

“Let me approach this another way. Please note, I’m not asking what you remember… but do you remember anything at all about your life before you became as you are?”

‘I’ nodded. “My memory isn’t perfect, but I do remember from my childhood to today.”

“And no one made you as you are?”

I moved the column of bugs in an approximation of a head-shake.

She sighed.

Well, since I wasn’t at all who she had thought I was… that put a damper on the conversation.

“You think someone’s out there making monstrous-looking parahumans? And tattooing them?”

She tilted her head.

“Think? No. But the fact that so many have been found, amnesiac, bearing that mark… it raises questions. I have a client who wants answers.”

That kind of work wouldn’t be simple. And it wasn’t her power doing the work: Faultline could create a crack in inorganic substances with a touch, from cutting hinges to dropping buildings. A strong power, but not one that lent itself to investigations — that had to be her own intelligence. Which meant she was smart enough to be dangerous.

Smart enough to just run her nightclub, and not take the wrong kind of jobs? Maybe. That would make life a lot easier.
I piled more palak paneer on the naan, folded it, and ate.

“I wish I could help you with them.”

She nodded.

“Would you like to stay and meet the others?”

I thought about it. I’d rather not get to know someone I’d have to remove — it might make things difficult. And I still didn’t know if Faultline was the kind of presence I could permit in Brockton Bay.

“Perhaps another time.”

“The door will be open.”

She stood, and I felt the other room empty. She then escorted ‘me’ back to a rear exit — avoiding the kitchen in favor of taking another exit. It wasn’t as if I would leave bugs behind wherever I went.

Tracking bugs excepted, of course.

As ‘I’ moved out into the alley, she spoke again.

“I’m not taking back anything about that open door, but in the near term, we’ll be out of town. Chasing another lead, one put off to investigate… you.” Somehow I thought she was smiling.

I thought about that. Her leaving my town? To hunt for someone or thing who, if they existed at all, desperately needed stopping? Why couldn’t all my issues resolve like this?

There was only one appropriate reply.
“Good hunting.”

I moved the swarm clone down the road, noting the massive man two blocks ahead, and Newter following ‘me’ from the rooftops. Professional of them.

If things went well, we’d never have to see which of us was better prepared.

I found a convenient sewer grate and moved the swarm through it, before dispersing the insects.

There.

That should leave them uncertain about what ‘Skitter’ could do.

And now? Well, now I had lunch to finish. And, after that, groceries.

Lunch was delicious.

I even indulged in a mango lassi after.

It was getting on toward sunset when I made my way home, backpack and storage compartment full of groceries instead of bugs for a change. I was looking forward to some variety in my diet. I didn’t really have a fully equipped kitchen, but there were still a lot of things I could make with what I had.

As I approached the farmhouse, I felt a presence on my porch. My focus expanded outward even as I homed in on the interloper, and I slowed the scooter to give myself more time to feel out the threat.
No one else I could sense, but that was no guarantee of anything.

I set some insects patrolling, and gathered swarms for combat if necessary. I might not have my normal complement of bugs with me, having been out on a day off — or at least what passed for a day off these days — but here, among my hives… I had all the bugs I could want.

A quick look showed me a hooded figure, slender. Not that size was any measure of danger, when capes were involved.

One swarm to the roof, above the stranger. Another beneath the porch. Two inside the house, and three more flowing into place in the tall grass of the yard. With those preparations in place, I pulled the scooter into the driveway, prepared to lay it down and dive in an instant.

The stranger turned at the sound of the engine, and… Amy?
I pulled into my driveway, and walked to the door, groceries forgotten with the scooter.

“Amy?”

She turned, face dirty with ashes.

“You said you owed me.”

I nodded.

“I need a place to stay.”

I blinked.

“Of course. Is someone after you?”

She looked down, shoulders hunching over.

“Amy. Do I need to prepare a defense of this location, and if so, against whom?”

She jerked a little, meeting my eyes again.

“No.”

I nodded, but increased surveillance anyway, stepping up the screens around the perimeter, setting insects patrolling out in force — not to the limit of my range, that would give away too much, but within about half that distance. The patrols further out shouldn’t look like anything but random insect movements. The patrols furthest out were purely passive, and if a Thinker could tell I was sensing through an insect when I wasn’t making it do anything, well… nothing I could do about that.
Besides transitioning to the best defense.

I opened the door and let her in, holding it while a pair of swarms ferried in my backpack and grocery bags, bearing them up on a tide of chitin that built beneath them like a waterspout to deposit them on the counter, and then scattering to begin the work of sorting things out and placing them in their appropriate locations.

“Can I get you something to eat or drink? Tea?”

She didn’t seem to want to meet my gaze, looking over my shoulder. I checked through my swarms, but there was no one behind me in the kitchen, and no one on the other side of the wall either.

No response.

“I’d like some tea.”

I turned away to put the kettle on — technically, something the swarms could do, but moving a heavy (and later hot!) kettle around the kitchen was a little hard on them.

She took a seat at the table and waited.

I looked at her, and at the rain outside, and put on one of the cans of soup I’d got that afternoon.

Chicken noodle.

After I’d fed her and rinsed the dishes, I settled down at the table again.

“Do you want to talk?”

A headshake.
I sipped my tea and sorted through my swarms, checking on the various spider breeding projects, tweaking how much silk I could divert without slowing the breeding project, arranging a more efficient beehive location pattern (and then deliberately deviating from it in order to have backups). Altogether, it was a pleasant way to spend half an hour looking out at the skyline through some of my sentry swarms.

“Is there a place I can sleep?” Amy voice was soft, verging on a mumble.

I stood. “Sure. No bed here yet, but let me show you the chaise longue I’ve been using.”

I walked her to it and gestured at the blankets folded on it. “That’s it. Bathroom’s down the hall; shower needs a bit to warm up in the mornings but can get pretty hot, so don’t turn it up all the way trying.”

I paused a moment to see if she’d respond, then left her to it.

There were another two chaise longues in the house, but no true sofas and — until Friday — no bed for the bedframe. Were sofas easier to sell at auction? Did one of the previous owners prefer asymmetry?

Other people’s furniture choices could be a mystery.

I settled in on the more comfortable of the two, still wearing my costume beneath my clothing, arms wrapped around my chest, trying not to shiver. The farmhouse was drafty enough before I’d gone to the trouble of making sure my swarms could come and go easily that the insulation was a long way from perfect — especially at night, especially trying to go to sleep. Nothing a good set of blankets couldn’t fix, but my only set was upstairs with Amy right now.

Well, I could weave a blanket, but I’d been planning on using that silk for filling the first order the PRT had placed with me.

Other ways to stay warm…

Ah. There we go.
I woke as the sky lightened toward dawn, but pleasantly refreshed. Going to bed early had its advantages.

I checked on Amy — still asleep — and on the world within the reach of my power.

Nothing stirring that shouldn’t be.

I scattered the blanket of bees, sending them off to their work for the day.

I walked to the porch, thought about breakfast or a shower, but no point waking Amy early. Whatever had hit her, it had hit hard.

Instead, I stripped down to my costume and went for a run. I could have gotten some exercise clothes out, but better to train the way you’ll have to perform. The last time I’d been running for my life (from an oncoming wave of burning bunker fuel), I’d had the extra weight of my costume and gear.

The time before that, too.

The farm made for an interesting criss-cross of potential trails, passing through the hedgerows, in and out of the orchard, and through field and forest alike. I set down a promising one, accelerating into a pace I could comfortably hold for miles.

How long had it been since I’d run for training or fun, instead of for my life?

I thought it was since that Sunday, waiting for Coil to leave his house so I could investigate.
Not quite two weeks ago.

That had been a nice loop. The creek, particularly: there was something about water noises that was just calming.

My old route, up along the Boardwalk and Docks and back, had been mostly about the ocean view and the people-watching.

It was a little early to say what the character of this set of trails would be, but the farm looked to be more of a cross-country course. Hilly, rough terrain, jumping fences or stooping to pass through gaps in the thorny hedges, paths crisscrossing in a tangled mess.

The interesting kind of run.

Running felt different in a place so full of insects — in a place I could afford to fill with insects, without causing alarm. The moment-to-moment problem-solving of varying pace and stride to cope with the terrain remained, but without the intensity of surprise normal to running through such rough terrain.

I could feel every foothold on every path, see the whole farm from a dozen angles inward at once, and as many more outward — see myself running and simultaneously observe the way the eastern sky moved from violet to peach, wiping away the stars as it changed, the land below still dark except for where the city’s streetlights glimmered in the black: a squared-off, regular set of ersatz constellations.

And while I watched this slow change, I also moved my body through the trails, picking new routes as I went, idly considering the fastest ways to move from point to point. Then the safest. Then the trickiest. I made a game of it, trying not to leave a trace behind, to avoid crushing plants or stepping in mud. I could see how to move, always, but I couldn’t always manage that kind of precision.

Still.

Fun to try.
By the time the sun itself crested the horizon, my legs burned pleasantly and I’d been considering possible routes through the trees, running them in mind’s eye — but not with my body, of course. Awareness of my surroundings could do a great deal, but it didn’t make me more graceful or able to take a fall, just more certain of my steps.

Something worth thinking about. The Protectorate probably had spent some time on the problem of how to get around an urban or other broken-terrain environment… maybe they had a class I could take? It might be reserved for members, but no harm in asking. I knew that they did run training camps for capes who weren’t directly part of their organization, but I thought most of those were attempts to ensure smoother coordination in Endbringer fights.

I let the irregular, urgent rhythms of running through rough terrain smooth my thoughts away, and relaxed.

A timeless moment later, I felt Amy stirring, and turned my path back toward the farmhouse.

The sun had a gap between it and the horizon now, and I could see the city below stirring.

Not a bad way to wake up.

I slowed my pace and walked the last hundred yards to the house, breathing deep and even.

I made my way to the shower — there’s nothing like a hot shower after exercise.

Those would be a good set of trails. Might be hard to share it with anyone without something like my costume: too many thorns. Might be hard even so: lots of false trails and bad footing. All the better for defense, really.

Outside the shower, I set spiders to cleaning my costume. Silk can be finicky, but people had long ago worked out how to wash it. I could have gotten away with hand-washing it pretty safely (it’s the heat and drying that typically does damage). Silk and the reinforced insect carapaces I used as armor? That combination didn’t come with a tag and washing instructions, though I suppose I’d have to write some for the suits I’d be supplying the PRT. Besides, this way I could touch it up while I cleaned it: why throw something in the washing machine if you can get it reviewed by the original tailor?
I’d had other plans for the day — more errands, more trying to settle in — but I could put those on hold.

I owed Amy.

I’d planned on taking two days off anyway, and stretching that to cover the daylight hours of Thursday wouldn’t be a big concession — criminals really were more active after dark. If she still needed help come Thursday night… I’d have to think about it. A lot would depend on how the Empire was taking things: they’d have noticed he was missing by now, but the reaction could be anything from a smooth transition of power (hard, if he might be coming back) to renewed civil war (unlikely, at least so quickly).

Clean, I dressed once more, called “Shower’s free!” and made my way downstairs.

By the time Amy ghosted down the stairs to join me, I had tea ready and pancakes coming off my skillet.

“Morning.” I spoke without turning around.

She nodded, and paused behind me.

“Can I…”

“I’ve got it.”

She drifted toward the table, where I joined her with a stack of flapjacks, butter, and honey.

My plates and silverware were mismatched too, but that wasn’t really an problem except for formal meals, and I didn’t expect to be playing hostess to high society any time soon.

We ate in near silence, broken only by the addition of some bacon as dessert.

I rinsed the dishes and settled back down at the table with a fresh cup of tea. She’d said she didn’t
want to talk, and I could honor that. I could wait as long as she needed before she started talking —
well, at least until tomorrow evening. It wouldn’t even be a waste of time: I’d just work through my
swarms.

Two hours of sitting in at the kitchen table in silence proved enough.

“How do you deal with becoming a villain?”

I blinked. That was a disturbingly well-informed question. How would she even…

She sputtered a moment, waving both hands back and forth. “Not you! Me…”

I blinked again.

That was just disturbing.

Panacea was the greatest healer the world had ever seen, fixing in seconds or minutes what a surgeon
could take hours to do… if it could be done at all. Her cape name wasn’t a boast, but a fact: if
someone reached her alive, they lived. She couldn’t fix brains, and she couldn’t fix dead, but within
those limitations, she had done more good more widely than almost any of the heroes, ever. Right up
there with the heavyweights who made their names fighting Endbringers. Tens of thousands owed
their lives to her, literally. I was one of those. There were several small sects that revered her as an
avatar of Guanyin! She’d built this deserved reputation as a girl not yet out of high school.

“You’re a villain?”

I checked my swarms. Probably a misunderstanding, but best to be prepared.

She had her mug of tea in her hands, and was staring into its depths as if it had the answers she
wanted.

“I don’t think so. Not yet. But it’s only a matter of time.”
A pause.

She looked up, her words rapid. “I just want to let them die. For them to go away. To leave me alone. I slept in today, and I know there are people I could have helped, and I’m… I liked it! And then, when…”

She just trailed off.

I thought about that, wondered what she wasn’t saying. Nothing to do but address what she’d said.

“You liked sleeping in, or you liked thinking about them dying?”

“Both, maybe.” Her voice was small.

“Well, let’s test which it is.”

She blinked.

“Take a few days, sleep in. Eat. Relax. See what you think about when you’re not stressed.”

My father had taught me that. Mom had always been absent-minded — loving, but she’d forget to feed herself, let alone me, when she was in a book or lost in thought. I’d inherited a little of that single-mindedness, which meant that Dad was the one who had to insist that we get enough sleep, enough food. He called it checking the fuel gauge: if you couldn’t get something done, or couldn’t see the point anymore, maybe you were just out of gas. With what I was doing lately, I couldn’t afford that.

I wondered if anyone had ever taught Amy that.

“But there are people who will…”

“Amy. You’ve done a lot of good for a lot of people, me included. No hero is out there constantly, except Scion, because they’d go nuts if they tried. And some days I’m not too sure if he hasn’t lost it
already.”

No smile.

Well, I’d never been good with jokes anyway.

“Something to think about, anyway. Any time you want to talk, I’ll be here. Any time you don’t want to talk, don’t worry about it. Plenty of work I can do.”

She looked down.

I closed my eyes, and went back to work.

Weaving was more productive when I was personally supervising.

We had spent hours in silence — even getting through a light lunch (tuna, on crackers) with hardly a word.

She’d taken a walk afterward, through the property.

I kept an eye on her remotely.

She walked slowly, and didn’t seem to be headed in any particular direction.

Once, she stopped in the orchard and touched a tree — it promptly produced two apples for her.
Healing wasn’t the half of what she could do, then.

But when she came back in, she just nodded at me and resumed her chair in silence.

I went back to weaving. It would mean delaying the PRT’s order very slightly — most of the delay was just waiting for more spiders to mature — but I could get her a new costume for when she left. Some extra protection.

I wondered if the fact that she hadn’t made a living costume for herself was proof that her power wasn’t broad enough, or that her imagination wasn’t wide enough. Or, I supposed, that she thought imitating Nilbog in any way was probably a bad idea.

One of the two other capes with arguably as much command over life as Panacea, he now ruled a small domain — thoroughly overrun with his creations — where once the town of Ellisburg had stood. It had proved easier to wall it off than wage war against his hordes, particularly when there was always another Endbringer attack coming.

Besides, it wasn’t as if there were any survivors left to abandon.

A buzz from one of my phones roused me, and I checked it.

Amy looked over at me. “Work?”

I shook my head. “Visitors.”

I thought about it.

“There shouldn’t be trouble, but you might want to be out of the way unless you want to make conversation.”

She shook her head, and retreated to the upper floor.

I pulled on some baggy civilian clothes over my armored costume, and settled back in my chair.
It wasn’t long to wait.

Gravel crunching announced the arrival of James and Lisa in a pickup truck; I rose and greeted them in the yard.

“Welcome back.”

Lisa hugged me — a surprise, but not an unwelcome one.

James shook my hand — a firm grip, but not a crushing one.

I led them onto the porch.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Some tea, with honey, please.” James inclined his head to Lisa, and she nodded. I put the kettle on, and then rejoined them on the porch, sitting in the empty chair between them.

We sat there together, facing out over the city to the bay for a few minutes.

I broke the silence first. “So what brings you back here?”

“We can’t just come for your company?” Lisa was smiling, but then she usually was.

“You could. Did you?”

James leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m interested in a referral.”

I nodded. “Looking at getting out?”
His jaw tightened, something that I wouldn’t have seen with my peripheral vision alone.

“The boss won’t be able to deliver on his half of our bargain anymore. Lisa picked up enough money… but money wasn’t the important thing, to me.”

I nodded.

Lisa was leaning back, eyes half-closed. “Speaking of which, if you check in with your banker, you’ll find that there’s been a deposit.”

“Thanks, but that’s hardly necessary.”

She smiled. “Some of us were recruited at gunpoint, and were really glad to get out from under.”

Had any of them been recruited that way except her?

“Besides, it seemed safer to bring money and announce our retirement before you went out and ended another villain’s career.”

I nodded.


I turned my head to look at her as she shrunk away. Whatever the hell her power was, it made it dangerous to even have a secret in her general vicinity. Tattletale was a good name for her.

“I owe you. And you’re a friend.” I kept my voice calm.

I noticed James, behind me, had spread his arms slightly, fisting his hands. There were swarms in the area, of course, but it shouldn’t come to that.
She shivered. “I need a drink.”

“Don’t have any.”

She shivered again.

James relaxed his hands a little, spoke. “Smooth.”

I turned to him, tilted my head a little. “Thanks.”

He nodded.

“It won’t be an issue.” His voice was deep and even.

“It never would have been, unless you’d changed tactics significantly.”

He shrugged. “I needed someone with pull on the legitimate side of things — family stuff — and had what I had to trade.”

I thought about that.

Family was important.

“Did I cross you up, with Coil?”

He shrugged again. “Different set of problems. I’m hoping I can use some of the money we got out to get your lawyer to fix them.”

I nodded. “He’s good at what he does.”
Upstairs, a swarm made its way into my backpack, withdrawing a notebook and chewing a small piece of paper free.

Downstairs, the kettle whistled and I rose to get it, returning with three mugs and a jar of honey.

“Orange Pekoe for you, and hot chocolate for you, right?”

James and Lisa nodded, and took their mugs.

We watched the skyline darken toward sunset together.

“Alec and Rachel?”

“Thinking their options over. Will probably wait and see how things go for us.”

I nodded. Wise of them. I hoped they took this chance, but they didn’t need to be reckless about it.

Lisa spoke up again. “Taylor, you can’t wage war singlehanded on the villains of Brockton Bay.”

I nodded.

“I haven’t been. Lung against the Empire, New Wave against Coil… and it sure looked like you put the Merchants against the Empire yourself.”

James had a good poker face.

Lisa just scrunched up her face and said “We hit a stash-house, made it look like the Empire. Coil was taking a page out of your book. But this is the kind of thing that’ll get you killed!”
I shrugged. “Someday. Not yet.”

She continued. “Remember how I said most of this is cops and robbers? People dressing up and playing tag? What you’re doing is way the hell over the line.”

I sipped tea rather than answer.

When I was calm enough, I replied in a perfectly even tone.

“What happened to my father was over the line.”

She recoiled at that. “And that’s why it’s over the line! Pull shit like that, and you get someone out for blood. Someone like you. And all kinds of collateral damage! A large chunk of the city is ash, Taylor.”

I nodded.

“And people haven’t finished fixing the damage from Bakuda’s bombs, either. I know.”

She sighed.

A small cloud of bugs flew out, bearing a scrap of paper with Quinn Calle’s number. They deposited it on the side table by James and departed.

“I’ll call him, let him know I gave you the number.”

James nodded. “Thanks.”

He stood, taking the paper.

Lisa and I stood as well.
“It’s never boring. And, if I’m retiring… it’s Brian.” He shook my hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Brian.”

Lisa hugged me again, and this time I hugged her back.

“Take care of yourself, Taylor.”

“You too.”

As the twilight darkened, the pickup truck made its way down the hill.

I thought about Amy, and dinner… and then simply went to where I’d slept last night.

Early as it was, I was tired.

I pulled the bees about me, and slept.

Once more, the lightening sky woke me.

Again, I rose while Amy was still sleeping, again set out for a morning run.

It was just as beautiful as yesterday, but I didn’t feel the same sensual joy in pushing myself, finding the limits of my body and gloring in the effort.
I kept thinking about last night. The Undersiders retiring, the Merchants dead or captured, Coil dead, the ABB gone but for Lung, Faultline out of town on a long-term job… things really were down to the Empire. And the Empire, last one standing though they were, had lost six capes in the last three weeks — five of those fatally. Purity and Crusader could probably be counted as constructively lost to the Empire, if they really were trying to go vigilante. Eight.

Three weeks ago, I estimated that the Empire could call on fifteen capes.

More than half, gone.

Those losses could be replaced, with time.

If they were given time.

I wouldn’t make that mistake.

Even after the Empire was gone, other gangs would come. Krieg had named the Teeth — an old Brockton Bay gang, driven out by the Empire a decade past — and the Fallen — a group of villains who worshipped (or claimed to worship) the Endbringers — as being on the move. And they wouldn’t be the only ones interested in expanding into this town.

Still, things were going well.

Then why did my feet feel leaden?

The memory of seeing Lisa flinch, of seeing Brian prepare for a fight in her defense?

The fear that, in wiping out the gangs, I was leaving ruin in my wake?

Amy’s unknowing question, “How do you deal with becoming a villain?”
I made my way back, showered, and waited in the kitchen in silence.

When I felt Amy approaching, I started in on scrambled eggs.

Twice during breakfast she opened her mouth, but she didn’t say a word.

I wasn’t feeling talkative anyway.

It wasn’t until I was rinsing the dishes from lunch that she got up her courage to ask “Who were they? The visitors, I mean.”

I took a moment, putting the dishes up, to think about what I could say, what secrets weren’t mine to tell and which of mine would do no harm.

“Villains, kind of. People Coil forced to work for him, looking for a referral to my lawyer so they can get out of the business safely and cleanly.”

She opened her mouth once, twice.

I continued. “What your family did with Coil… made a difference for a lot of people. Not just Dinah Alcott.”

I was halfway outside when I noticed her tearing up, and I turned around.

“Are you ok?”

Stupid question.

I moved closer, embraced her awkwardly.

She stiffened at the contact, and then hugged back.
Five minutes later, we were outside on the porch and she was doing her best to work her way through my entire supply of kleenex.

I came back out with tea for her — herbal, with honey.

Something my mother had done for me when I cried.

A long time ago, now.

I sipped my own tea and waited.

Finally she spoke. “It just hit me that she’s gone.”

I blinked.

“Who?”

“My m… well, my adoptive mother, I guess.”

She was adopted?

“Brandish is dead?”

She nodded, and blew her nose again.

I shook my head, and drank.

“What happened?”
“Some case 53 — the inhuman looking parahumans — named Noelle wanted to look human again, took Mom hostage. She had some freaky cloning power — could make evil twins with a touch, and they’d have the same power as the original, or close. Had a few with her when she came, I think.”

Noelle. Lisa had given that name to the prisoner Coil kept behind the vault doors. She’d survived the building collapse, and gone hunting for healing or revenge, or both. Another unintended consequence laid at my feet. A foreseeable consequence, unforeseen and unforestalled.

And this one cost Carol her life. She’d taught me something about how death didn’t need to mean defeat, the last time we’d talked. The last time we’d ever talk. I don’t think either of us had expected it to be personally relevant so soon.

Time enough to worry about her work with Fortress later; for now the best way to pay the debt I owed her — and her daughter — was to help Amy.

If I could.

“So it was a standoff. She had a hostage, and a couple of evil Brandish-twins, plus some other clones I never saw hidden outside, and we had the rest of the family, plus Eidolon.”

“Eidolon?”

“Mom,” she smiled a moment, “Mom always said to deal with Eidolon if you had to deal with the Triumvirate. Legend might charm you into something, and Alexandria could trick you into anything, but Eidolon would play it straight. He was at dinner to talk about Fortress and Coil.”

I nodded.

“All of you, and Eidolon, and it was a hostage situation?”

“We’d trained for it. For someone taking a hostage to get healed, I mean. Uncle Neil had worked it out.”
I thought it through.

“They’d have to let you touch her.”

She nodded.

“I can’t make case 53s look normal — it’s something about how their power works on them — but I can heal them, or do other things. And if I could knock her out, that should be it. Most Masters, their minions stop when the Master goes down. So…”

“You knocked her out…”

“And then there was another me, and she went down and her minions didn’t go down. Victoria got me clear, but then she got caught and Noelle got back up and… it was a mess.”

I thought about the part of the fight that I’d seen, the end. A couple of minutes, maybe, for Eidolon to find the right selection of powers and just end it.

A short fight, given the degree of powers involved.

A very long time to watch your family fight among themselves.

“And Brandish didn’t make it through.”

She shook her head.

“It’s stupid, really. Some of the clones started saying things, because there were things they could say that would hurt worse, secrets people had kept…”

I blinked. Clones, with the powers of the original and their memories?
That could have gotten bad.

Very bad.

What if she’d reached Eidolon?

“I got distracted by… something… my clone was saying, and then Noelle was going for me again, and Mom bought me time to get behind Shelder’s forcefield — everyone who couldn’t fly did that — and… she got caught in one of those fireballs… nothing left.”

She pulled another tissue out.

I thought about the picture painted by her fragmentary description. She found out she was adopted, maybe from a villain, and then watched the woman she’d thought was her mother die in a way that Amy would feel was her fault.

All in all, she was holding together pretty well.

I thought back to my own losses.

A swarm upstairs stirred, seeking one of the small caches I had established — just in case.

“Amy, this isn’t something that will pass quickly. I don’t know how long it’ll last. I can tell you that if you go to a psychiatrist, you’ll be in therapy for months. Take a month and spend it on a beach somewhere sunny, and you’ll probably get the same effects — but you’ll enjoy it a lot more. Or spend that time here, if that’s what you prefer.”

A group of insects came through the door, bearing a lunchbox. Alexandria.

"Take this as a partial thanks from someone whose life you saved. Take it as proof you made a difference with what you did. And if nothing else, take it from someone else who's been there: cash is freedom for you right now.”
She looked up at me, eyes still bright with tears.

I shrugged.

“I don’t have answers on how you should handle this. I don’t know why you’re not comfortable with your surviving family. My own attempts at coping have… issues. But you’ll always be welcome here.”

The silence after that stretched out into a long afternoon.
Interlude — R

Roger wondered, sometimes, why it had been him.

Looking up at the ceiling of his bedroom, forearm thrown across his face, feeling the gentle rocking motion of the Protectorate’s floating base in the Bay, and failing utterly at getting in an afternoon nap before an evening patrol… well, the doubts rose up as they had so many times before.

There wasn’t anything special about him before. He hadn’t been particularly skilled at much of anything — he’d been muddling through college, three years and five majors into it when lightning struck. Figuratively.

And literally.

At first, after the shock of the crisis had died down, it had been a relief to know what to do with his life. He’d gone into the PRT, declared himself, and spent a long month being written off as a dead end, of interest primarily as the weakest parahuman ever found. He’d tried to explain, how it wasn’t about making a taser, how there were these threads that weren’t threads, and some he could thicken and others tweak, or attach extra threads, or groom them, weave them, kind of, in directions and dimensions that he didn’t have words for, and he didn’t know where they came from, or why…

It never came out right. How could they ask him to explain something that he didn’t understand either? He knew what he did, and over time they could figure out what kind of results that work produced, but how he was doing it… no. It just didn’t make sense. To anyone.

And there it rested. They classed him as a striker one, and set him to working on his imitation taser. When he did finally manage an effective voltage, he’d been given a costume, and sent back to his home town — at his request — instead of one of the bigger teams.

There followed a year where he was considered a slow learner who’d finally figured out how to use his unspectacular power. That hadn’t been a bad year, really — he was used to being thought mediocre at school or on his soccer team, and he hadn’t seen any reason the Protectorate would be different. And he was mediocre. There were those smarter, stronger, more determined… some who were all of the above, even. He respected them, did his best to learn from them, to support them… but everywhere, he wasn’t anything more than second-rate. Not in hand-to-hand, not in tactics, not on comms.
Public relations, he was… ok at. He didn’t have the command presence or natural charisma of some, nor the authority that came from sheer power. But he could be patient with people, and sometimes that was enough. It was certainly enough for the brass to shift his schedule, and put him on all the community outreach duties, and fewer of the patrols. Comparative advantage was the phrase used. He wasn’t better at it, just least bad.

Roger didn’t mind. That freed up the stronger capes to be on the streets. And if citizens were more comfortable, some ways, with a hero like him, someone without phenomenal cosmic powers, with barely enough juice to wear a costume and not get called out on it… well — he could do that. Laugh with them, be one of them.

It wasn’t giving them the same kind of assurance, that say, a grieving parent got when Armsmaster said we’ll find him like he was just stating an obvious and immutable fact that no one else had realized yet. It didn’t inspire the same kind of fierce pride that he’d seen when Miss Militia swore new citizens in — he’d seen people break down weeping after her speech about why she wore the flag as part of her costume, what it meant to her. He’d broken down weeping, hearing it, and not just the first time he’d heard it. But it wasn’t nothing, being the guy that people felt comfortable talking with, laughing with, crying with.

And it was comfortable for him to be that guy. That’s who he’d been his whole life. Always easy with people, always had a lot of friends, though few close. Being ready with a smile, ready to listen, ready to help… having a lot of friends is just what happened, if you lived life that way.

One of the routine follow-up tests on whether he could manage a stronger shock after some field experience got really weird when he melted the test equipment. And that led to a more detailed set of tests, and the discovery that his lance was constantly getting stronger… if ever so slowly. The PRT Directors had taken an interest, and that led to more time with the men and women in white coats, followed by questions about whether he could do what he did with his threads to anything other than his weapon.

And, sure, he could.

Just hadn’t seen the point: it wasn’t like the Arclance was anything special. More like a reusable taser than anything else when it had finally been approved. Half the PRT squads carried better tasers, and the other half only didn’t because containment foam canisters were heavy.

They pushed him to try it with a shield, for three months. And then six. And then he was given strict instructions to develop his defenses, to find ways to stay alive, to avoid risk to his life.
Because in five years, in ten years… maybe he could make a *difference*.

Maybe he could hurt an Endbringer. And if delaying that day for a year — or five years — was necessary to make sure the day did come in the end, then that’s what he was ordered to do. To work on his mobility, for the things that a forcefield just wouldn’t help against. Eventually, to work on his armor, make it tougher. Make it heal him. Everybody had ideas, but most of those ideas would take *months* to begin to test. The big Thinkers and the big thinkers narrowed it down and handed him a program, which he followed.

And just like that, he wasn’t seen as mediocre anymore.

Three years ago, now.

The Arclance had become something far more formidable than a taser: flexible in range and effect, something that served as energy or matter as he chose, strong enough to take down all but Brutes, and even some of those. And yet he’d spent the *least* time on it, over the years. More had gone into his shield which, well — it worked as a shield, but maybe it was more that it worked on the concept of a shield, or that it was a tool with which he could manipulate patterns of the light that wasn’t light, that you could touch… simplest to say it did forcefields. The shoes were the most recent, things that let him leap tall buildings, stand on air, or teleport in a flash of lighting. Or at least something that looked like lighting.

None of them were *done*, he could feel them, feel ways he could tweak them further, make them stronger… but the guys upstairs wanted him working on his armor for now, for the hits he couldn’t block and couldn’t dodge. And when they thought he could survive an Endbringer fight, they’d let him return to the Arclance, shape it over slow years into something that could split the heavens.

And then?

That was the kind of question everyone asked him, and he always had the same answer. “I’ll just have to do my best.” People thought he was being humble. He’d had Glenn Chambers, the man who was said — only half in jest — to run two thirds of the PRT (the PR part), tell him that those public shows of modesty played well, and urge him to keep it up even if he didn’t want to. Roger had nearly laughed in his face.

That wasn’t an act, that was the cold truth, and if he smiled when he said it it was to keep from throwing up.
It had been comfortable, being the friendly one, the approachable one, the one people liked.

Being the guy people hoped would save the world was fucking terrifying. Because, when you got right down to it, a weapon is only as good as its wielder. And Roger knew that there were people smarter, stronger, more determined than he. But no one else could use the things he imbued. They’d tested it — he insisted — and like some parody of the story of the Sword in the Stone they’d come, the greatest heroes of the Protectorate, to see if the Arclance would live in their hands. They’d even tried PRT agents, on the theory that it was the presence of other powers that was interfering.

Nothing.

He could have told them that beforehand, the way the threads or hair — or whatever it was that he did — worked, it was all routed through him. But he’d wanted the results to be different, had hoped to pass this responsibility to another. With the results the way they were, he trained instead.

And improved painfully slowly.

Maybe whatever capacity he had for personal growth had been channeled into his power… but he’d had two left feet before he triggered, too. Years of training in personal combat and tactics, and the best he could manage was a straightforward block-and-jab offense, and on tactics… well, he could follow orders. Roger trusted his team, and if they sat down afterward, he could usually follow why someone had shouted something to him — and sometimes it was just self-explanatory, like when someone shouted ‘duck!’ just before a blast went by overhead — but in real time?

All too rarely.

As it was, without powers, he lost every serious sparring match. With them, either he used enough force to put them down with a glancing touch… or he lost. Against many, he always lost anyways — Armsmaster and Miss Militia were both good enough to avoid ever getting hit, Assault was too tricky, and Velocity was just too fast.

All of his wins came from strength, and not skill. But he did have that strength, and it kept growing.

The burden kept getting heavier.

And it was a burden.
When you got right down to it, there were only a handful of capes whose power got stronger. Almost every parahuman on record had the same power their entire career. Alexandria, Legend, even Scion or Eidolon were, to all analysis anyone had been able to do, exactly as powerful now as they ever had been or ever would be. They could get more skillful in the use of their powers, more clever... but the Endbringers were like natural disasters given form.

_Clever_ wasn’t enough.

A bare handful of capes had had second triggers, a one time increase in power or flexibility. Those could be a big deal: Narwhal had gone from being the finest user of forcefields in the world, a support specialist of flexibility and skill... to someone who could manifest her forcefields _inside_ people.

Explosively.

But no second trigger had been strong enough to make the difference against the Endbringers, and no-one had ever seen a third trigger.

That left the few whose power _itself_ was to grow in power. Lung took time to build up in a fight, and given that time he had proved capable of defeating Leviathan... but not killing him. Given that same time, Leviathan was capable of sinking Kyushu and inundating most of the rest of Japan.

Not exactly a victory.

Lung hadn’t shown for another Endbringer attack since. Maybe he’d do better in a second engagement.

The Thinkers weren’t optimistic.

Crawler’s power was to heal from any damage dealt him, permanently incorporating some new change that made him stronger and addressed the source of damage, a sort of adaptive regeneration that had left him far more monster than man, a beast with far too many eyes and limbs. He had joined the Slaughterhouse 9 in an effort to subject himself to more damage, to make himself ever stronger, and slaughtered people in the hope of drawing heroes who would, in trying to kill him, make him all that much stronger. PRT consensus was that throwing him at an Endbringer could only make the things worse: if he were to defeat an Endbringer, then the world would have traded a periodic natural
disaster for a continuous rampage of unconquerable murder.

Glaistig Uaine — he’d seen the sealed files, there wasn’t much closed to him when he was looking for ideas about how to get stronger — had been able to take powers from capes, killing them in the process, and use their ‘ghosts’ in concert. The powers she took didn’t get stronger, but the possibility of a power combination was tantalizing. Unfortunately, she was completely insane: thought she was a Faerie Queen. A particularly clever PRT Director had gotten her into the Birdcage by offering her an extended vacation under a hill; she’d taken him up on the offer for the next three hundred years, following which she had invited him or his descendants to an event that — depending on the interpretation — would be something between a tea party and a genocide. Everyone was hoping that she wouldn’t still be alive then, but even if she were... someone else’s problem, by then.

You take the wins where you find them.

Scion might be strong enough already, or he might be one of the ones who got stronger. The first parahuman to appear, he had only spoken once in recorded history — giving his name in response to a question. Which made it hard to tell what he was doing, or why. He didn’t seem to strategize, he just flew across the earth saving people wherever he found them, twenty-four hours a day three hundred and sixty four days a year, without a care for whether they were in a house-fire or beneath Behemoth’s descending foot. Some thought he was a living rejection of utilitarianism; others that he’d gone mad. Either way, he was always welcome when he showed, but not exactly reliable.

That left Dauntless himself. Could he get strong enough to end an Endbringer? How could anyone know, when no one had ever killed one? Even Scion and Eidolon, fighting together and backed by heroes and villains from the world over, massed hundreds strong, had only ever driven them into retreat. Those victories, such as they were, were purchased at staggering cost. Typical casualties among the capes who fought in a victory ran from 25% to 60%; civilian casualties ran into the tens or hundreds of thousands directly, and far more indirectly.

And those were the good days.

The defeats didn’t bear thinking about.

Each of the three had their own brand of terror.

The first to come, Behemoth, was perhaps the most straightforward — a juggernaut’s challenge to meet strength with strength, directed against a target too dear or dangerous to abandon. The resulting carnage among the capes who fought him had earned the dynakinetic the name of Herokiller. Mass destruction was Leviathan’s domain: the waters above what had once been Newfoundland and
Kyushu bore silent testament to the scale of his devastation when he could not be brought to bay quickly enough. At the opposite end of the spectrum lay the endless paranoia born of fights against the only true telepath known: the Simurgh. She — if that was the word — was also the most powerful known precognitive and telekinetic, and used those abilities in concert to make those who fought her her precision guided weapons. She killed the least in open confrontation, but months or years after each attack reaped a bloody harvest of madness, war, and despair through her unknowing pawns. Doctrine now called for the quarantine or execution of those exposed to her beyond the briefest periods — even knowing that this doctrine itself might be one of her plans, no better alternative had yet been found.

And one of them struck every three to four months.

The world was slowly dying beneath that irresistible pressure, and had been for almost as long as he’d been alive. And the PRT was deliberately holding him back from those fights, from any serious fight, out of fear that he might be the irreplaceable path to victory against the Endbringers.

He sighed. No wonder he’d been having trouble sleeping.

Maybe he should get up, go and talk to someone. About anything, or nothing. The whole team was on-base right now: Assault, Battery, and Velocity were on ready alert, but Wednesday afternoons weren’t exactly prime time for crime.

He stood, and began walking to the break room. Velocity would be happy to talk about baseball, and Assault was always ready with a joke.

Halfway down the corridor outside his room, he felt dizzy. Blood rush? He was swaying to the right, almost falling.

No. The corridor was tilting. What…

The tilt reversed, more suddenly than it had come, and Roger was thrown to the ground. He grabbed a handrail, tried to stand, felt the pull of acceleration. What was going on wasn’t clear, but crisis response had a very clear step one: survive to get to step two. A thought, a crackling flash of white absence, and he was clothed in his armor, spear and shield in his left hand. Another thought, directed at his shield, and arcs of white lightning surrounded his body.

Moments later, he heard the distinctive hiss-crack of forcefield generators failing (the base’s?),
followed by the whining, groaning crunch of metal crumpling. His shield’s bubble held, though he could feel the force it had absorbed.

Roger stood, releasing his own forcefield, looked out the window now at knee-level, and saw the bedraggled ruin of the Boardwalk. The base was on shore.

Whatever it was, this would call for everyone. He broke into a measured run, making for the briefing room, ignoring the crazy angle of the corridor by stepping on air. The ominous sounds of metal continuing to settle, a slower screeching crunch than the impact, seemed to chase him down the hallway.

What he found when he got there was reassuring: most of the rest of Brockton Bay’s Protectorate had assembled in the tilted wreckage of the briefing room: Assault simply standing as if the floor weren’t tilted past thirty degrees, Battery cradled in his arms; Miss Militia and Triumph were using shelving as makeshift seats, and Velocity was fidgeting blurrily at the room’s base. Armsmaster was at the top of the room, supporting himself from the doorjamb of a broken door which let in a shaft of light — even the grey afternoon outside was brighter than a mostly windowless room without power.

“This is a worst case scenario.” Armsmaster moved his head, the blank visor meeting everyone’s eyes in turn.

“Leviathan is here and is already ashore. We can expect no support for minutes, and no support in significant numbers for what may be an hour or more. Whatever we do, this is going to be a very bad day.”

A pause.

“Miss Militia, you are to make your way to the PRT building and take charge of such Wards as volunteer for service. Hold them there and provide a rallying point for reinforcements, at least until sufficient force arrives to make seeking battle advisable.”

She nodded, pulled up her American flag scarf up to cover her mouth, and turned to go, the knife by her side shifting itself into a long spear she used as a walking stick.

“Velocity, you’re on recon, and recovery as needed. Go.”
The speedster nodded, and vanished in a humming blur.

“Everyone else — with me. We will attempt to engage Leviathan. Our primary goal is distraction. The alarms did not sound until Leviathan was already ashore; every minute we buy saves hundreds or thousands of lives as people make their way to the shelters. Our secondary goal is positioning: if we can lure Leviathan to the Scar, it will further lessen the collateral damage and loss of life. Our tertiary goal is force preservation: we need to remain a force in being and in contact long enough to guide reinforcements in on top of him as they arrive. Of us all, treat the survival of Dauntless as priority.”

Roger flushed as everyone turned to look at him.

Why did it have to be him?

“Move out.” With that, Armsmaster released his grip and slid down the floor, tumbling through one of the shattered windows onto the beach beneath and coming up running.

Maybe today was the last day that question would haunt him.

One way or the other.

Dauntless hefted his spear and followed his team through the shattered window and onto the beach.
Our quiet afternoon view of the city skyline was interrupted by a tsunami.

Literally. It engulfed the city, swallowing the line of shops along the boardwalk and rushing through downtown, carrying cars with it and crashing into and through buildings, water foaming halfway up the shorter high-rises — at which point I lost track of things for a moment, as something lit up like a flashbang sized for a city.

There were a few seconds where I wondered if a nuclear weapon had gone off, it was that bright.

My eyes saw only spots, but my swarms gave me a collectively clearer picture, with remarkable resolution at distances my own eyes could never have managed anyway. The Protectorate’s floating base was now on shore, around the middle of the boardwalk, and more or less intact, if tilted almost at a forty-five degree angle. Whatever had made the flash had come from there — some Tinkertech, at a guess.

The wave didn’t reach the top of the ridge the farmhouse was on, but it came closer than I was entirely comfortable with.

It was possible that this was just bad luck, an earthquake somewhere in the Atlantic.

Lots of things were possible.

I rose, and donned my mask.

“Taylor!”

Right. Amy.

A quick shift of attention showed that she, too, had been looking at the city when the flash went off.

“A tidal wave just hit Brockton Bay.”
It surprised me, how calm my voice was. Particularly since I could see through my insects the water beginning its withdrawal, sweeping wreckage, cars, and bodies out to sea. The death and destruction wasn’t the worst part: as the water level lowered I could make out a massive presence moving through the Boardwalk, wading through the immense weight of water going out to sea as if it were so much air.

“It’s Leviathan.”

Why should the greatest hydrokinetic known find water a hindrance?

He — if ‘he’ was the word — looked to stand thirty feet tall, top-heavy, with muscled shoulders and arms giving way to lean legs with knees that went the wrong way and a sinewy tail not quite twice as long as he was tall, lashing out behind him to balance his swaying walk. His head had no face, just a flat expanse of scaled skin, with four gashes for startlingly green eyes — three on the left side, one on the right — and it bounced about with constant flicking jerks, in sharp contrast to the rhythmic relentless movement of his gait, graceful in a sort of swinging way. A lazy seeming swipe of his left hand just missed the facade of a building at his knee height as he passed; the water answering his gesture didn’t, and smashed it to pieces. Even as the water from the tsunami withdrew, more seemed to condense out of the air in his wake, following in every movement he made like a liquid afterimage.

An Endbringer.

Here.

Not the kind of enemy I could overpower.

Not the kind of enemy I could get someone else to overpower.

Not, unfortunately, the kind of enemy I could leave be, either.

Well, maybe I couldn’t win.

But I wouldn’t give up.
The sirens rose up in the city, loud enough that I could hear them clearly here.

“Amy, I’m going into town for a bit. Would you like to come?”

It could go either way, really: she was an unparalleled battlefield medic — and by that very token perhaps too valuable to risk. I was certain her family would have worked out a contingency plan for this.

“I… yes. I can’t see, though.”

“Take my hand.”

I started moving toward the scooter, a swarm of insects bringing out the costume I’d woven for her over the last two days. Incomplete, uncolored, it was simply a hooded white robe over a bodysuit. Still better protection for her than anything else I could offer.

“I was working on a spidersilk armored costume for you. Not finished, but its mostly lacking cosmetic touches right now.”

She nodded. The cloud of bees brought it to her, and she changed. It was easy to assist her fumbling sightless efforts by ensuring the bees brought to her exactly what she was reaching for, and afterward they bore away her civilian clothes. She turned to me.

“I’m still seeing spots — can you drive?”

I nodded.

We got on the scooter, and set off. It would be interesting, driving at speed when my eyes weren’t working. Assembling swarms ahead as I advanced, getting them dense enough to serve as eyes quickly enough… a challenge. It felt a little like an out-of-body experience, or perhaps like seeing myself through a racetrack camera system, the viewpoint switching ahead with each curve.
Coming off the ridgeline, we quickly encountered debris, and then water.

Twice, I had to change my route into town, avoiding dips in the road that were still flooded. The Vespa had served me well, but it wasn’t meant to ford rivers. The roads were nearly deserted going in to town, though a significant number of people had apparently decided to flee the city rather than seek shelter, and not all of them were driving on their side of the road. Under the circumstances, I couldn’t blame them for fleeing.

Perhaps that was wiser than trying to get to a shelter.

Either way, this meant that it took longer to get into town: the same fifteen minutes that should have put me downtown left me skirting around to try Oak Street in the hopes that it wouldn’t be blocked or flooded. Not that I was sure where to go when I got there. Normally, capes would rally on the Protectorate’s base if there was one in a city. We’d had a floating base instead of one downtown near the PRT offices, something about the politics and expense of condemning a full block of downtown, if I remembered correctly.

Right now, lacking their facilities, hardened and designed for contingencies exactly like this, looked a lot more expensive.

I was heading for the PRT building — that was the next most logical place for a rally point, if it survived — and we were mere minutes away.

Still, the water was almost completely gone from the city, and I could see the beach again.

In fact…

I pulled into an alley, stopped the scooter, and grabbed Panacea.

“Come on!”

I could see with my eyes again, though a purple blotch in the center of my vision remained, and I thought she should be able to likewise.
I led her at a run into the lobby of the adjacent office building, deserted now, and strewn with sodden wreckage. We hit the fire stairs at a run. Second floor. Third. Fourth: the stairs started being dry again. I kept running. When we got to the tenth floor, I paused, breathing deeply.

Amy leaned over and threw up.

I patted her on the back, lightly.

“What…”

“Too little water, too much beach.”

Getting off the Vespa, moving more slowly, had given me time to gather multiple swarms and use them as an array telescope again, get a panoramic view of the city from the height of this building’s spire, and its neighbours’ roofs.

Leviathan had moved mostly north from where I last saw him, toward the Docks and the Scar. I could see some of the Brockton Bay Protectorate fighting him.

Or maybe retreating from him would be more accurate, launching a series of pinprick attacks and falling back to fresh positions to repeat.

On foot, Dauntless jabbed with a spear of white fire, and then vanished before the retaliatory tail-whip could catch him; two roofs further north, Assault held an I-beam balanced on one palm like a javelin sized for Behemoth while Battery crouched beneath the far end, the lines on her costume glowing so brightly it was hard to make out her figure. Without detectable movement from the hero, the I-beam launched itself forward, and Battery did something as it passed her, accelerating it further. It struck Leviathan, crumpled, and bounced off, crashing through a nearby building. Without waiting to see the result, Assault snatched Battery up, and they changed roofs northward barely ahead of a wave of water.

Leviathan followed after, unhurried, his path drawing level with Triumph. The hero shouted and the building facade behind Leviathan shattered… but there was no visible effect on the Endbringer. Worse, Triumph’s scrambling rooftop retreat wasn’t fast enough and, as the sound of his shout reached us — audible even across that distance — a whip of water caught him across the waist and he was flung clear to fall to the next street over in two different places.
Leviathan continued toward Assault and Battery, still fleeing but losing ground, only to be interrupted by Armsmaster swinging in on a line and going to melee. A blur moved toward where Triumph fell, and then away — Velocity?

In the distance, I could see it: another tsunami was coming.

Leviathan was still moving in that slow, swaying gait, seemingly unharried by any of the attacks, content to follow after and swat the heroes like flies. Was he concentrating on bringing more waves instead of the fight?

They’d seen the oncoming wave, too. Armsmaster did something, faked Leviathan out cleanly, and rolled clear before using his grappling hook to reach Assault and Battery on the the roof of the old Transatlantic Shipping building, the tallest in the area. Dauntless joined them in a flash of white fire.

And Leviathan changed gears, and leaped, moving faster than I’d yet seen him move, coming down on the grouped heroes claw first.

I felt my fingers tighten into fists.

Assault leapt to meet him, open hand outstretched in some ludicrous parody of a high-five… and launched Leviathan skyward and away with a touch, sending him hundreds of feet into the air. Assault smashed back down onto… no, into the roof, cracking it with the impact, and though Leviathan had been thrown back, the water that followed him like his shadow hadn’t.

A torrent poured down on the heroes, collapsing the roof beneath their feet and I lost sight of them as the tsunami swept in. Above, Leviathan flipped himself around into a perfect dive, landing in the wave’s wake and vanishing without a ripple.

Not long afterward, the wave struck the building we were sheltering in, reaching higher than the last one: the sixth floor, perhaps.

Any of that crowd of cars I’d seen on the way in who hadn’t already reached the ridgeline weren’t going to make it out untouched. If he kept this up, he’d eventually flood the shelters, too: they could be sealed against flooding, and they had systems to deal with what water made it through… but they couldn’t keep the doors open through this amount of water. And there was no way that everyone had already reached their nearest shelter.
Nothing to do about that that I wasn’t going to do already.

Still needed to work on the details, though.

I nodded, and tapped Panacea, still bent over and breathing deeply, on the shoulder.

““The tsunami’s hit and the water’s rushing back out again. We might as well start downstairs.””

She groaned, but followed me into the stairwell. No point going too quickly, when we’d then have to wait for the water to withdraw enough to use the streets again.

In the distance, I saw the Transatlantic Shipping building crumble and collapse, Leviathan surging out of the seething waters where it had stood like a shark breaching.

A flash of white fire on the roof across the street marked the survival of Dauntless.

I couldn’t say one way or another about the others.

We emerged on the ground floor, wading through calf-deep water.

I checked for my scooter — I’d been careful to park the Vespa in the lee of the building — but… nothing.

It was gone, and I wondered for a moment why that hurt as much as it did.

Nothing for it. We’d just have to walk.

I started slogging toward the PRT building, Panacea a half-step behind me.

In the distance, Dauntless was fighting the Endbringer alone, if fighting was the word.
He was teleporting constantly, often to stand on thin air, always moving a little bit further north… and despite everything was still taking hits. So far, he’d managed to catch them on a forcefield made up of the same white fire. His own return strikes, the Arclance leaping forth like the lightning it resembled, turned water to steam and cleaved concrete… but left no mark on Leviathan. Watching Leviathan’s lazy pursuit, I thought of cats and cruelty.

Maybe I was anthropomorphizing it. Leviathan’s desires, like its schedule or its origin, might be unfathomably alien.

Those questions didn’t matter today.

Getting through the afternoon with my city intact was the only thing that did.

There were limits to Dauntless’ mobility and shield both. A water whip, one just like the dozens of others he’d dodged or blocked, shattered his shield and knocked him to the ground below. Leviathan lifted a clawed foot, elongated in a way that looked wrong, and a dark thunderbolt took him in the chest, plowing him into and through the road, leaving a trench two blocks long. The figure rose into the air just ahead of his counterstrike, resolving into a woman in a dark costume and helmet, lighthouse emblem on her chest, cape flowing behind her.

Alexandria.

Leviathan’s attempt to stand was met with an eye-searing column of white force from the heavens that hammered him back down, and then froze his water shadow into an icy prison. Lasers couldn’t normally freeze things, but then they couldn’t normally turn corners either. Legend’s lasers could do all that, and more. The man himself dropped from the sky, meteoric, to hover beside Alexandria, his bright blue bodysuit embellished with white zig-zagging flames a sharp contrast to her more somber style.

Behind and between them, the air wavered and Eidolon shimmered into being, his blue-green bodysuit and hooded cape completing the set.

It was a scene fit for a painting, the Triumvirate hovering above a frozen Endbringer, claw reaching up in defiance, the ruined city about them. Even the darkening clouds above conspired to let down a shaft of light upon the scene, and for the first time that day I felt hope join itself to my determination.
The moment couldn’t last.

Leviathan shattered the ice explosively and a massive waterspout reached up in answer to his clawed gesture, the three heroes scattering out of its path.

I couldn’t help but notice that, for all the force directed at the Endbringer so far, he had yet to be scratched.

Above the PRT building, I could see three flares go up in succession, forming a triangle of white stars against a sky dark with clouds. That would be our rally point, then.

From different quarters of the city, other fliers rose into the fight.

To the north, I could see Purity, glowing like a nova against the dark sky, trailed at a distance by a man with a long spear, borne on the shoulders of ghostly duplicates of himself. From the southeast, I saw three figures in New Wave’s distinctive uniforms rise. In the north, but nearer, I saw a giantess loom above the low-slung houses, jogging toward the fight, a steel wolf sized to match running at her side.

Each afraid to challenge Leviathan directly, they were all rallying now to fight behind the Triumvirate.

Atop another roof, running toward the fight, I could see Armsmaster’s distinctive silhouette, two of his Halberds crossed on his back, and a burst of white fire by his side meant Dauntless wasn’t out of it either.

The battle for Brockton Bay wasn’t over yet.

We were just getting started.
Cataclysm 7.2

The PRT building was just as squat and solid as I remembered, but that solidity was comforting right now. Even the bars over the shattered windows made it feel less like a prison than a fortress. In sharp contrast to the gutted lower floors of the surrounding buildings, lights glimmered within, and I could feel people moving with purpose inside. If there was panic, it wasn’t obvious. They even had a cordon of armed agents maintaining a perimeter, which implied impressive discipline considering that a wave had hit minutes before.

There were perhaps three dozen civilians being escorted through the main doors and outside the perimeter, gently but firmly. Some of them were protesting quite loudly about how ‘even the children’ were being forced back out into danger.

They had a point.

The lead agent was explaining, patiently and firmly, that temporary shelter from a wave was one thing, but the PRT building was not a proper shelter, that doctrine forbade establishing civilian shelters beneath any of the planned crisis response headquarters as Endbringers often targeted defenders, and that there were two shelters each less than a mile away, to which they should hurry.

He had a point, too.

The bickering paused as we approached, and they all parted to let us through.

Some of the agents braced and saluted, even.

I had a momentary flashback to those hours of following Coil around remotely, watching as he walked through his base and inspected his soldiers, being treated to every military courtesy. Not something I’d expected to experience for myself, but right now anyone wearing a costume and headed toward the Endbringer fight got a lot of deference. Hero, villain, it didn’t matter. Today, the only fight worth thinking about was the one for the survival of humanity, the one where we beat the end back one day more.

Amy and I strode through the lobby and to the elevator bank. There was water here and there, and if the person manning the reception desk had a working computer I’d eat my mask… but there was someone manning the reception desk. Director Piggot ran a tight ship. The receptionist spoke into her headset and waved us toward the elevator banks, where an elevator opened as we approached. It
didn’t feel like we were moving at all, but I could sense the relative positions of my bugs, and we were moving. Much faster than the elevator had gone on my last visit, as if the building itself was on an emergency footing.

Maybe it was.

The elevator ride took seconds, and the deceleration was just as imperceptible as the acceleration: that had to be a Tinker’s work, at least in part.

When the doors finally opened, we stood on the roof of the PRT building, and a figure in gunmetal power-armor waited before the doors.

“Amy, Tailor. Glad to see you both, though I could wish it were under happier circumstances. If you’ll follow me?”

His voice was calm and his manners polished: maybe it was how he dealt with stress, maybe it was just who he was. Admirable either way — secret identities meant about the only thing you could be sure of a Ward was that they had family in their city.

A lot of people had lost family today.

If he was among them, he wasn’t letting it show.

He moved toward a tent of sorts set up on a corner of the roof. Clockblocker sat there between two gurneys, legs crossed at the ankles, a hand on each of the bodies beside him.

Assault, I recognized. Triumph… was just a torso, a snapshot of a man bleeding out, frozen in time.

Clockblocker looked up as we approached, but didn’t wave.

“Panacea! Welcome to my humble triage corner. Business is slow so far, but I have hopes of it picking up later today.”
She just shook her head and rested her hands on exposed skin for each of them; Clockblocker stood up and stretched his arms behind his back.

“Just refroze Triumph, but it’s anyone’s guess which of them will come out first.”

Amy’s voice was firmer than I’d ever heard it, and it carried through the tent.

“Barring brain injury, both will survive. Triumph won’t walk until I get enough biomass, though.”

“Will insects do?”

She nodded.

“I’ll take care of it.”

My swarms, already gathering on this roof and the others to provide vision, started redirecting slightly. I sieved through the bugs in the PRT building, searching out the less useful bugs first, and directed them to gather nearby.

Assault half-twitched, and then his flesh began rippling beneath his costume.

“Shattered spine, burst organs — extreme blunt force trauma. Water inhalation, rib puncturing a lung… and done. He’s still got traumatic brain injury, and it’s serious. Prognosis, positive with time. Oxygen uptake optimum, blood pressure stabilized. I’ve put him under. Recommend transport to a hospital.” Amy’s voice remained firm and detached as she lifted her left hand, the right staying poised on Triumph, as if to push his time-frozen viscera back in.

Clockblocker nodded and removed Assault’s earpiece before handing it to Amy.

She absently nudged it into her left ear.

He tapped his own, and spoke. “Browbeat, let Battery know Assault’s injuries are down to head stuff, return today unlikely. Then tie his earpiece into the medical net, and designate it Panacea.”
I turned, surveying the roof.

Vista leaned against a wall perhaps ten feet from me, her eyes on Gallant.

There were a half dozen individuals with binoculars and radios, two focused on the horizon, the rest on the fight.

At the calm center of the bustle stood Miss Militia, flare pistol in hand, talking to Director Piggot.

They weren’t speaking loudly, but some phrases carried clearly across the distance.

“… limited, in the time we…”

“… about Strider, or…”

“… some in, but considering…”

I looked around the roof again, looking not for who was there but who wasn’t. No Kid Win. No one from other cities that I’d seen… except for the Triumvirate, and each of them could circle the earth in minutes, at need.

Very few capes could equal them in that, or in any other question of personal power. It was one of the reasons they led: sometimes, in times like this, there really was no substitute for sheer strength.

As Armsmaster had said: “I can’t tell you effort trumps raw power.”

Right now, I wished I had even the kind of strength Armsmaster had, let alone that of the Triumvirate.

Still.
No point in wishing right now. I’d use what I had, and do what I could.

I turned my attention outward.

Leviathan was easily found by the fliers circling above him, hurling energy beams down. Purity’s magnesium-white bars of light washed out Lady Photon’s softer blasts, and Laserdream’s twisting tangle of wire-fine lasers snaked around them both, all converging on a single point at the small of his back. Enough force to jolt Leviathan forward, claws digging trails in the asphalt. Enough force, concentrated enough, to break his skin, and leave a patch the size of my fists weeping ichor.

Water whips snaked up in answer, converging on the group from seven different directions, only to be met by as many lasers from Legend while the other fliers fled.

For a moment threads of water dueled with threads of light, before Leviathan simply brought more water to bear. In a blink, Legend was gone, leaving tons of water to crash down on the buildings below… and in that same instant, Alexandria struck the monster from behind, flying through and catching Leviathan at the ankles, leaving him off balance and momentarily suspended in mid-air. White fires flickered as Dauntless flashed in and out, his strike leaving behind a cloud of steam that was promptly skewered by more fire from on high, a sustained burst of firepower from all the Blasters present.

When the steam cleared, there was a crater surrounded by gutted buildings… but no Leviathan.

He leapt, piercing through the roof of the building in which he’d hid — was hiding even the right word, for a being which barely seemed to feel the mightiest attacks anyone had been able to launch thus far? — and launching arcs of water upward at the fliers as he came. Purity evaded laterally with that same startling speed I’d seen her display when we first met; Lady Photon took it on her forcefield which, while it didn’t hold, broke the impact enough for her to dodge. Laserdream’s shield was weaker, and the water blade carried through almost unimpeded. She was fast, though, almost fast enough to dodge it.

Almost.

I saw her leg fall, and then she too fell, Lady Photon diving for her daughter as she fell toward Leviathan’s claws.
With impossible speed, Legend was suddenly floating in Leviathan’s reach, a blazing cluster of lasers reaching out into the monster’s face, superheating it until the skin glowed orange and red. But the uneven eyes sparked green as ever in that glowing face, and Leviathan twisted in midair to switch targets, swiping at Legend, water blades again preceding his strike.

A gold and white meteorite resolved into Glory Girl, who hammered Leviathan back down toward the ground, claws just short of reaching Legend. The poster girl for New Wave floated there a moment, watching him fall and spin, his tail unfurling, until Alexandria shoved the young heroine aside and took the tail across her waist instead, Leviathan rotating again to sling the older heroine into the road beneath and flipping to drop onto her, claws first. Alexandria met him rising, and they traded blows that could — and did — shatter buildings in a few seconds of furious brawling that covered three blocks and ended with him holding her whole body with one immense hand and hitting her head with the other.

Above, Legend held his stomach for a moment, the thin red line across his torso widening, then rejoined the fight beneath with breathtaking swiftness, lasers reaching out and turning corners to unbalance Leviathan with precise strikes to his legs, letting Alexandria get clear of the grapple.

A massive metal shape flew toward the stumbling beast only to be met by its unnaturally long arm reaching out, snake-quick, and I recognized Hookwolf caught in the hand of Leviathan, clawing for all he was worth, fresh metal boiling out from him until the Endbringer held a spiny set of sharp flailing metal. Leviathan turned toward the giantess who’d thrown the villain at him — his equal in height, if nothing else. She unlimbered her spear, and they squared off for a long moment.

Then Leviathan raised his left hand, and squeezed.

I could see thin streams of ichor dripping down his fist, whether from the fight with Alexandria or the attempt to match his strength against Hookwolf’s ability to extrude more metal, I couldn’t say. Fenja immediately charged the beast, leading with her spear, only to be met with a hurled Hookwolf that tangled her feet up and sent her tripping through a building.

Leviathan leapt forward to land on them only to be interrupted by Armsmaster swinging up to close with him in midair. There followed a lightning exchange of blows that left no marks on either I could see, but did leave Leviathan twisted halfway around in his efforts to catch the hero when they landed.

The dust rose up and obscured the fight from my view once more.

Right now, I would have cheered at seeing more Empire capes joining the fight, led by Kaiser or
Krieg. At seeing Lung, rampaging through the city like a smaller Godzilla. At having Coil standing on this roof, using whatever his Thinker power was that scared Tattletale to shift the flow of battle.

Hell, right now I would have been glad to see Squealer.

Was that why the Protectorate was so much more careful, so much less ruthless, than I would have been in their place? Than I had been?

I’d justified killing Krieg on the grounds that I preferred *that* to risking the lives of real heroes in a major fight. Well, right now the heroes were risking their lives, in part, because there weren’t more villains to join the fight.

And yet… was the *chance* of the Empire taking the field as they were today worth leaving this city to their partial control for more than a generation?

Questions for another day, if I lived that long.

No sign of reinforcements yet.

No sign of Eidolon, either.

A shout from one of the rooftop spotters confirmed my fears — it had been too long since the last wave. And they were coming closer together now. Twenty minutes, perhaps, between the first and second; fifteen between the second and the third?

The second had been almost half again as high as the first.

If this kept up, there wouldn’t be a city *left* when the reinforcements got here.

But as this one reached the city, it was barely fifteen feet high, and… strange. Spread out. A long, slow push instead of a devastating crash.

In the distance, hovering far out to sea, I could see Eidolon standing alone on air. Beneath the clouds
and above the sea, a green glitter in the distance, he fought his solitary battle against the ocean. Whatever he was doing wasn’t enough to stop the waves… but he’d probably just saved thousands of lives, right there, as the wave broke on the wreckage of the Boardwalk and what made it into town was a great surge of water, but not a killing wave.

How long could he keep it up? How long could he match himself against the undisputed master of the waters, and hold him to a draw?

A gurgling splurthc beside me marked the return of Triumph to the flow of time, and I urged my swarm to boil forth from beneath the gurney and onto Triumph’s torso.

“Clean cut. Perforated intestine, infections, amputation of everything below T-11; major bloodloss. All fixable.”

The insects melted, a most uncomfortable feeling even second hand, twisting until they vanished from my perception as Panacea shaped them into flesh, rebuilding Triumph’s legs.

“Prolonged loss of blood to the brain. Prognosis… negative.” Amy sighed. “Recommend transfer to major hospital.”

She lifted a blanket to cover his bare legs, spreading it gently over the young man.

Clockblocker punched the wall, once, leaning into it and resting his weight on his forearm.

He then straightened and plucked Triumph’s earpiece from his ear and offered it to me.

“We never did get you that second ride-along with the Wards, did we? Well, never let it be said we didn’t give you the full tour, including covering all the risks of the life. Browbeat, designate Triumph’s earpiece as Tailor, and tie her into the Ward net.” His voice was light, but biting.

I took it, wiped it off, and slipped it beneath my mask and into my ear as Gallant and Vista wheeled the gurneys carrying Triumph and Assault toward the elevator.

“Don’t think we’ve met, Tailor, but welcome aboard.” The voice was deep, deeper than Brian’s
even, and almost a drawl. “You haven’t had the pleasure of sitting through the lectures on radio
discipline, so here’s the short version: don’t worry about your settings. Tap your earpiece to talk to
me. In a bit, I’ll put on you on the Wards net and then if you tap and talk you’ll reach all of us. If you
need to reach someone specific, or another net, tap it twice and you’ll get me… and I’ll handle it.”

I tapped my earpiece twice.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I turned to watch Lady Photon come in for a landing.

Panacea calmly turned to her cousin, rebuilding her leg in seconds and consuming another chunk of
insects in the process. The original cut was clean enough that it looked like she’d had a one-legged
bodysuit from the beginning.

The three of them shared a brief hug before the two fliers lifted off again, making for the battle.

I wondered if that took more courage than going out to fight Leviathan the first time.

My swarms caught movement against the sky — to the west, coming in fast. Something fast, sleek,
and nearly silent: tinker-tech. It came straight for us, decelerating with startling suddenness, and
coming to a hover just inches above the roof. A hatch opened, and capes began stepping off. I
recognized Narwhal, a strangely too-tall woman covered in her trademark forcefields with another
forming her horn, and the power armor that stepped off last could only be Dragon, but the others
were only vaguely familiar as members of the Guild and New York Protectorate.

Dragon joined Miss Militia and Director Piggot in conference.

A soft wave of air pressure, and another group of heroes, larger, appeared on a different corner. I
recognized Chevalier and Myrddin, the one dressed as the archetypal knight and the other as the
archetypal wizard, as they walked toward the others at the center of the roof. Their presence meant
that the Chicago and Philadelphia Protectorates had both joined the fight.
A man in the center of the teleported group dropped to one knee, panting.

The various leaders talked, more quietly now.

I thought about trying to put enough bugs close enough to listen, decided against it, and looked to the Wards instead.

Gallant and Vista returned, bringing with them one of the capes I’d seen arrive with Dragon, a young woman with a crossbow, quiver, and a large wraparound visor.

Clockblocker and Vista were leaning against a wall, arms crossed. Gallant was standing between them, back straight and hands hanging easy by his sides. Panacea had taken Clockblocker’s old chair between the empty replacement gurneys and had her eyes closed, apparently content to wait. The newcomer was sitting against the wall, one leg tucked under her.

All of them content to wait, even in the face of this. Did they have practice? Was that what Ward life was like? A lot of waiting?

I turned my attention outward.

Nothing. Devastation everywhere, but no sign of fighting.

I could see the fliers circling, but no lasers. No dust.

Hookwolf was on top of a building, turning about as if trying to find a scent.

Had they lost contact with Leviathan?

In the distance, I could see another wave coming.
The oncoming wave passed with the same unnatural smoothness as the previous one, the water spread out until the tsunami lost all killing force and became a gentle push of water. It rose maybe eighteen feet above ground as it reached the shore.

Nothing, in comparison to the first two disasters.

Taller than the third one.

Eidolon wasn’t winning his fight against the ocean.

I looked around the dozens of capes, gathered on the rooftop, at the Wards, all of them waiting, and looked past them to the wreckage of so much of my city.

I wanted to scream at them to do something… but what?

A voice spoke in my earpiece — in everyone’s, judging from the reactions — “Leviathan has broken contact. Brockton Bay has been assessed as a soft target due to the aquifer beneath us; accordingly, the consensus is to engage the Endbringer as soon as possible, without waiting for further reinforcements. Broadly, once a location has been identified, a small group of the swiftest and toughest will engage the beast and lure it toward an ambush position. Once there, our goals are twofold: damage Leviathan enough to force its withdrawal, while keeping it in place long enough to manage that. Strider will handle transportation for most. Stand by for more detailed briefings from your team leaders.” Female, with a faint accent I didn’t recognize.

Not Alexandria. Dragon?

I tapped my earpiece twice.

“Soft target?”

Browbeat answered. “If we give Leviathan enough time, a chunk of the state sinks and we get a new Great Lake. Or possibly the bay gets a lot larger, I’m not really sure which.”
As if the waves weren’t enough of a problem.

Several of the gathered heroes lifted off, and began to fan out over the city in what looked like a
search pattern.

Aegis spoke through my earpiece. “Wards, we’ve got two longshots with us today. I do intend to
rejoin you when we’re readying for battle, but if I’m still in transit from where I’m doing S&R,
Clockblocker has tactical command in my absence, followed by Gallant. Transport for our group will
be handled by Dragon in the Fafnir. Our team’s role, once Leviathan has been found and after the
ambush has been sprung, will be to attempt to put Clockblocker or Flechette in range. We’re not to
take undue risks in the process, and ideally we’ll all make it back together, but the brass has judged it
worth finding out whether one or both of you can make a difference here. I don’t need to remind any
of you of how many lives are at stake, and I’m proud that each of you volunteered for this. This,
right here, right now, is why we’re needed.”

I looked around for reactions. None of the Wards moved much, though I could see Gallant and
Clockblocker muttering to each other — probably about the chain of command.

Tough crowd to inspire.

Then again, they all had just volunteered for what could be a suicide mission already. Maybe asking
them to cheer, or even stand up straight, was pushing it.

I tapped my earpiece. “I know Clockblocker’s power, but what does Flechette do?”

She answered. “Things I touch will go through other things, and leave a hole behind. Or fuse
themselves to whatever they’re touching, if that’s where they are when the time runs out. Some other
stuff — timing, trajectories, balance. I don’t generally miss.”

She shouldered her crossbow.

“Works on nearly everything we’ve tested it on so far. Forcefields, barriers, Tinkertech… if it hits
something Clockblocker’s frozen, there’s a mutual cancel, and that’s better than anyone else has
managed. But I’ve never tried it on an Endbringer before, and they break a lot of rules.”
I nodded. Two nigh-absolute abilities? I could see why the Protectorate thought it was worth giving them a shot. Flechette could stand off and bombard, but Clockblocker had to touch what he froze out of time, and getting in arm’s reach of Leviathan…

Suicide. Or as near as makes no difference: he wasn’t any tougher than I was.

And he was simply leaning against the wall, looking bored.

I could respect that.

If we had to wait, I could at least help with the search.

I turned my attention outward, surveying the city.

I saw a wreck.

And yet the damage could have been worse. I could see gentle rises which had channeled the flow, leaving some buildings wet but relatively untouched while those a few hundred feet away had borne the full brunt of the rushing waters. Far enough south, or west, and the hilly terrain had again left more intact than I’d feared.

The PRT building was in one of the areas which had taken the worst of the waves. Bad luck or Leviathan being clever?

Still, the city as a whole didn’t — quite — look like the Boardwalk. And even the Boardwalk was still there, still serving as a breakwater for the rest of the city, even if it wasn’t so much a row of buildings as a row of wreckage now.

Not much activity on the streets right now. Pretty much everyone had either gotten to their shelter, had decided to hunker down where they were, or…

Well.
Endbringer attacks never had light casualties. The attack on New York had been just before I was born, but I still knew classmates who’d lost family then, and more whose families had moved away from there, or away from other metropolises, to what was then a medium-size town… fueling its growth into something now large enough to rate its own Endbringer visit.

Irony?

Without traffic on the streets, things were quite still. It didn’t look like there was enough water in the streets for him to be in it, and what water there was — the pools lingering in some depressions aside — draining away quite rapidly into… into the storm drains.

I tapped my earpiece twice.

“Do we have anyone checking the storm drains or sewers?”

I caught a muffled curse from Browbeat, followed by a long silence.

Then his voice in my ear again “So… Dragon was more polite about it, but yeah… they'd thought of that already.”

I nodded.

Worth asking anyway.

I returned to scanning the city. Fliers circled above, quartering the city or spiraling outward. Legend, up just below the cloud cover, was simply hovering in place and rotating. Could he see things clearly enough from that height?

Movement on a rooftop, too large to be human… Hookwolf.

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, and more nothing.
Except for another wave on the horizon.

Waiting meant losing.

Just like a fight with Lung. Was he looking for a rematch?

Would it matter? The last time they’d fought, Leviathan had still sunk Kyushu.

Fine, don’t assume Lung would save the day. What about anti-Lung tactics? Sudden overwhelming force?

The plan, as given by Dragon and Aegis, already called for as massive a strike as could be managed.

Letting him get clear of the fight, and ambushing him when he thought he was safe?

That would involve writing off Brockton Bay, and then trying to fight the world’s greatest hydrokinetic at the bottom of the ocean.

The first part of that idea was unacceptable, and the second part… would be a very bad plan.

It was frustrating. So many of my enemies had been as fragile as I was, with Lung himself as the great exception. I didn’t have a strong enough power to fight straight up, and all the victories I’d had had come from embracing that truth. Because I couldn’t win in a fair fight, I’d had to learn how to fight unfairly. Surprise, allies, traps… I had used them all. I’d gone a long way on cunning, care, and calculated ruthlessness.

I didn’t see how any of those qualities would help me fight something better understood as a natural disaster. I couldn’t hide from an earthquake, or trick a tsunami into fighting a volcano for me, and it galled. This was the biggest fight I’d ever been in, by any measure: participants, scale, casualties… importance. I needed this to be a victory.

For there to still be a Brockton Bay afterward.
And I couldn’t think of any way to affect the outcome.

The wave came through — still nothing like a true tsunami, but over twenty feet now.

I couldn’t tell whether Leviathan was getting stronger, or Eidolon was getting weaker.

Bad news, either way.

The part of me that was monitoring my swarms’ view of the city noted several fliers converging over an area northwest of here.

Then the way the buildings slumped down, toppling into each other, as a chunk of land just… sank, water rising up where once roads and homes had been.

I felt my hands form fists.

My thoughts were interrupted by another transmission. “Leviathan has been found.”

All across the roof, capes stood up, checked their weapons or costumes, and said hurried goodbyes.

“Wards, please board the Fafnir now.” Dragon’s voice, with that same odd almost-accent.

Gallant and Flechette were the first into the Fafnir, I followed with Vista, and Clockblocker brought up the rear.

Dragon wasn’t with us, though that didn’t seem to hinder her in piloting her craft.

Or keep her from noticing who had boarded it.
“Tailor, I’m afraid you’re not a Ward.” This time, she spoke through the vessel’s speakers.

Clockblocker clapped me on the shoulder as he squeezed past. “Ride-along for a prospective member.”

“I am sorry, but that’s not within your authority. Even in situations as desperate as this, there are rules governing when non-villain minors…”

I flushed beneath my mask, tuning her words out. What good would growing up to be at a future Endbringer fight be? What good would it be to stay out of combat and manufacture tools for others? I didn’t see Dragon sitting at home, making more PRT equipment or remote piloting vehicles like these instead of coming herself.

Besides.

This was my home.

The gathered capes had blinked away, Strider teleporting them out. The fliers were on the move independently, including Dragon in her armor. The Fafnir alone remained on the rooftop, and if it wasn’t going to leave with me on it soon then I’d have to get off. Have to accept that staying out would be my major contribution to the fight. And that it would be that way only because I wasn’t a villain, due to some inflexible, rule-bound…

“It’s within my authority.” Armsmaster’s gravelly voice had never been so welcome. There were pauses when he spoke, holes in between words where he might have been breathing. If true, he was running flat-out. “We all die someday. How can one die better?”

That… was less than encouraging, but I thought I knew what he meant.

And agreed.

The Fafnir’s doors closed and it lifted off, smooth and silent and virtually imperceptible.

I breathed out an immense sigh of relief at the realization that I would, after all, get a chance to get
myself killed.

Then I tapped my earpiece once. “Whoever thought of asking Armsmaster… thanks.”

The speakers replied in Dragon’s voice. “You’re welcome.”

I blinked.

Huh.

Not as inflexible as I’d thought, then, if she’d been asking for permission on my behalf while telling me that there were other ways to make a difference. She must have texted Armsmaster while she was talking to me and lecturing Clockblocker, flying her power-armor, and remote-piloting the Fafnir. That bespoke some serious ability to multitask. Or maybe most of those activities were on automatic pilot: for all I knew, she had a macro that texted Armsmaster to tell him his Wards were up to something and needed supervision.

Mere minutes later, we were unloading onto a roof facing the growing lake; Aegis had actually beaten us there and was already looking over the terrain. Most of the capes were to our southeast, and were busy setting up for an ambush; the Fafnir lifted off and moved to join them.

I began gathering swarms again reflexively, but for the moment looked out on the water with my own eyes.

Fliers were beginning to make strafing runs on the lake, and I could see Leviathan breach out of the wreckage to rip one trailing green fire cleanly in half; two heroes immediately cannoned into him, moving him toward the shore and ambush.

Only one of them fought clear of his attempts to twist round and catch them. The other dropped beneath the waves in Leviathan’s claws.

I wasn’t surprised when Leviathan surfaced again empty-handed in an effort to catch Legend, who zig-zagged just ahead of the claws until Alexandria swapped out with him.
The one after her in playing bait, armored in what looked like earth and debris, was very tough.

Tough enough to last half a minute in his claws, while some of the greatest heroes the Earth had seen tried to force her release.

They scarred Leviathan and kept him moving toward the shore, but he didn’t release her so much as wash her remains off.

The bait group were toughest and most mobile of us, and he was killing them almost as fast as they came.

We were probably all going to die.

I looked round the roof, seeing each of the Wards as if for the first time.

Flechette, stolidly loading and checking her crossbow, the tightness around her eyes clearly visible through her visor.

Aegis, standing at the edge of the roof, looking out at the slaughter, his shoulders hunched forward.

Gallant, standing at ease in his gunmetal powersuit. He could sense emotions as well as impart them with his blasts: he had to be feeling our worries as well.

He didn’t show it.

Vista, bright green dress and visor doing nothing to lighten her grim expression.

Whatever fears Clockblocker had, the full-face mask hid them.

He stretched lazily, and then said “Hey. It could be worse.”
The silence that followed was punctuated by the crash and hiss-crack of combat, as the heroes playing bait attempted to draw Leviathan ever nearer.

“Could be raining.”

Flechette was the first to snort, and it spread through all of us on the roof, dying down after a time…

And then the first raindrop fell.

So it was that when Leviathan came ashore and battle was joined in the rain, we were laughing almost too hard to breathe.
Leviathan slowed as he came ashore — not that slow was the word, precisely — but he went from keeping pace with the speedster running on water just ahead of his claws to losing ground.

Another one of the Alexandria package capes took up the role of bait: fast enough to get inside Leviathan’s guard with a dive from high above; powerful enough to hammer the Endbringer up a dozen feet into the air with a fishhook maneuver that paid no regard to inertia, and strong enough to lift Leviathan momentarily and shove him toward the waiting ambush.

Not fast enough to get clear without being caught.

Not tough enough to survive it long either.

Strong enough, and dedicated enough, to spend those last seconds dragging the Endbringer behind him through the air toward the ambush.

He managed another half-block before those backward-jointed claws touched the ground again. His strength — enough to move the Endbringer’s mass in free fall — was not equal to Leviathan’s, and Leviathan simply planted his feet and twisted him in half, discarding the pieces over the small park that they’d landed near.

I wished I’d known the dead hero’s name.

He’d died well, but hadn’t — quite — gotten the Endbringer into the ambush. Alexandria came in and hammered him into the ground, accepting the grapple for a chance to move him another half-block and hold him in place for a few precious seconds.

I didn’t hear the word given — we weren’t tied directly into their network — but I saw the results.

Forcefields went up on all sides, a confused and overlapping melange of powers except where one of the strongest was at work. I recognized Bastion, almost singlehanded anchoring the north end of the box; Narwhal’s more organic shapes rose up to close the way he’d come to the west.
Moments after, everyone cut loose, with Alexandria still in the Endbringer’s grasp. I knew she was tough — she’d been going toe-to-toe with Endbringers longer than I’d been alive, and hadn’t even been scratched yet — but holding Leviathan in place while the other capes unleashed seemed to me like it would be risky.

The storm of lights made it difficult to see, all the more so because Leviathan’s water shadow absorbed some blasts, replenishing itself as it was boiled away into steam which in turn obscured, diffracted, and distorted. Not all of the beams operated like actual light, with many being so-called ‘hard light’ and others being still more obscure and unintelligible to physicists and laymen alike, but enough did to make things still more strangely colorful.

The result was coruscatingly beautiful: a madman’s cubist attempt at ‘Death by Rainbows’.

Some capes were going for the biggest blast they could manage; others were trying the other extreme: Dragon appeared to be targeting a full set of relatively small beams from her armor and Fafnir on a single point, and Legend’s contribution was a hair-thin beam so bright it left its own distinct afterimage against the blurrier purple blotch on the inside of my eyelids from the other blasts.

I closed my eyes, and then put my arm over them, and then when that didn’t appreciably reduce the glare I turned away. I could still see through my bugs, and I noticed none of the Wards were having any issues.

The visors they all had must be Tinkertech: my own quite decent glare-reducing sunglass lenses weren’t nearly up to dealing with this light show. A tangible manifestation of some PRT procurement bureaucrat’s hard work — I felt some momentary sympathy for them having had to face Quinn Calle on my behalf.

Flechette raised her arbalest, and launched a quarrel downrange — the distance looked too great to me, but she was the expert here. It flew straight and looked like it had hit, but while I could rotate bugs to keep from being blinded by the intensity of the light, I still couldn’t really see too much of the Endbringer: too much steam and light and chaos.

Abruptly, most of the display cut off. Leviathan was bleeding more than I’d yet seen, skin scoured away in some places or with irregular holes in others, piercing deeper in his body than I could see — some glowing with heat — but he was still there. No quarrel visible from any angle, and very much alive.

And active.
The southern end of the box was held by an assortment of overlapping forcefields: weaker powers individually, gathered and arranged in an effort to make up for it. Some advantages, in theory: if Narwhal or Bastion fell, or even lost concentration, a whole section would fall at once. If one of the crowd gathered to the south fell, another could step forward.

Ablative defenses.

Some drawbacks, too: Leviathan had slammed into that overlapping mess of forcefields, and — at the expense of a dozen of those smaller fields — they had stopped him cold.

But only his body.

His water shadow kept going, and flowed through the gaps he’d created like the the story of the Little Dutch Boy in reverse. The water crashed through the defending capes on that side like a smaller tsunami; I don’t think any died, but I could see force-field generators overturned and capes knocked over, and the fields they’d sustained flickered out.

Chance? Or had he planned that?

Either way, it also brought him close enough to the barriers that the ranged assault on him diminished, as people started picking their shots more carefully.

Flechette reloaded, fired. The bolt flew straight, reaching one of Leviathan’s backward-bending knees, and vanished… but that leg folded a moment later, and I could see the quarrel vanish into the ground beyond Leviathan. It had gone through air, Endbringer, and two of the several forcefields deployed in that area like nothing, and for all I knew it might be going still.

And in that moment, the defenders sortied, charging Leviathan to buy precious moments while the barrier capes reorganized and reset themselves.

Chevalier was first through the sally port in the forcefields, a man in sword and armor matched up against one of the dragons of this age. His sword grew as he charged, until it was almost as long as Leviathan was tall. He swung it as if it were light as a feather; it hit Leviathan like an avalanche. The return blow from Leviathan didn’t rock him either; no point carrying a shield when he already carried a sword far larger than himself. How it could be light enough for him to swing, and heavy enough for Leviathan not to knock him over at the same time was beyond me, but powers didn’t exactly
Hookwolf leapt from one of the nearby roofs, rising right over the forcefields and going for Leviathan’s head while he was down to one knee. We still weren’t sure if Leviathan ‘saw’ with his eyes, but it wasn’t a bad choice of target. It was still a predictable approach in ways a flying cape wasn’t, and Leviathan raised one hand to catch Hookwolf for the second time today. And while Leviathan squeezed with that hand, the other gestured toward Chevalier… and the water answered with a thundering rush, funneled right toward the opening the heroes were preparing to use.

Others were charging from the other sides of the killbox: I recognized Armsmaster coming from the east, but crossing that ground would take precious seconds. For the moment, the south side fought alone.

Chevalier’s armor let him stand unmoved in the crash of water that followed, though judging from the fact that it had an open eye-slit I didn’t think he would do well with being submerged. Behind him, Myrddin jabbed at a point in the air and Leviathan’s onrushing water shadow surged into that point, vanishing into a tiny sphere; Chevalier stood as firm against that immense pull as he had against the original push. When Myrddin sent that sphere against Leviathan, for all its marble size it knocked the beast back further than I’d seen anyone but Alexandria manage, clearing a space for the other capes on foot to join the fray from all sides of the trap, Dauntless’ white fire flickering among them.

Leviathan was actually using Hookwolf like an improvised golf club, each swing tossing one or two capes high into the air. To his credit, the Empire’s current leader took that treatment the same way he did the slow and killing pressure Leviathan was applying with his grip: with a furious disregard for his own safety, and indeed for anything but the next chance to hurt the Endbringer before him.

Or at least the next chance to try. Hookwolf could scrape Leviathan, even cut the beast — shallowly.

Nothing more.

Alexandria herself was off to the side; costume half-melted against her own invincible self, blinking rapidly. I guess that earlier display had been brighter still for someone right in the midst of it, but she shook her head and launched back into the fight, knocking Hookwolf free and then staying low — those who could were still striking from range, but aiming high to avoid hitting allies. Some sparks flew off of Leviathan’s face, near one of the eye-holes, and I traced them back to Miss Militia, set up two rooftops away with the biggest rifle I’d ever seen: bipod-mounted and still larger than it looked like she could carry.
On our roof, cheers had gone up at Flechette’s shot; she herself reloaded while her Tinkertech arbalest drew the string back.

“I think that was a hit!”

Vista had actually jumped up, seeing it.

Clockblocker punched the air.

I found myself smiling, not that anyone could see.

“It went all the way through his knee, out the other side, and into the ground.” I was speaking loudly, to be heard over the noise of the battle taking place two blocks away. “Will it stop?”

“Couldn’t see if the first one had done anything, couldn’t even see if it had hit. Put a little extra on that one — it’ll have worn off already. I’ll be more careful next time.” Beneath her calmness bubbled satisfaction: Leviathan was up on both legs again, reaping a terrible harvest among the capes facing him, but she’d brought the Endbringer to his knees for a moment.

Literally.

If that didn’t justify pride, nothing did.

Even Gallant, always calm and collected, had a touch of excitement in his voice. “How large an object can you do that to?”

Below, Chevalier’s blade again struck true, saving a hero face down in the mud long enough for two more to get him clear… but it pushed the beast more than it cut him. An inch, or inches in depth, nothing more.

If he could actually do damage the way Flechette could, he could cut Leviathan in half with one swing.
“Big. I tried that with Chevalier once. Something about the way my power works didn’t play nice with his: his sword… came apart somehow. It was strange.” Flechette picked her moment, launched. “Besides, it’s too easy for someone else to hurt themselves badly with something I’ve charged.”

Her shot sailed just a few feet high as Leviathan dropped into a shambling charge, overrunning the line of heroes and crushing two before great hands of asphalt rose up from the road beneath and grabbed his heel. I could see the moment where her power wore off, as the quarrel went halfway through Leviathan’s still-standing water shadow like the water was so much air, and then stopped like it had hit concrete. The asphalt didn’t hold Leviathan more than a moment, and he shattered the grasping hands and followed the shrapnel through the heroes’ ranks again, smearing two more against the ground and pinning a third to the ground with his claw like a butterfly in a case as he rampaged all the way to the opposite forcefields.

The dodging — if that’s what it was — worried me.

Chance?

No way to tell.

The fact that those five seconds had left us with as many down and probably dead worried me more. That wasn’t even close to a sustainable rate.

Flechette tsked. “Can’t shorten flight time without getting closer.”

We all looked to Vista.

She shook her head. “There are too many people fighting around him. I can’t change things much with people already in the way, and I’m not sure what it would do to your aim if I could.”

Clockblocker shrugged. “We needed to get in arm’s reach for me to try anything anyway. Chief?”

Aegis glared at Clockblocker a moment. “We won’t get up among the Protectorate forces, let alone into touching distance… but we can get a roof or two away from Leviathan.”
Most of the roofs we could run across, and Vista shrunk the one empty street we had to cross into a sidewalk crack we could skip over.

I had no idea what would happen if one of us fell into that distortion, but breaking someone’s back might be the least of it.

Over the minute and change it took us to reposition, the fight went on.

On the one hand, the Protectorate tactics were working as designed: Leviathan was for the moment contained, and taking visible damage. Every time Leviathan tried to go through the forcefields, they slowed him up long enough for the others to re-engage and keep the fight going on the chosen killing ground. Legend, Purity, Dragon, New Wave and a dozen other capes were pouring fire into him from above the whole time.

On the other hand, despite fighting the fight we wanted, we weren’t getting any of the results we’d hoped for. None of Leviathan’s wounds so far passed beyond superficial… and while Panacea could heal any of the living who made it to her, she could do nothing for the dead. That minute and a half alone cost over a dozen capes dead. We’d had maybe a hundred to start with, had taken losses just to get him here to fight, and not all of us could fight in melee anyway.

I was not at all confident we would win if this became a question of attrition. We wouldn’t run out, not completely… but we might run down to the very few who could and had done this a dozen times before. The veterans, the ones who went to every fight, and came back too, whether in victory or defeat, and then got up and went to the next one anyway.

The strongest among us, in many ways.

Legend, Eidolon, Alexandria, Chevalier, Myrddin, Armsmaster, Dragon, Narwhal… the list went on. Strong as they were, they hadn’t ever been enough on their own, though each could tip the balance under the right circumstances.

Scion — if he showed up while we could still fight — might be enough to win this day. The golden man, the first parahuman and still in some ways the strongest, had helped beat back Endbringers before, in the same impartial way that he did disaster relief or stopped violent crime: one person at a time. But he devoted the same apparent attention to house-fires as he did to Endbringers, and he didn’t make it to all the fights.
He didn’t make it to half of them.

I checked the sky with my swarms anyway.

Nothing, not that that meant much with his speed.

On the up side, I was pretty sure Eidolon would only have to hold out for one wave, maybe two, more.

After that, either Leviathan would be gone, or the defenders would be mostly dead.

The crowd struggling around Leviathan’s feet was already almost half the size it had been when Chevalier led his charge. I’d worried about how they’d get back through the barriers once they were reset; now I thought that their numbers would be small enough that it might not be a problem.

So, we were losing.

I’d been there before, and had gotten through by being cunning, and careful, and ruthless.

Cunning and care weren’t helping much right now.

The rain had only continued to get heavier, but as we came up on our destination I could feel the spray from the battle with Leviathan, violent enough that it reached three stories up and most of a block.

Flechette lined up a shot, sighting over an air-conditioning unit, and delivered another shot which lodged itself in Leviathan’s chest: where his heart would be, if he were at all like us.

Whatever he kept there, it didn’t have a problem with a crossbow bolt drilling through it.

Aegis stood on the edge of the roof, looking toward the fight.
He wouldn’t have noticed a wound like that either, with his redundant and adaptive biology, so it wasn’t unprecedented.

I’d been thinking, looking for an answer.

Something, anything.

Gallant’s question; Flechette’s answer; the risks of anyone else using her trick…

_Aegis._

“Does what you do affect the ballistics at all?” I was practically shouting to be heard over the noise of the battle.

She shook her head and shouted back. “If I do the whole thing, yeah, the fletching doesn’t work. If I do the leading edge? No. Part of why I just do the tip.”

I tapped Aegis, and pointed at the row of air conditioners on the roof. “Think you could throw one of those far enough?”

He looked at me a moment, then nodded and simply ripped one of the air-conditioning units out of the roof.

That was the closest I’d ever been to someone using superhuman strength — not counting those desperate clashes with Lung, when I really hadn’t had time to watch and think about it — and it was in its own way something as thoroughly alien as flying. Someone his size and weight and leverage just shouldn’t be able to do that, and my brain locked up for a moment on the impossibility I’d seen. Another part tracked the trajectory as he threw it, watched it go through the air awkwardly but accurately to bounce off Leviathan’s muscular shoulder and to the ground beside Armsmaster.

He turned back around, and I could _see_ Flechette’s smile through her ski-goggle sized visor, her cheeks were drawn so tight.

Aegis was smiling pretty hard himself, turning to the next unit, but paused. “Friendly fire?”
“Timing and trajectories are one of my minor tricks, and I choose how long the effect lasts, up to about a minute. If you miss, it’ll go inert before it gets below twenty feet from the ground.”

Her quarrels had punched holes right through the Endbringer — small holes, the size of my finger. From what I could see, they were already healing, and the Endbringer was still fighting. Something that size would make a hole a person could fit through, depending on where it hit.

Would that be enough for him to feel it? He’d been practically ignoring some of the strongest attacks from the strongest capes throughout the fight.

It would be more than anyone had ever managed before, and Leviathan had been driven into retreat before.

It would have to be enough to make him notice. To make him fear, if he felt fear, to give him reason to go.

To make him leave, for any reason or none, and let us begin to try to put the wreckage back together.

Aegis ripped the unit out and held it ready to throw.

“Anything I should know before I throw?”

“I’m going to try to leave your handholds alone. Don’t touch it anywhere else, at all, after I’ve touched it, and there’s a decent chance you’ll lose your hands anyway. I’ll give you a count to throw. On three.”

Flechette reached out and tapped the air conditioning unit. “One…

I held my breath.

Below, Legend’s lasers struck the Endbringer’s face, corkscrewing into the eye-slits in an effort to blind while Alexandria led another charge, Armsmaster a step behind and Hookwolf looming above
them both, but still knee-height to the Endbringer.

“Two…”

Leviathan absorbed the blows upon his bleeding flesh and struck back, his too-long arms letting him reach the ground without stooping, hook a cape in power armor up, and crack the shell like a walnut with one clawed thumb.

“Three!”

Aegis threw, and his right hand was erased by the outbound projectile, cut off just below the wrist.

He held it with his left, the stump clotting over almost instantly, his whole attention on the tumbling trajectory of our hopes.

His aim was true, and it flew straight toward Leviathan’s muscular shoulder.

Until the moment when Leviathan dropped and whipped around, flinging several heroes into the air and wrapping his tail around Alexandria as he had when she’d saved Glory Girl’s life. None of the capes clipped the inbound air conditioner, but Alexandria met it going the other way with as much speed as Leviathan could generate at the end of his rotation.

Alexandria was close to physically invincible. Tough enough that the projectile didn’t simply go through her as it had everything else so far, Leviathan’s tail included.

Not tough enough that she could ignore it.

I saw her bleed and then I saw her fall, Legend diving with impossible speed to catch her and being met with a rising backhand that sent him flying back the other way.

No, not flying.

Falling, in an uncontrolled parabolic trajectory.
Well, we’d found a threat Leviathan noticed.

And now he was leaping, over a hundred feet into the air.

Directly above us, and descending.
In those terrible few seconds, when Leviathan started to fall, it felt like I had forever to think.

Contingencies for when your enemy out-escalated you?

I had those, from dealing with Lung. Disengage and try again later.

Good plan.

Little hard to pull off, under the circumstances.

Specifically, directly under a falling Endbringer.

Hit him while he was in the air? Leviathan was free-falling, and unless he had been hiding the ability to hydrokinesis his way into leaping from raindrop to raindrop — which would be complete bullshit — we might have a tiny window to hit him before he killed us.

Flechette hadn’t reloaded her crossbow. She didn’t have the arm to get anything up there that fast. Coordinating another shot with Aegis — besides the fact he had lost a hand — would take… too long.

And while my mind ran through those plans, I flinched away, my body instinctively trying to take shelter under yet another of those rooftop air conditioner units. My bugs started swarming up, my desperation reaching through them and telling them to attack the source of my distress.

Not that either would make a difference. I could see just about everyone else ducking away, too.

Not Aegis.

Aegis didn’t take that moment to think, he just launched himself straight up.
He wasn’t as strong as Alexandria, not even a fraction as strong. But he was strong enough, and moving fast enough, to momentarily halt Leviathan’s descent.

The water shadow continued unchecked.

Which changed our situation on the roof from ‘about to be killed by falling Endbringer’ to ‘about to be crushed by tons of falling water.’ Immediately followed by the previously scheduled Leviathan, in case the water wasn’t sufficient.

Clockblocker straightened, jabbing one arm up into the air… and the leading edge of the descending mass of water froze in place in a distorted dome around us, locked outside of time, transparent but temporarily immutable on some fundamental level.

Which is why we had a clear view of Leviathan landing on those scant feet of time-frozen water and smearing Aegis across the barrier like a bug on a windshield before launching a furious series of blows to no effect.

Clockblocker tilted his head, hand still upraised and tapped his helmet with the other, speaking through the radio to be heard over the sound of Leviathan trying to batter his way through the unbreakable shield.

“Gallant, you’re in charge. Get them out.”

His voice was terribly calm, without any of the laughter normally dancing beneath his words.

I looked again, and saw his hand embedded in the same time-locked water that even Leviathan couldn’t scratch.

It hadn’t been five seconds since Leviathan leapt, and this would be the second time a leader of our little team had sacrificed himself to give the rest of us a chance.

Above us, the battle resumed as some of the heroes attacked Leviathan, who batted one away on the approach before the melee began again.
Gallant gestured north, but Vista was already in motion. A few steps took her to the edge of the barrier. The scant space between water and roof widened, and the gap across the road distorted as she began to open the path we’d need to leave.

Flechette turned to Clockblocker, brandishing one of her quarrels. “Not without you.”

He shook his head. “You could cancel my power, but then we all die. Go.”

She cursed, and turned away… and then stopped.

“Anyone have a tourniquet?”

Vista turned around, removing her costume’s belt and underhanding it to me.

I turned to Clockblocker and Flechette helped me wrap it around his right arm, a momentary application of her power punching the holes we’d need to tighten it enough.

It was pretty strange, watching Dauntless and Armsmaster fight directly overhead on the glass-smooth surface of the time frozen water with another part of my attention, the one taking blows on his forcefield or teleporting out of the way and the other simply dodging like he’d been fighting on ice his whole life. The one time I thought Leviathan had Armsmaster dead to rights, he was baiting him into position for Chevalier to pole-vault onto the roof using his momentarily enormous sword, taking the monster in the face with a kick that actually staggered him backward into a flying charge from Dragon.

She unloaded a barrage of missiles — more missiles than looked like could possibly fit into her suit — and then flew forward. Trying to push Leviathan off of the time-frozen water to give us a chance to get out? Whatever her aim, it didn’t work. The Endbringer simply set his feet in the water flowing from his shadow, using it as firm footing, and moved through the missiles to meet her powersuit in melee.

A tremendous explosion resulted, and only one of them remained.

Trying to tie the tourniquet with my hands, when I could have been using my bugs for finicky work instead, was actively frustrating and I made a note to start carrying around silk threads in bulk.
Clockblocker’s running commentary didn’t help.

“Ladies, I don’t mean to rush a moment I’m enjoying so much, but I don’t know when this will unfreeze.”

Flechette snorted, tapped her quarrel, and waved it through his arm just above the wrist like it wasn’t there.

And, just like that, his hand wasn’t attached to him anymore.

I took his right arm over my shoulders and supported him as we staggered toward the now seemingly six-inch crack we’d have to leap to make it off of this doomed roof and across the street.

Down at the ambush site, things didn’t look good. The incapacitation — or death — of Alexandria, Legend, and Dragon in quick succession had shattered what organization had been present before. In absence of strategy or command, some capes were moving toward the fight: I recognized Narwhal’s distinctive scale-like forcefields manifesting in Leviathan’s skin, ripping a cut that little bit wider and holding him in place for Chevalier to slam him onto them, embed them that much deeper.

Others were leaving the field.

More than were coming to the fight.

I saw Purity stoop to pick up a chubby kid wearing a ski-mask, and vanish into the distance, with Crusader following.

Myrddin, too, was withdrawing, Alexandria slung over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, limp and bleeding.

Leviathan recovered his balance with eerie quickness, and simply bullrushed Chevalier off the slippery surface and to the ground beneath, the others following him.
The rumble of the building shaking under my feet was the first warning. Just because we were protected from above didn’t mean that was the only way for Leviathan to reach us, and I staggered beneath Clockblocker’s weight. Gallant turned and grabbed Flechette, spinning her across the gap as the roof collapsed beneath us. I reached out my right hand to catch myself, and felt it shatter under the impact. The silken armor of my costume kept it from breaking all the way out, but that was definitely through my skin in places.

The fact I’d bitten most of the way through my tongue was hardly worth noticing in comparison, except when I realized that a full-face mask left me nowhere convenient to spit.

As I lay there in the rubble, dazed, Clockblocker’s unmoving body to my left, I spread out my attention through my swarms.

Anything to avoid feeling that pain, or worse, to dwell on the limp form of Vista, blood matting her hair.

She'd complimented me on my costume's coverage and armor, once.

I hadn't taken the hint.

Gallant had fallen through Vista’s spacial distortion bridging the street we had been trying to cross. It hadn’t left him an exercise in applied topology, but a three story fall was danger enough, and he was face-down in a flooding street next to Flechette’s arbalést.

Flechette herself had gotten clear, and was limping away on the roof across the street.

I didn’t blame her for leaving us — it was the right choice. I was hoping that she’d succeed, come back in another fight with more planning and better support than we’d proven.

Vengeance wasn’t enough, but sometimes it was all you had.

And on that note, I wasn’t dead yet.

I worked my left hand free and raised my mask enough to spit blood.
Wouldn’t do to choke and die a moment earlier than I had to. There was work to be done. If only I could see how…

My earpiece crackled with Armsmaster’s voice. “Tactical command has fallen to me. All capes, retreat if able. Reform on the PRT headquarters, and follow Chevalier’s instructions afterward, or Myrddin’s.”

I turned my attention outward just in time to catch the grouped bulk of the capes behind the barriers blink out of existence.

Dauntless, Chevalier, and Armsmaster remained engaged in melee, but the other scattered few remaining were running away from the fight.

Or limping, as was true for many.

The fliers had departed almost as quickly as the order was given. The Fafnir did dip to pick up Myrddin and some other wounded and then lifted, arrowing toward Downtown, which gave me some hope that Dragon hadn't actually died earlier. If she was remote-piloting one, why not both?

I saw Dauntless shake his head once, as the white flash from his forcefield taking a blow hid him from sight. Then he nodded, and blinked away, appearing a block away on a rooftop. Another flash of white fire, and he was further still.

Chevalier stayed in the fight with Armsmaster, neither of them doing any real damage to the beast, but neither of them dying to it either.

They hadn’t earned their leadership positions through politics or PR, they’d earned them through surviving countless such killing grounds, and the experience showed. They covered each other’s weaknesses flawlessly, distracting and attacking in turn. Finally, Chevalier took advantage of a momentary overcommitment to catching Armsmaster to deliver a great blow that knocked Leviathan back on his heels for a moment… and then he turned and ran, moving surprisingly quickly for a man in armor.

Armsmaster fought on alone.
He armed himself with the second halberd he’d been carrying on his back, and he was fighting better than he had been before, as if the presence of other capes in the fight had only distracted him. His dodges were cleaner, his strikes more precise, and his movements more efficient. He made the battle look like a dance, one he’d choreographed. Leviathan would strike here, and Armsmaster would be there, the water would rush up, and the hero’s halberd would gush flame in answer. The Endbringer would claw, and Armsmaster would dodge and use the momentary blind spot to close. His halberd spat plasma or electricity whenever it struck… but even when it cut, the damage he did was superficial.

Two blocks away, Chevalier’s sword extended to its full size and swept up in salute. Then down, and shrunk again. The armored knight resumed his run, now at a ground-eating lope.

A pause in the battle, Leviathan looking down at the fly which had proven so hard to swat, Armsmaster glaring back up through his visor. He did something with his second halberd and it lit up, a gray haze forming around the blade.

The hero spoke. “Just you and me, then. Maybe that’s for the best. Had been making this for Lung, hadn’t finished it yet… but it won’t be wasted on you. The predictive software certainly hasn’t been.”

Lung! I reached out, searching. He hadn’t shown, so far.

Maybe that was for the best. Lung would aim for a long fight — he’d have to. And in a long fight, Brockton Bay ceased to be a city and became instead a body of water.

Some victories were all but indistinguishable from defeats.

Without waiting for Leviathan’s response, Armsmaster charged. And when the gray haze reached Leviathan, it cut.

It cut deep, more deeply than I’d seen anything touch him besides Flechette’s power.

Not deeply enough to sever anything, though he tried at the right wrist and again at both ankles, where Leviathan’s limbs were thinnest, opening deep gashes. Still enough that I wondered for a moment whether he could pull victory from the jaws of defeat, draw out a death of a thousand cuts over minutes, or at least last long enough for reinforcements to come.
Leviathan’s tail whipped around in the same move that had taken Alexandria — in the same move she’d let take her in Glory Girl’s place, a very long half-hour ago, and I wondered if her overconfidence had been her undoing — and Armsmaster leaped above it, reaching down one halberd to let Leviathan amputate almost his entire tail against that smoking blade, and pointing the other at a roof, launching a grappling hook and pulling himself out of the way of Leviathan’s clawed followup.

Leviathan’s tail, twitching on the ground gave me hope.

The way that gray haze was sputtering… didn’t. Pity he hadn’t had time to finish it already, and still worse that he wouldn’t ever have the chance, now.

Still no sign of Lung or Scion.

Hookwolf was four blocks north, almost at the limit of my range, and had stopped to cough blood, Flechette was down on street level and limping away northwest, and there were two armored capes supporting each other in a three-legged race south, but the area was otherwise almost deserted.

The dead and dying excepted.

Armsmaster held up his failing halberd, glanced at it, and spoke again. “Still the battery issues. But Dragon has the designs, you know — or you’d know if you understood language and could think, you overgrown animal. One day, one of us will end one of you.”

He charged again, dropping into a slide just under Leviathan’s claw and popping up into a scrambling run that took him behind the Endbringer, using one of those backward bending knees as a stepping stone for an astonishing leap, assisted by his powered armor. As Leviathan turned around, his face met Armsmaster’s boot coming the other way.

It didn’t do anything, of course — like punching a mountain with your fist — but I grinned all the same to see it.

If he was going to die, he was going to sell himself dearly.

After that bravura charge, Armsmaster settled into a different rhythm, abandoning any serious offense in favor of a more evasive style. He was still dodging by inches, but in exchange for giving
up his attempts to cut the Endbringer in reply he was able to more precisely control the range and terms of the engagement. And while he stayed just out of arm’s reach, he was a ghost, virtually untouchable. At some point, he’d run out of power for his armor, or his concentration would flicker, and that would be the end.

But not before.

I thought back to Carol’s words, about death not necessarily meaning defeat.

I thought about how to fight opponents you couldn’t, directly.

I thought about how to fight an opponent who could parry or dodge any projectile.

And then, through the blood, I smiled.

The bugs I’d had watching Hookwolf congregated into a mass before him.

He looked up, his torso visible above the mass of spikes and hooks like some misproportioned metal centaur.

“Skitter. Didn’t think you’d shown for the fight.”

“Leviathan’s not something I can fight directly. But I can watch, and think.”

He spat. “Your point?”

“If I gave you a way to hurt him… would you try it?”

His answering smile was as red as mine.

I reached awkwardly across my body with my working arm and tapped my earpiece, coughing and
spitting to clear my throat.

“Flechette, see if you can get to Lord and Harbor. Hookwolf’s setting up for a suicide run, and it’d be nice if he could do more than die trying.”

Well, him dying in the attempt was the plan, but I’d certainly take him potentially damaging Leviathan as a bonus.

I could feel Flechette alter her course in response — it wasn’t much out of her way, really. One short block east of her escape to the north.

I could also feel another cape entering the zone. A pause, a burst of superhuman speed, and another pause.

Battery.

She was headed toward the rendezvous too, and I could bet she’d be trying to extract Flechette. Which was fine by me — after Hookwolf went in.

Interesting that they’d sent her back in. She was tough, and fast — not a bad profile for Search and Rescue, under the circumstances, and many of the other choices would have been on the front lines just now. But why would she be coming for Flechette right now, when…

Ah.

Another wave on the horizon.

Without the intense fighting, Leviathan was free to go back to calling the big waves faster. No wonder he’d been content to play around with Armsmaster: the real fight was elsewhere, with Eidolon trying to keep the waves from coming.

It looked like that fight was going about as well as this one, too.
Well, I’d done what I could. I lay back in the rubble, the bodies of the other Wards about me, and waited. No way for me to outrun or outclimb a wave like this.

I could feel Flechette touch Hookwolf, shake her head. She drew out a quarrel, waved it, and Hookwolf sprouted a scorpion’s tail of twisted metal into which she sank it, so he had a long metal sting. Battery glowed, and as Hookwolf leapt over her he accelerated, flying toward Leviathan. She promptly turned and snatched up Flechette, moving away and for high ground.

Armsmaster was in the middle of rolling clear from another stomp when Hookwolf arrived like a javelin from behind… which Leviathan reached up and caught, for the third time this day, without even looking around.

The Endbringer squeezed, producing a terrible sound of metal grinding on metal. Hookwolf’s ‘tail’ came around, and in two seconds of thrashing probed the wound Armsmaster had left, leaving the clawed hand hanging by a thread. Then by nothing, and Hookwolf fell, still wrapped in the right hand of Leviathan.

Leviathan really didn’t seem to mind the loss of a hand. There was no gush of ichor, no flinch of pain: the Endbringer simply reached out with the other hand, pinning the villain with his foot, and ripped Hookwolf’s steel tail out before picking him up.

At which point he started trying to beat Armsmaster to death with the Empire cape, squeezing all the while.

I shrugged, and then winced. It had been worth a shot. Like Cricket, the only way to hit him was to use his own reflexes against him: throw him something he could and would catch. It had worked, even… but success there hadn’t been enough.

At least this way, Hookwolf wouldn’t make it out either.

A pause in the noise drew my attention outward again.

Eidolon floated above the battlefield, looking down at Leviathan, who ignored Armsmaster in favor of looking back up.

I could still hear metal squealing, so Hookwolf was still being squeezed to death. Good to know the
Endbringer hadn’t lost all sense of his priorities.

I laughed, coughed, and laughed some more.

My left arm shattered while I laughed, and I choked and sputtered.

What the hell?

Leviathan threw Hookwolf at Eidolon. *Through* Eidolon, and he simply rippled like water when it hit, the ripples bouncing off the landscape and converging again, a hundred feet away, where Eidolon wavered back into solidity.

Still floating, still staring, still doing nothing I could see.

A red line appeared on his costume, and then Clockblocker’s left hand just dropped off, blood spurting out with every heartbeat.

Fuck.

Another tourniquet.

That… both my arms were broken. This would be a *lot* easier if he were awake, and could just freeze his costume into a bandage.

Hookwolf landed almost half a mile away with an echoing crash I could hear with my own ears.

He didn’t get up.

I nudged Clockblocker’s arm out, and then sat on it just past the shoulder. Was that where the arteries were? I couldn’t remember.
It wasn’t a very effective tourniquet, and I set spiders to weaving thread. It would have to be braided thick enough not to just cut through his flesh if it were tight, and that would take time. Time I wasn’t sure he had.

I underlined the previous mental note about carrying lots of silk around next time.

Unlikely as that seemed.

I could see new wounds appearing on Leviathan, shallow ones. Matching ones, arranged symmetrically. Nothing that had given him pause before.

But there was a line of ichor dripping around Leviathan’s left wrist.

The hand dropped, and the Endbringer turned away, taking deceptively swift strides before transitioning into a strange ostrich-like run, and then a great leaping dive face-first into the oncoming wave.

He was retreating.

Leaving.

*Leaving my city in ruins.*

I closed my eyes before the wave reached us.
Lunch on Sunday found Armsmaster in his lab — or what passed for his temporary lab, right now. The important things had been salvaged from the Protectorate base, the ones likely to explode or irradiate or otherwise respond poorly to unskilled handling; the rest of the building still lay where it had been cast up on the beach.

There were more urgent problems.

There was never enough time to get everything done, but he couldn't drop any of his projects, either. Another week, even, and the nano-thorn cutting edge might have been able to handle an extended fight — right now, it just took too much energy, but it looked like there was a way to make it more efficient. Baking the air intakes at 505 degrees centigrade might be enough to clear out the accumulations, and if that worked then he could remove the current workaround, and with the space and energy saved there, he could extend usable life by a factor of five while reducing footprint.

Still not small enough; still not efficient enough... but then, he had some ideas about slowing the extrusion of the nano-wires by maybe 2.5 seconds, from the present .6: what it cost in initial deployment might be well worth it in terms of service life. And, whether or not that worked, there were other ideas to try, and by the time he emptied this list more would have come. It would take time, but he might be able to fit this functionality into his standard halberd.

He'd managed it for almost everything else so far.

Still, the five minutes it would take to bake the air intakes left him free to think while he ingested nutrient paste of his own design through a tube. Not quite as nice as an actual meal, but it saved precious time.

The fight with Leviathan, all things considered, had gone quite well. 42% fatalities among the defenders; civilian casualties still uncertain, but into six figures; property damage uncertain, but immense. Still, a good day in the fight against the Endbringers.

He'd seen much worse.

The flow of emergency supplies wasn't without hitches; there was never enough coming quickly enough, and the Empire under Hookwolf — now calling himself Fenrir, after the wolf who bit off the hand of a god — had already picked off one of the shipments for themselves, distributing it to
their supporters. And, for the moment, there was nothing to do but let the offense pass: there was far too much disaster relief work that simply couldn't wait. Lives lost now couldn't be saved later, and any other order of priorities... would be inefficient.

Hookwolf would be there next month.

It was vexing, having to wait. Having to watch idiots swarm to follow him, made worse by the fact that without Hookwolf's last-minute heroics, the city might have been lost and Armsmaster himself would likely have died. Having to have him healed, and thank him, and let him loose, and watch as he went right back to villainy with a bigger and undeserved reputation than ever was worse still.

The man was only middling as an offensive threat, and only hard to kill if one took a crude, brute-force approach. Armsmaster spent half his time in fights making sure he didn't kill the villains he was fighting — bad PR, and against protocol. Still frustrating.

Inefficient.

At least when it came time to confront the villain, well... the Brockton Bay Protectorate had survived in excellent shape, considering the challenge they'd had to face. Very, very, few could conceivably engage an Endbringer with fewer than a dozen capes at their back and live to tell the tale; fewer still could say they'd done so without some form of invulnerability protecting them.

Every one of his surviving subordinates was now among that elite few. (Miss Militia's membership in this particular club, along with his own, had come against Behemoth, in Lyon — the second time. Eight years ago. That had been one of the bad days.)

Faced with the need to distract Leviathan, he'd ordered a course of action that his models predicted would minimize civilian casualties... and leave his command with two survivors — one of whom would have been Miss Militia, who wasn't directly engaged in battle. His team hadn't quailed or questioned, they'd simply stood up and done their duty. They'd performed efficiently, following the directions of his combat prediction program with adequate precision, and they'd lived.

His right hand clenched, and then released.

Most of them.
Dwelling on that was... unproductive.

Armsmaster finished the allotted paste for this meal and checked the clock on his HUD: two minutes left to go.

Time enough for one of his set of strength and flexibility exercises.

He started his suit in motion, letting it guide him and then pushing against the resistance it presented with the familiarity of long practice, the movements unconscious enough that he could continue thinking.

He selected one of the unsolved puzzles currently troubling him.

Endbringers were, often, drawn to chaos. And Brockton Bay had, in the space of a few weeks, gone from a tense simmer to... chaos.

How?

The start of it was clear: Lung's capture, Bakuda's shocking lack of judgment, Tailor's unexpectedly effective response.

Still a shame that she hadn't joined; even though she'd chosen a quiet retirement, she had gone right into the heat of battle when Leviathan showed. There were never enough who would.

If only because so few survived doing it the first time.

After that, things grew less clear. Lung and Kaiser fought, something they'd managed to avoid doing for years. Why then? The destruction of the ABB hadn't materially affected Lung's threat level, and Kaiser should have known that. Hard intelligence on why was difficult with so many who might have known dead, and the rest not talking... but some of the rumors blamed it on a new Case 53 Changer who'd been at Faultline's immediately before the mercenary had taken her people and departed.

Faultline's employer? Faultline's employee? A third party delivering news, or a threat? No way to
know right now, but something to ask about if their paths crossed again.

Then there was the curious case of Thomas Calvert. Knowing that there had been a traitor, well connected and highly competent, with Thinker powers to boot, went a long way to explaining why the last few years had been so difficult. And yet... and yet, Thomas Calvert was able, and he'd warned the PRT of a major Thinker operating in the area just before he was exposed and died.

His record of service to the PRT would have ensured that warning was explored. His now-disclosed Thinker abilities would have underlined it — Thinkers often interfered with each other's abilities. His clear and strong motivation to avoid pointing any PRT investigation in the direction of shadowy Thinkers in Brockton Bay made the warning stand out in letters of fire.

Who had he felt at work? And what had they sought to accomplish?

Brandish had spoken of no Thinker, but instead of a 'friendly Stranger' who was successfully acting against Calvert (no small feat — the man had written half the Master-Stranger protocols) and whose identity she had refused to disclose until the PRT had cleaned house.

She'd died before that could happen.

Was it coincidence that the assault on New Wave had killed her and only her, cleanly cutting that link away?

New capes almost universally lacked subtlety or discretion, a sense of the consequences of their actions. Existing capes tended to form habits, patterns of action, styles of attack — none of which were precise matches to known threats, though neither could it be ruled out entirely.

The idea of three new capes, all of them of this strength and unnoticed was... implausible.

No, Occam's razor suggested...

His door hissed open.

Armsmaster stood and turned. Not many would interrupt him in his lab, and any real emergency
would have come over the comms. Which meant...

Director Piggot.

She stood the doorway, squat and blocky, in a cleanly pressed suit despite the devastation outside.

"Director."

She nodded. "I thought we might go to Triumph's funeral together."

He checked the time on his HUD reflexively.

"You're half an hour early for that."

"There was some news I thought you'd want to hear personally, and then discuss."

He took the halberd out of the oven, checking the air intakes.

Clean.

Excellent.

Attaching it to his back beside his workhorse halberd, he moved through the door and into the corridor.

The Director kept pace, two of her strides to each of his.

"The news?"
"No-showing an attack on his own city, after burning much of it down, was enough to sway some of the other Directors, the ones who kept pushing for recruitment instead."

He stopped, turning to see her smile a bulldog's smile, all jowl and teeth.

"It's been approved. There's a kill order on Lung."

Well. Not having to fight to capture anymore... that would change things.

They walked down the corridor together in silence, and then out into the sunshine.

The ride over was short, filled with tactical discussions of how to corner Lung and what to do about Hookwolf; what the implications of the Chief Director's leave of absence were and how to integrate the new Ward recruit.

Rebuilding would be necessary, including transfers. The casualties they'd taken had been brutal. And yet, in his analysis as well as Dragon's, Flechette's presence had been the deciding factor. Legend had been right to ask her to come; Miss Militia had been right to order her to engage; her team had been right to sacrifice themselves to get her clear.

Despite the costs.

Never mentioned by either was the question of whether the city would be rebuilt... or condemned. New York had been rebuilt, but it was New York... and that happened in the early days, when people still believed that the Endbringers might be beaten back. When 'Endbringers' wasn't even a word, because Behemoth stood alone against the world.

The PRT van arrived at the cemetery — cleaner than most parts of the city, though official efforts were focused on infrastructure and survival right now. Enough people were gathered to explain it: some sentimental attachment to those beyond such things.

Armsmaster stepped out, and took his place among the other members of the Brockton Bay Protectorate in the front row of the mourners.
As the speeches began, he locked the joints of his armor and brought up intelligence appraisals on his HUD.

No point wasting time when he could be working.

Mark looked at Armsmaster's unusually rigid posture, and wondered what the man was feeling.

Triumph had taken his lethal injuries under his command, after all.

The thought of facing that guilt was one of the reasons he'd never taken tactical command.

He helped Neil with planning, certainly, and Sarah with public events. But the thing into which he'd poured himself had been fatherhood.

Mark sighed, feeling his daughters at his elbows, using him as the buffer.

They still weren't talking to each other, and they were barely talking to him.

He'd hoped, once, that having a child to love would be enough, would be a strong enough reason to push past the grey bleak pointlessness of it all, that it would be something around which he and Carol could center their lives, and build something better.

Instead, he'd just found a new way to fail.

And he knew that was the depression talking, but that wasn't enough — his life would have gone a lot smoother if the thought 'that's the depression talking' led to 'so it's wrong' instead of 'and it's about right, as usual.'
Which was also the depression talking, and so on recursively.

There were days he didn't want to get out of bed.

Fighting was easier.

Bouncing his globes of light around, predicting enemy movements so that when they dodged this one they met that one — it was like a game. Fun, even. More fun if they had superspeed, or teleportation, or invulnerability, or any one of the other obvious counters to his power: solving puzzles like that was when he felt most alive.

When he felt most effective.

Days like today were pretty much the opposite.

All of New Wave was here, and a surprising amount of the city, considering how much wreckage remained to clear.

It wasn't normal for capes who died in Endbringer fights to have state funerals — too many fights in the past over how or whether to honor villains, for whom nothing in their lives became them like their leaving it. A simple cenotaph, usually a pillar or obelisk inscribed with the names of all who fought and fell, was usually what made it through the committees.

Then again, this was ostensibly a private funeral. Triumph's father just happened to be the mayor, and Triumph himself a well-beloved hometown boy who'd died a hero and martyr both, and in death been unmasked as a semi-public figure, the mayor's son and a popular high-school and college baseball star whose retirement from the sport was now explained by his call to greater things. For all of those reasons, the turnout for this 'private event' just happened to be... large.

And to include the media.

There was even a blimp, circling overhead, interrupting its footage of the disaster to show aerial scenes of the crowds gathered.
Everyone had lost someone, in the attack. Triumph — Rory — had just been in the right place to stand for them all.

Mark wondered if the mayor would use this loss to launch his campaign for governor in the next election. And then he wondered if the man had had that thought already when he'd given his permission to remove the ventilator so it could be used to save another patient with a real chance of recovery.

He looked at the mayor's family, lined up behind him on stage, his wife and two twin daughters, pulling together in the face of their loss.

As family should.

What did it say that his own family was splintering under the loss of Carol? Was he a worse father than a man who killed his own son for political advantage?

After that, Mark hated himself a little for seeing the worst in people, and then hated the way he hated himself.

The speech ended. It hadn't been a bad one, Mark thought, from what little attention he'd paid. There'd be copies in the newspapers tomorrow, in other cities where the newspapers were still being delivered anyway.

He turned to Amy, but she was already moving back toward the ambulance waiting to take her back to the hospital. She was sleeping there, these days. Doing good work, yes... but also pointedly not coming home.

The Pelhams spoke brief farewells — Sarah and Crystal with hugs, Neil with a handshake, and Eric with a wave — and they too departed.

He turned to talk to Victoria after, but she vanished upwards, flying away.

She wasn't staying at home anymore either.
Maybe with Gallant.

Mark looked again at Armsmaster as he strode away, his head high and his walk purposeful.

Any of the Wards who had made it out alive had done so due to him, some directly and others indirectly.

The bare-bones powersuit that Gallant had purchased with extra duty shifts and a staggering sum from his trust fund had had an integral oxygen reserve, solely because Armsmaster was too much of a perfectionist to make something purely cosmetic, even when asked. He still remembered the boy wondering aloud if he would ever use half the things it could do, and whether he shouldn't have simply spray-painted some PRT chain mesh instead and donated the money to a worthier cause.

Cheap at the price.

Was that how Armsmaster slept at night? Did he measure the lives saved against those lost? Did he dwell on those he had saved to blot out the memories of those like Clockblocker? Like Aegis?

Vista's fate was still uncertain — Amy, for all her gifts, could not heal the brain, or he'd have asked her for help a long time ago. And maybe if she could have helped him, he would have been able to do something, be a better father to them and a better husband to Carol, whom he'd never loved as freely as he'd hoped.

A dark corner of his mind whispered the familiar refrain that that was why she'd chosen him, because she knew he'd fail and she hadn't wanted to let anyone in.

By the time he'd set that thought aside, most of the mourners were beginning to disperse.

For lack of anything better to do, Mark made his way over to Carol's grave — marker, rather, for nothing of her body had survived that miniature sun.

He was surprised when he got there to find two people — father and daughter, by the looks of them — and fresh purple flowers before the stone.
They turned at his approach, the man — dapper and handsome in ways that made Mark feel inadequate — offering his hand and condolences. One of the burdens of unmasking: so many knew him whom he did not know.

"You knew her?"

They glanced at each other.

"A colleague, in a way." The man's voice was smooth, something he could have made a living with.

The girl shook her head. "I'm just a stranger who would have liked to have known her better."

They moved away, arms laden with more flowers, leaving Mark to the contemplation of Carol's empty grave.

As Quinn Calle walked away, stride long and steps poised, he thought that Mark Dallon must have loved his wife greatly.

In a way, he envied the man despite his obvious aura of crushing loss.

To have loved like that... Quinn had his work, and its challenges, and there had been women over the years whose company he had enjoyed, carnally or innocently, but never something around which he might reshape his life, a white-hot passion that the years did not dim.

Perhaps it was simply that the grass is always greener.

Still, at least his work afforded him interesting opportunities. He'd come here to negotiate a way for two villains to come in from the cold and lead legitimate lives, which made for an interesting and satisfying variation on his typical job of negotiating ways for villains to get out of prison.
Doubly satisfying to have had a hand, however indirect, in bringing them to this resolution. He'd come closer to crossing one of his personal lines than he really liked, very nearly getting involved in a direct confrontation between parahumans... but when faced with Taylor's desperate idealism and the sheer depth of Calvert's treachery, there hadn't really been a choice.

Not one he could have lived with afterward, anyway.

For all that his clients were almost entirely divided among the mad and the bad, Quinn believed in the worth of the system. He believed he was making the world a better place by doing his job, that the advice of counsel was one of the things that kept the republic a republic, where all men were born equal in dignity... though clearly not in power, not since the rise of Scion and the superpowers that followed.

That his work was one of the things that helped maintain a civil world, helped prevent a civil war between parahumans and normals.

Calvert's abuses under color of authority, his efforts to supplant the system and turn it to his ends, were exactly what Quinn Calle was born to fight, and if that made life riskier than he'd prefer... well, why else had he cultivated his skills?

It certainly wasn't just to see the unprovably guilty go free, though he did enough of that that an outside observer could be forgiven for the mistake. But there was no way to legitimately declare guilt or innocence without going through the process, what he did was a necessary part of that, and so he did it with care, skill, and panache.

And, once in a while, a client came along who offered the chance to do good.

Directly.

And, on those occasions, he worked a few more hours and expensed a few less. They were the dangerous cases, really. Losing a case when his client deserved it was painful.

Briefly.
Losing a case when his client was innocent was soul-crushing.

Part of why he took care to lose so few.

He smiled, thin-lipped and self-mocking, looking up at the blue sky and white clouds.

Pride could be useful, pride could be entertaining. It didn't do to show it off, or even to believe your own PR... but it wasn't rightly pride if you really could do it.

Just an accurate self-appraisal.

Their path took them across the cemetery to another marker — fresh cut stone, by the look of it, though the earth seemed undisturbed by anything but the waters.

"James Fliescher? Husband, father; his laughter lightened our lives?" He glanced at the girl in black beside him as she laid a bunch of orange and red flowers, five-petaled, before the stone.

"Friend of yours?"

She shook her head, and turned away.

He took a long look at the stone before following her.

Part of serving clients well was knowing when not to ask questions, and a mysteriously empty grave was not a topic to press on with any of them. Even her.

Especially her?

In time they came to a third cenotaph, next to a grave, and she laid down her last set of flowers, a spray of small blue and white flowers.
They stood there for a long time.

Eventually, she stirred, and he took that as his cue to break the silence.

"What's the case? I'd have come for the company, but..." he half-smiled "you never call me just for the company."

"Rebuilding the city." She used the same matter of fact tone he'd heard her use for everything from indicating her preference in eggs to numbering those dead by her actions.

He nodded. She'd never lacked for ambition.

"A lot of that will be politics."

"The mayor will be pushing it — you heard the speech."

He tilted his head.

"Being a viable candidate for governor makes you at least as many enemies as friends."

She shrugged.

"Money can help."

*That was inarguably true. It couldn't buy most politicians, but it could make or break campaigns and so often could ensure a moment in which to make a case. Not his specialty, but he knew those who knew how to do this with the best.*

"Assume the politicians don't condemn the city; rebuilding it still won't be anything close to cheap. Your assets don't begin to cover it."
She nodded.

"We'll start with Fortress. You can tell them Brandish's knowledge didn't die with her."

A half grin quirked up the left side of his mouth again.

"They like to play hardball."

She glanced at him with that strangely even gaze. "And we can't?"

He wasn't sure if he'd ever seen her flustered, or stressed, or surprised, though there was that one time he'd woken her with a phone call... not that he'd seen her face then, but it was the closest he'd come to seeing her with her guard down.

Actually, he wasn't sure if he'd ever seen an expression on her that wasn't 'grimly determined'.

That was charming when she was ordering pasta, and by turns terrifying and inspiring when she was laying out plans.

His smile widened.

"Not taking this on alone?"

She shook her head. "You, and... some others. We'll see."

"You're taking a broader view of how to change things."

She shrugged.

"Carol made more of a difference than I did in less time, with the right leverage. My own successes have never come without... side effects."
Had one of the parahumans finally figured out that there were other ways to get things done than dressing up and hitting people? And was that good news for the world... or a sign that the End Times were coming, as he'd so often joked it would be?

Say what you will, she wasn't a boring client.

His smile was actually showing teeth now.

"Her successes didn't come without side effects either, you know. And what do you intend to do about your... side effects, past and future?"

She turned back to the stone for a moment, and the silence stretched.

"Live with them. Fix them, if I can. Never give up. What else is there to do?"

He could work with that.

"You're the client."

This was what was best in life: a chance to play the game for the highest stakes, a chance to use his skills to their limit, a chance to make the world better.

Quinn looked up into the deep blue sky, at the blimp circling among the puffy white clouds, and laughed aloud.

The television screen showed an aerial view of a city in ruins.
Not the usual channel shown on the television behind the counter in this remote roadside diner, but the waitress had been kind enough to hand over the remote to her sole group of customers today.

Cooperation had even bought her another twenty minutes of life.

"So!" The man seated at the center of their gathering glanced around, smiling.

"Doesn't that look good for our next road trip? We need another to round us out."

A teenage girl wearing a bright pink hoodie and sprawled across a corner booth popped her bubble-gum loudly. "Yeah. I've got family there I'd like to see."

A tall woman two booths down looked over her book with disgust. "You choose crudely. But I think this 'Fenrir' has promise: I will not object to the destination."

"MINE." A deep voice rumbled from within the kitchen.

"Now, now, I'm sure we can work something out in case of any double-nominations. Besides, you might prefer the dragon-man, no?" The man's smile never wavered.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" A little girl, sitting at the counter before an ice-cream sundae with her legs kicking idly in the air waved her spoon about. "Dibs on Panacea!"

The woman beside her, naked but for the stripes of white and black covering her whole body, smiled and stroked the girl's curly blonde hair.

The dark-haired woman in red with burn scars down her face flicked ash from her cigarette out the window and exhaled smoke. "Sure. There's an old friend out that way."

A single note rang out from behind and beneath the counter as a finger stroked an extended blade.
"Yes, of course: the tinker working on ecosystem issues. We know your preferences... and that makes it unanimous."

Another chime, this one wavering in tone.

"Me? Well, we'll have to see when we get there. But when I look at all this" he gestured at the television "I don't think it's accidental. I think someone arranged things, set the scene. And" his smile grew sharper "I think whoever they are, they're someone we'd very much like to meet."

He stood, and stretched.

"Shall we?" With that, he hit the remote.

The television blinked, and darkened to black.
Timeline

All dates 2011.

1.1 Monday April 11th (pre-dawn)

1.2 Monday April 11th (day)

1.3 Monday April 11th (afternoon)

1.4 Monday April 11th (evening) through Wednesday April 13th (dawn)

1.5 Wednesday April 13th (morning)

1.c Wednesday April 13th (late evening)

2.1 Thursday April 14th (afternoon — evening)

2.2 Thursday April 14th (evening)

2.3 Friday April 15th (pre-dawn — evening)

2.4 Friday April 15th (evening)

2.5 Friday April 15th (evening)

2.6 Saturday April 16th (morning — evening)

2.v Sunday April 17th (afternoon)
3.1 Sunday April 17th (morning) through Monday April 18th (morning)

3.2 Monday April 18th (afternoon — evening)

3.3 Monday April 18th (evening) through Tuesday April 19th (afternoon)

3.4 Tuesday April 19th (sunset)

3.5 Tuesday April 19th (sunset)

3.6 Wednesday April 20th (morning)

3.e Friday April 22nd (evening)

4.1 Saturday April 23rd (morning)

4.2 Saturday April 24th (afternoon)

4.3 Saturday April 24th (evening) through Sunday April 25th (morning)

4.4 Monday April 25th (day) through Tuesday April 26th (morning — noon)

4.5 Tuesday April 26th (sunset — evening)

4.m Wednesday April 27th (evening)

5.1 Wednesday April 27th (morning — afternoon)
5.2 Wednesday April 27th (evening)

5.3 Wednesday April 27th (evening)

5.4 Thursday April 28th (morning — evening)

5.5 Friday April 29th (morning — afternoon)

5.j Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

6.1 Friday April 29th (evening) through Saturday April 30th (afternoon)

6.2 Saturday April 30th (evening) through Sunday May 1st (evening)

6.3 Monday May 2nd (dawn — evening)

6.4 Monday May 2nd (evening) through Tuesday May 3rd (afternoon)

6.5 Tuesday May 3rd (afternoon) through Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

6.r Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

7.1 Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

7.2 Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

7.3 Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

7.4 Thursday May 5th (afternoon)
7.5 Thursday May 5th (afternoon)

7.E Sunday May 8th (afternoon)

?.d Friday May 13th (pre-dawn)
Author's Note

Cenotaph was born out of contrarianism. As best I can recall, someone argued that it would have taken a significant butterfly to put Taylor in the Wards. And I, not immune to the lure of someone being wrong on the internet, thought 'that's not so.' 1.1 was written as proof of concept, a demonstration that something as small as a delay in Taylor's explicit rejection of the Ward life in her conversation with Armsmaster would do the trick.

Again, as best I can recall, some poster or collage of poster reactions concluded that she would have to end up in the Wards now, and only good things could come of this change. That was so clearly and staggeringly wrong that I went out and wrote 1.2-1.5 by way of showing a) a limit case of how things can always get much worse and b) she could still end up in a position to go anywhere... which is where Taylor is placed at the end of 1.5, having suffered as much as I thought would be believable, and then some I thought wouldn't be, with plausible entrée into most of the BB organizations, or the chance to go independent.

Somewhere around 1.c enough encouragement from readers had come in suggesting that I write this out that I thought about doing it. Fiction writing isn't my strength (I do have a day job, and have worked much harder on that), and this is the third project I've attempted (a tiny oneshot being the first, and an abandoned 20k word attempt at making HP make sense being the second). And that left me in the awkward position of having to write a story from where I was, from a situation I'd selected for argumentative purposes instead of entertaining ones, one on the border of plausibility or a bit beyond. All in all, not the best of foundations.

Those structural flaws remain, and are visible even now.

Other issues are sensory — I tend to a highly interior style, with few descriptions of the world outside, even across viewpoints. Thoughts tend to interest me more than sensations, and while it's rarely a bad idea to write what fascinates, it's definitely an issue.

Likewise, conflict. I believe that fair fights happen when they are arranged, as (occasionally) in competitive sports. Otherwise? The closest thing in the wild is when at least one party has screwed up seriously, and everyone has to fear a golden bb regardless.

This makes writing fights with uncertain outcomes, interesting fights to read... problematic. I attempted, with imperfect success, to shift the conflict from 'who will win' to 'at what price / with what consequences.'

There are some things now visible that I challenged myself to do along the way (e.g., Arc 4 is the
one without a single fight scene) and some that are necessarily fading from view (e.g., Arc 5 is the one I put up in a week). I did do what I could to leave easter eggs everywhere from the macro-structure (set aside all the non-Taylor viewpoint snippets, and look for the exact center of her story), to the micro (there's a direct/indirect quotation game running there), to the throwaway (the flower-language references).

Taylor's courses of action were chosen among those plausible for her character in that circumstance, and told as seemed likely to entertain. I greatly enjoy unreliable narrators who play fair, and Taylor's belief in the rightness, necessity, or advisability of any particular action isn't much guarantee of any of those qualities, nor even necessarily a guarantee of what she herself believes to be true (as opposed to is desperately rationalizing). She's not a viewpoint given to lying, save that she (as we all do) lies to herself often enough.

I do think that the question of what to do when the system fails you — as it inevitably will, though usually not on the scale or with the spectacle depicted above — is a hard one, without an answer satisfying all criteria. Taylor's final answer — that there's nothing to be done in life but live with your mistakes, make up for them where you can, and keep on trying — is as close as the story comes to a statement I'd personally endorse.

It would be inappropriate to close without particular thanks to Wildbow, whose world this is and whose example of simply writing day in and day out led me to think of something on this scale as conceivable. It's been great fun to write and fantastic exercise both, and it remains a daily delight to know that others enjoy this work.

[Comments will have responses, but not likely before AO3 gets around to implementing PMs.]

P.S. A sequel is in process, and may be expected here sometime in October, 2014.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!