### Hunting Wyverian

**Summary**

Taylor Hebert didn't really leave the locker a changed woman as much as she kicked her way out of it high on adrenaline after just killing an overgrown spider with too few legs. Outed as a cape by both her exit and her appearance, she has to navigate the treacherous cape scene of Brockton Bay with the power to turn ex-living beings into PR-unfriendly weaponry and armor while monsters mysteriously appear around her. They don't survive the ordeal. Also kleptomaniac cats.

**Notes**

Starting from chapter 2.3, the chapters are betaed and proofread by a third party.

Going forward, the chapters will be uploaded parallel to SpaceBattles and SufficientVelocity.
I knew it had been too good to be true. The holidays had only just past and the spirit of Christmas was still lingering.

I pretended that the nervous laughter intermingled with the genuine deal, I heard throughout the crowds as I moved towards my locker was due to embarrassing stories being told or sweaters from loving relatives being worn.

I dared to begin hoping that the terrible trio might have truly gotten bored of me and that I might be able to witness a Christmas miracle.

In hindsight it was probably the same hope I somehow managed to hold on to throughout my tormented high school career. The same traitorous thoughts that they’d leave the tall, thin washing board walking around as a girl alone if only I endured a bit longer; after which I’d be able to make friends again.

I realized my mistake as I came closer to my locker and I began to notice a nauseatingly sweet, coppery stink oozing that only grew stronger as I moved closer to the row of identical metal boxes. More specifically, my locker seemed to be the source as I began to notice more unidentifiable, revolting smells as I moved to open it.

The part of my mind conditioned to run on pure paranoia noticed that I was the only one actually moving to the locker. It knew what was about to happen while the rest of me was playing catch up in a dazed state of denial. By the time I had set down my backpack and opened the locker, I actually doubled over and gagged at the sight of rancid, moist contents of the locker. I was pushed in the rest of me came to the same conclusion.

The stumble made me hit my head against the wall, causing a sharp stab of pain to run through my nose with a wet crunch and my glasses to break. They fell on the ground with a squelch and the door was shut in behind me.

Blood filled ran down my face and the area around my eyes burned from the tiny cuts and filth as I struggled myself to stand again, my hand sliding down the slickened walls.

Panic rose as I tried to push open the door with a foot and found it locked.

Girls giggled outside of the fast growing nightmare and I took a deep breath to center myself, to get the coming, all-consuming terror under control.

I got half a lung full before the oily taste swamped my tongue and permeated my nose.

My stomach nearly followed my breakfast as I collapsed once more, vomiting, adding its acidic stench to the amalgamation of rot and funk.

Whimpering and with shaking hands I forced myself up again, away from the slimy muck on the bottom, nearly hyperventilating in the process.

I needed to get out. I needed to do something; something to focus on while I still could and to keep me from slipping further into insanity.

My baton!
I embraced the options the tool could provide, clinging to the hope I could force myself out of the locker with its help.

The cheap, collapsible baton was a bit of an impulse buy at the start of the holidays as grew wary of the very light bullying leading into it, unable to accept that they simply grew bored of me and fearing the worst.

A hysterical giggle escaped my lips as I realized I had been right all along.

Having something to defend me felt good as was practicing extending it with a sharp flick. Imagining using it on Sophia was meditative. It felt like a good totem to hang on to as the bullying would inevitably ramp up again.

I blinked as I noticed I was mentally rambling and breathing faster and faster. It did nothing to make my teary eyes itch and burn less.

I forced myself to struggle and face the door as I fumbled at my belt to reach the collapsible baton with trembling hands.

Now I knew that I had been stupid buying it. I probably wouldn’t have enough power in my stick frame to do anything with it and would only serve to escalate thing for the worst.

Even my excuse that it would be a backup for the pepper spray my dad gave for my morning runs seemed pathetically hilarious in hindsight.

Another giggle escaped at the thought of driving off a gang banger with a hollow metal stick.

I felt like a complete idiot as my clumsy hand finally managed to entangle the baton and grab it. Only to find out I didn’t have the range of motion needed to extent it.

Please, please, please still work.

Blindly and with short, raspy breaths, I pressed the stick against the wall locker and brought the metal instrument to the edges of my locker door.

I knew that my skinny self wouldn’t be able to brute force her way out.

Nobody had released me out of my rapidly worsening hellhole yet. I could only hear silent snickers and laughter from the outside. Nobody would come for me.

Pushing the stick into the opening between the door and locker and using it as a crowbar was the only way to free myself.

It was my only chance to escape.

The baton was too thick.

How could I’ve been so stupid to believe it could fit. How naïve did I have to be? How stupid…

That was the point I lost it.

I kicked and punched and screamed and wailed.

I was vaguely aware of the occasional sharp snap heard accompanied by another spike of pain from either my hands or feet as I hit the reinforced edges of the door.
I ignored the warm liquid flowing from my hands and pooling into my shoes.

I didn’t pay attention to the thin, white platelets hanging from the tips of my fingers.

I rejected the burning I felt in the areas I knew on an intellectual level I was wounded and overlooked the fact that I was covered in the putrid muck.

I was fighting the pain that threatening to overwhelm me with equal measures of terror and rage.

My effort was rewarded by small indentations on the otherwise still sturdy door and a deafening quiet as my voice gave out.

Nobody would come for me.

Hopelessness overtook me and I collapsed as much as possible in the small confines of my locker, my back sliding along the rotting biological waste that plastered the back wall. Even in the dark I could somehow see my vision narrowing.

I felt something snap and passed out.

I woke up by the feeling of a sudden fall and subsequent rolling down an incline.

My brain messily interpreted the data my eyes were sending it with a reluctance that I chalked up to a concussion I had gotten either through the meet and greet with the wall that cost me my glasses or the collapse at the end.

I could recognize that I was somehow transported in a cave of some sorts. Light coming from cracks in the ceiling revealed a crystal-like formation glittering beside a someone who couldn’t decide between a gun and an anvil on a stick would make.

My eyes had cleared up enough by now that I started to realize that I saw better than I had any right to do without my glasses – never mind with these light conditions.

Too bad they also revealed the corpse laying amidst the hammer and a pickaxe, chunks of flesh missing and its wounds still bubbling.

Beyond that I could make out a variety of stalagmites and -tites which anchored thick webbing. Large cocoons hung from the ceiling in the back of the cave, some of them revealing a leathery wing that stuck out of them. Also, there was a spider moving towards me, green eyes focused on my prone form and rubbing its claws in malicious hunger.

I didn’t have much time to think as I threw myself out of the four-legged spider’s lunge, scrambling towards the corpse clad in leather and iron armor. The baton I had still grasped in my hands was discarded as I realized its utter uselessness.

I laughed as I came to that same realization for the third time that day.

A small part of my mind was trying to figure out why my gait was so strange, what happened to my hands on top my eyes, and where I had lost my fifth finger. I liked my hands with the full amount of fingers. It was normal. It gave my bullies less ammunition to use against me.

That part of my mind was nearly silenced by the far larger part running around like a lunatic in pure, pants-shitting terror as I weaved and rolled out of the way of my skittering pursuer.

Even she was nearly silenced as I came close to the hunter’s corpse and the strange weapon and
something clicked into place and I recognized the hammer as well as my foe.


I was flooded by building schematics of the weapon and far, far more on top of that. Stuff ranging from armors and creatures. From knowledge how to use the ridiculous weapon to what I could make from the remains of my would-be hunter.

I actually felt getting giddy from excitement, the previous reasonable panic pushed into the background as I went for the gun hammer.

The part of my mind that was previously busy running around, screaming, took her time to inform me that I was positively mad if I thought I could wield the monstrous instrument laying on the ground. That it would be impossible to swing a revolver cylinder around with the same diameter as my upper body, let alone when it was on a stick.

I could actually hear her sigh as in ignored apathy as my hands wrapped around the handle of the hammer and she was pushed back further by the excited newcomer.

The weapon simply felt right, a familiarity washing over me as if I had practiced with the weapon for a lifetime.

I brought the hammer up in a golf swing, batting aside the claw-like appendages descending upon my and impacting in the surprised nerscylla’s face in a gout of flames, denting it in ever so slightly.

The creature jumped back with a hiss, carefully observing me as I went through a couple of additional swings to get an even better feeling for the hammers balances.

It jumped and launched globs of webbing at me as I dodged out of their way and towards the attacker. I brought the hammer up to my side and behind my back, tensing up as I ran towards the arachnid, feeling my core and shoulder muscles strain as I build up power for the next strike.

I barely recovered quickly enough to evade the noxious poison dripping from the angry, violet spikes that grew out of the creatures back. The same one that was hanging upside down and was carefully watching my movements.

It apparently decided that hanging around wouldn’t do it much good as it shot a string of spider silk - one I narrowly avoided - and pulled, hurtling itself towards me with terrifying speeds, forcing me to roll out of its way.

With its back turned towards me, I went for another charge.

This time, the nerscylla didn’t see me coming and the smash connected with its abdomen, smashing spikes and splattering ichor as thick, black smoke rose from the impact side.

Tension in my face informed me that I must have been grinning like an absolute maniac

The creature shrieked in agony and managed to swipe at me while turning, scoring a glancing blow on my stomach.

I didn’t have enough time to contemplate how I should feel about this new and unique fragrance of pain that was added as a dread washed over me.
I threw myself on the ground as I heard the spider’s extendable jaws snap shut over me. The venom dripping from them easily eating through the hoody and shirt I wore, burning into my back.

I stood up, using the added momentum to swipe at the nearest leg and buckling it in a shower of flames. Continuing the same movement, I brought the overgrown cylinder back down on the arachnid’s head, shattering its jaw and clipping a claw in the process.

The nerscylla straightened its hind legs, balancing on top of them and I narrowly avoided impalement by the stinger coming out of the back of its abdomen it thrust forward with explosive force.

Another charge was finished just before the four-legged spider had the chance to stabilize itself again. This time, however, instead of a powerful smash I brought the hammer around to the side, putting myself in a spinning motion, not unlike a demented gyro. The hammer smashed into the legs as I moved out from under it, every single one of them triggering the searing gouts of flames on contact.

Its four legs gave out on it and the nerscylla collapsed into a tangled heap. The last pirouette brought me right beside its head and I decided to finish the rotations with another golf swing to it, channeling all my rotational momentum into it.

The creature suddenly stopped its attempt to get up and I followed up with more strike to the head. The first one caused some spasm to run through its body. The second one was accompanied by a with cracking noise as it chitinous armor gave out. The third and last one made contact with the ground smashing what remained of its ruined head.

I suppressed a cheer born from a potent mix of rampant adrenaline, pride over my accomplishment, and the thoughts of what I could make out of my price. I felt alive.

Not alive enough though to actually completely ignore the pain radiating from the shallow tear on my stomach and burning on my back as the venom did its best liquefying my flesh.

I stumbled over to the hunter’s corpse as my victory high rapidly left me and I knew that would have to treat my wounds sooner rather than later.

Luckily I found a Potion and an Antidote after rummaging through the hunter’s bags which took care of those particular problems. I still didn’t feel a full hundred percent but at least I wasn’t bleeding or melting anymore.

That left me with some time and capacity to think.

Or at least try to. I was too busy realizing I had become a parahuman to devote much attention beyond that. From the amount I spend researching the Cape community and lurking on the PHO forums as well as the fact that blueprint swirled through my mind, surfacing and disappearing at a rapid rate, I quickly came to the conclusion I had gotten a Tinker power and possible Thinker as well on top of an obvious brute one.

I wasn’t so sure how I felt the fact that my body had somehow changed and was already coming up with ways to potentially cover the changes I had already seen. But still, I had to smile, Tinkers were nice and versatile if given enough time and the good guys could always use all the help they could get. I wouldn’t even have to fight on the front lines.

I didn’t have much time to shudder at that last thought of never fighting again as I felt something shift and realized that I wouldn’t need to worry about finding a way back home.

In a frantic scramble I made my way back to the slain monster and scooped up pieces of its shattered
jaw and used one to try and cut loose the dislocated claw arm from the rest of the body.

There was no way I was going to leave without at least bringing some of the materials I worked so hard for. I needed them to start Tinkering.

I barely remembered to grab the gun hammer and hang onto the amputated claw as I felt the shifting reach a crescendo after only a minute since it began.

One moment I was in a beautiful and mysterious cave filled with an overgrown spider and the next I was returned to the hellhole known as Winslow high and in particular my own waste-filled locker that was way too cramped with the addition of the hammer and claw. A locker that also somehow had shrunk in height.

Still filled with a sense of elation after feeling alive for so long, I decided I was having none of that. I kicked the door off its hinges and strode out of the tiny prison and into the hallway.

I would have to find at least a sturdy anvil to get started somehow. And metal. A junkyard would provide the latter and I could even get some in the Boat Graveyard. My gun hammer would be able to knock some pieces off the boats there. An actual forge oven was another thing I wanted to get. Sure I could cheat with my fiery hammer – somehow – but knew that an oven would produce better results. That left the question what I wanted to make. I wanted to do something big – I was provided with the mental image of an enormous, futuristic greatsword – but knew that I wouldn’t have enough materials to do that. Well I still needed a sturdy knife for carving…

I couldn’t help notice how the few alarmed whispers stopped and everybody stared at me. Judging from the amount of people still standing with books and coffee in their hands, not much time could have passed since they locked me in.

Immediately I fell back to my old habits trying to slouch a bit and appear invisible. The insidious voice telling me that people were staring at my ugly, and now even weirder features, judging me and deciding how to use that information to hurt me even better almost made me overlook where their stares were aimed at.

Sure, there were wide-eyed looks of terror glancing over my body which was absolutely covered in blood, ichor, gore, and soot, but I could guess that the looks weren’t caused by my unflattering features or my mouth that somehow felt even wider than before.

Instead people were looking at the hammer I had no right to wield, let alone carry or even lift. Instead, they focused on the claw arm I dragged behind me that came straight out of a horror movie.

Somebody screamed.

I had to do my best not to freak out as I realized that I had inadvertently outed myself as a cape before I truly came to grasp with the fact myself. Suddenly, the terrible trio seemed almost completely fade into irrelevance.

It was almost enough to distract me from the fact that my mind had started feeding me ideas how to possibly convert them all into low-grade equipment.
Suddenly interpreting my fellow humans as walking raw material dispensers was quite effective in derailing the train of thought set on running away.

The second thing that kept my mind from simply fleeing the scene was the fact that I knew I was far too okay with the thought of using the remains for anything at all.

I should have felt disgusted but try as I might, the best I managed was the detached knowledge that it was a taboo to even consider it.

That had the potential for some really awkward conversations.

‘Earth to Taylor. You were doing the staring thing again. What were you thinking about?’

‘He? oh! Sorry, mind wandered a bit deciding whether you’d make a better pair of dual blades or I there’d be enough material in you for a sword and shield.’

Real hero material right there.

But regardless of the reason why I didn’t flee, I was glad that I didn’t. Even if I felt my face heating up under the weight of the stares directed at me.

I’ve had enough of the abuse and there was no way in hell I would let Emma, Sophia, and Madison get away from this. Not when the authorities had to be contacted in this situation. Not when those *bitches* could tamper with the evidence if I ran.

The click and flash of a cellphone snapping a picture tore me out of my thoughts.

I turned to face the sound, I heard a mutter go through the crowd and the girl who took the photo shrieked as my gaze fell upon her. She nearly dropped the phone as she shrank back in fear.

More had their phones out, no doubt filming my whole ordeal even as we spoke.

I knew that with my physical changes, a secret identity would be a fool’s dream but that didn’t mean I wanted footage of me at one of my lowest points in my life and covered in filth, be the first impression the world would have of me.

I had to suppress a chuckle at the dread I felt at the prospect of asking for basic human decency. Only minutes ago I had fought and killed a monstrous spider that was hell-bent liquefying me to be its next meal and the thing that actually terrified me was actually speaking out.

The absurdity of the situation nor the fact that they all looked *so fragile* now did do anything to lessen the pit in my stomach.

I moved my mouth a bit, silently checking if something felt off, and formulated my request before actually speaking it out loud.

I shouldn’t have bothered.
“I fucking told you no pictures, no clips, no fucking evidence!” Sophia snarled from behind crowd gathered around me.

She sounded… a bit scared – slightly hysterical even and trying to mask it with more overt aggression. If that was possible in the first place. I was used to the latter part, but seeing her apparently on the verge of losing control of the situation was something I could get used to.

The crowd parted as Sophia moved through it with only her angry stares, pushing the very few who didn’t move out of her way.

Much to her obvious annoyance, she had to let Emma steady her and she looked at me with murder in her eyes. As if this was somehow all my fault. But there was more in there as well.

She was afraid. Afraid of me.

Phasing. Tenebrous, gaseous wisp state. Armor. Enhanced dodging capabilities. Cerebral control unit imbedded in a matrix made from a mixture of bone and nervous matter and fucium ore enhanced by a nargacuga base. Possible synergy with chameleos. Weak to electricity. Weight manipulation. Superior weapon acceleration…

I felt my eyes grow wide at the sudden influx of information and their implications. I was only vaguely aware that I was actually staring at the approaching tormentor.

Sophia was a parahuman. I was sure of it. The armor my power suggested would be powerful, leagues beyond the pitiful suggestions it gave me for the others. I’d still needed to hunt some rather exotic animals to make it work but…

My mind reached a screeching halt. The powers seemed so familiar; phasing and tenebrous state? Shadows?

Everything clicked together. Shadow Stalker. Sophia Hess was Brockton Bay’s very own dangerous vigilante turned problem Ward.

I had read the threads about the brutal anti-hero and her love for crossbows. I even encountered some of the short-lived ones speculating how long it would take for her to take it too far before those threads got locked and buried. The powers, the shitty personality. It all fit.

That also explained why she was apparently immune to trouble at Winslow and why the teachers were so happy to look the other way. They didn’t want to lose their precious Ward; the grants it brought, the gang control she brought. From what I’ve heard the recruiters and neophytes were an even bigger problem before she came. And here I thought the school directory was afraid of Emma’s dad or didn’t want to lose their precious little star athlete. Madison, of course, was too “innocent” to do anything malicious. It was weird though that nobody seemed to notice the obvious differences in handwriting when she handed in the homework she had stolen from me.

At least I hoped it was just short-sighted incompetence and greed from Blackwell and her cronies that allowed it to happen. I didn’t want to believe that the PRT would willingly let it happen, they would have stopped their wards from tormenting a normal, innocent girl wouldn’t they? They were the heroes.

The vicious, paranoid side of me reminded that she was supposed to be under strict surveillance after her debut as vigilante which involved literally pinning people to walls. According to PHO, there
were signs that Shadow Stalker had even mellowed out over the last year.

Did I really wanted to be part of an organization that enabled such psychopaths?

“What the hell, Hebert, did you hit your pathetic head and got your mind scrambled or what,” Sophia spat as she arrived at what I now identified as striking distance. “Stop staring at me, pervert. I know the boys avoid you in disgust but that doesn’t mean you’d have better chances with us girls you ugly bitch. And the fact you assumed I’d swing that way. Eww.”

“And you’d think that it couldn’t get possibly get worse before.” Emma stage-whispered. She didn’t need to support Sophia anymore apparently and had time to throw her verbal barbs around. But it missed her usual bite. She was nervous and less eloquent than normal. Her insults reduced to the simple “you’re ugly”. That was Madison level stuff and those only worked because she managed to make her entourage to repeat it in various forms throughout the day. Constantly grinding another sliver of self-confidence away in the process.

I couldn’t contain a chuckle at how sad a display this was in comparison to their A-game.

It wasn’t what they had expected if their sudden silence and confusion they exuded was anything to go by.

Still, I couldn’t help it. Here I stood after kicking the door off my locker – a door that lay warped and in plain sight with a foot-shaped indentation – and wielding a hammer I had absolutely no right to even hold with absolute ease and they were trying to intimidate me? After I had faced the demonic spider?

If that wasn’t hilarious, I didn’t know what was.

Especially if you considered that the sharp claws that now grew out of my fingertips would be more than enough to deal with any of them with the exception of Sophia. But if she tried to do anything it would only serve to out herself so her hands were bound.

At least I also knew how my books and projects kept disappearing from my locker.

“The fuck? Why don’t you flee like the coward you are before you suffer another mental breakdown?” Sophia continued, fear and desperation seeping through more and more.

It looked she only now realized the stupidity of this stunt. She was afraid of ending in juvie or maybe even worse.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to witness you slobbering again like you did after your mother died. It was all I could do to not simply run out of the room when you started once again. Don’t know how I managed to let you ruin my clothes by offering a shoulder for you to weep on. What was it? An entire week of crying yourself to sleep because your dear mommy died?”

I felt a lance of betrayal and anger shoot through me at Emma’s words. Even if she was desperately blunt like Sophia, the reminder of both the happier times when I could call her my friend and my mother death hurt. It wouldn’t do. I had enough anger

“You,” I pointed at a student that looked the most uncomfortable. “Warn a teacher and tell them what just happened. They should have heard something happened by now but I don’t hold too much hope. And contact the PRT if —”
“WHAT? Just because you couldn’t take a simple fucking prank doesn’t mean you can just waste everyone’s time!”

“– They don’t already do it themselves. I’m sure they’d love to hear what just happened and would be glad to have people cooperating,” I finished with steel behind it that surprised me and ignoring Sophia’s outburst. She was grasping at straws now. Looks like she really didn’t count on the PRT’s benevolence.

The boy I pointed at fled the scene and a couple of others took that as an inspiration to do the same.

“That said, it’s probably best to stick around. I can’t imagine the PRT’d like to chase after you in case they have questions or that they’d be too happy if stuff leaked.”

“And why the fuck should we listen to you, Hebert? You’ve had a little episode and now all of the sudden you’re the fucking queen bossing us around. Do you really think anything will happen because you were gullible enough to be pranked?”

I simply smiled a wide, toothy smile that had very little to do with happiness and all the more with absolute contempt.

That apparently was too much for Sophia Hess as she lunged at me shrieking, accelerating faster than I somehow knew should be possible, dispelling any of the little doubt that remained regarding her identity.

Still, she wasn’t nearly as scary as the nerscylla I faced only minutes ago. Far weaker as well as I found out when her fist connected with my chin. It stung a little.

I grabbed the offending hand with my free hand and applied a little pressure and smiled once more.

Sophia’s eyes went wide as she realized just how much she messed up. I felt the pressure under my fingertips decrease slightly before it returned to normal. Sophia struggled to free her hand and desperately suppressed the urge to simply phase through it by starting kicking at my feet (probably wanted to hit my shins bit didn’t account for my changed anatomy) and hitting me in my side with her other hand. It didn’t do much besides annoying me so I applied a little more pressure, careful to not use my claws.

“What is going on here? What’s that awful smell? Break it up people boring adult coming through.” Mr. Gladly’s said as he presumably went looking for his missing class and saw the scene. Or he simply decided that he simply couldn’t ignore it any longer without it looking bad on his resume.

“Break it up you two! And I hope there is a good explanation for all this. What happened to that locker?”

“Why couldn’t you just have run away like you always did.” I could barely hear Sophia whisper with a fragility that I had never expected to hear from her.

I let go of Sophia but didn’t turn to face the newly arrived teacher. I didn’t want to turn my back on this crazed animal regardless of her showing a new side of hers. She returned the courtesy by spitting in my face as she massaged her hand.

The spit didn’t matter that much in the grand scheme of things with the rest that covered me but she had just ensured that I’d be heavily invested in making an electrified weapon. I knew there’d be
plenty monsters I could use but if everything else failed, I was sure I could cobble something together with regular household electronics.

“Hey Mr. G,” I began before Sophia could open her mouth perhaps a bit more bile as usual. “I’m glad you could join us. In case you’re wondering why I held on to Miss Hess’ hand, it’s because she punched me on the chin without provocation and I didn’t feel like eating another punch. It didn’t really work out that well.”

I heard Sophia sputter in indignation but I plowed right through any excuse she might have planned. “Just ask one of the students in the audience. I’m sure more than one has filmed the whole thing.”

I turned to face him as much as I could without losing Sophia out my sight and I saw his eyes wander from the gun hammer I still held in my hand, to the hand itself, to my feet, and to the filth still covering me.

“Taylor, what happened to you? Follow me to the infirmary - I need to get you checked out. Is that your blood?”

I was vaguely aware that Sophia skulked back into the shadows, towards Emma, and my suddenly overly large ears – I was wondering why turning my head felt strange before I hit the locker with one ear as I left it – picked up hushed whispers. I could make out the words “dad” amongst other things. That would explain why Sophia hadn’t tried to interrupt me more thoroughly. Looks like Alan would join the fray.

“No Mr. G, I won’t go anywhere until the PRT arrived,” I answered the troubled looking Gladly. “Most of the blood isn’t mine. I’m fine. Wouldn’t want an overly zealous janitor or student cleaning my locker in a bout of misguided’ kindness’.”

“Is something wrong with it?” he asked as he moved to check it out.

I saw him pale as the stench truly hit him and he was treated by the sight of rotting blood, tampons, and sanitary towels.

“What a sight, isn’t it? This is what happens if everyone turns a blind eye to an extensive bullying campaign for more than a year. They’ve pushed me in there and locked the door while I hit the wall with enough force to break my glasses.”

Gladly opened his mouth to protest but I continued with a cold anger I didn’t know I was capable of, “Don’t bother. I saw the pity in your eyes as you walked past them ganging up on me more than once. Have you never asked what happened to my chair and desk? Why I needed a new textbook so often?”

“So why haven’t you come to me; to anyone? My hands are kinda tied without students actually informing or even warning me.”

I let out a mirthless chuckle, “I have and was promptly ignored. I tried again and they told me I shouldn’t make such a scene with such tall tales and stop wasting their time. They said there was no evidence, that witnesses had come forward swearing I was the one starting it all and that I better quit or there’d be consequences. That my grades put me on shaky grounds even without the added problems. All the while my bullies escalated their little games and I could only hope that a teacher would take even the barest hint of an initiative. Don’t know how I could’ve been so sickeningly
naïve."

“Now you listen for a moment. I won’t stand for such baseless accusations aimed towards my colleagues. I don’t know whether you’re aware but you have the reputation of –“

“Of what? An overly problematic, failing student craving for attention? The mean bully who goes after poor, sweet, innocent Madison Clements? The same Madison who can make any boy and half of the girls say whatever she wants with her cute little shtick? Do you honestly think I felt like stuffing my locker was with this shit was just the fun thing to do and then somehow just ended in there by pure accident? Do you believe I asked nobody for help?”

I stared him right in the eyes and noticed I had to look down to do it. The only things keeping the tears at bay was the absurdity of it all, the rage flowing through me, and the hope that, finally, things might change. There would be enough time to lament my fate when I was at home.

“If you were truly locked up in there as you claim. How did you get out and what happened to the door?”

Wow, I hadn’t thought that Gladly would be this far out of his depths. Sure, I hadn’t expected much and had knowledge about the “birth” of new parahumans and their so called trigger events wasn’t widespread beyond the inner reaches of the PHO forums and newly started college courses. But there was dense and not-seeing-the-mangled-door-in-front-of-the-locker-while-staring-an-obvious-cape-in-the-eyes dense. I even still had the hammer for fuck’s sake!

Then it hit me. Gladly wasn’t that much different from the other passive students standing around. He was afraid to become a victim of the very same thing that happened to me – I served a fine example in that regard. It explained his cringe-worthily attempts to appear cool and everybody’s friend. Insisting on being called “Mr. G”, the deluge of group assignments with little oversight.

This teacher was afraid of his own students. Combine that with the pressure he was probably under by the faculties and I could see how he had reacted the way he did. How he managed to ignore my daily torment.

That didn’t mean I’d forgive him for his involvement anytime soon though.

“I triggered in the locker Mr. G,” I began slowly and pointed towards the remains of the door. “Then I decided I didn’t want to be in there anymore and busted out. Now, if you’d be so kind to call my dad and ask him to bring my notebooks, that would be lovely. I want him nearby when the PRT arrives.”

“PRT? I guess it makes sense to have them come all things considered. I’ll call him and just to be sure to call the PRT as well.” He answered before setting off to do just that.

Looked like he had decided that Winslow was sinking and he would better get off now. Alan would soon be a lesser problem for it.

I shot a pointed look at Emma who – much to my amusement – actually shrank back a little and sat down in front of my stinking, broken locker.

I wasn’t going to move away from my stinking, ruined locker. After all, I had noticed that my backpack had disappeared in mysterious circumstances in the short time I was in there. Losing my journals that way sucked but I had plenty where that came from at home.
They would not tamper with the mess they had created here. It was one of the only reasons why the door hadn’t been converted in a knife (yet), no matter how much my instincts screamed at me because of it.

Instead, I started to distract myself by cleaning up the hammer and actually see the nitty-gritty of the mechanism up-close. Sure, I knew how it worked but seeing is believing and, hey, maybe I can come up with some improvements.

At the very least it should distract me enough to suppress the urge to make a cousin out of bone.
It was interesting to actually see the integrated flesh sacks nestled inside the chambers up close. I knew on a fundamental level how they were supposed to look like and how to fuse them with the surrounding metal in such a way that they’d activate on impact. I knew what tools and what material’s I’d need to improve it.

I knew those things with an absolute certainty with a certainty that was humbling. As a Tinker, I was aware that I was mostly borrowing techniques and ideas from the future. Somewhere – or is it somewhen? – some über-genius actually comes (would have come up?) up with the methodology themselves from the ground up and actually invents the stuff I use if I didn’t, hadn’t, wouldn’t change it. Stupid time traveling knowledge and possible alternate worlds messing up language.

That was if my knowledge even came from the future. Most of it didn’t have the same antigrav toting, laser spewing flair that seemed to be a common theme in Tinkers capable of making weapons and armors. It also had a certain lack of fancy lights which apparently got replaced with teeth and claws and spikes.

But still, even knowing I was borrowing the base ideas I could and, if given the chance, would make the weapons, the armors, gadgets, and items my powers allowed me to create. And then I’d experiment and expand with Tinkertech materials completely unknown to the original owners of my knowledge.

They didn’t have parahumans to work with either…

I squashed that line of thinking. I wanted to be a hero and those don’t go around wearing the skins of defeated enemy Capes.

Maybe they let me use bits and pieces of fallen capes? I wouldn’t need everything.

Seeing where that line of thinking would lead, I Instead concentrated once more on the knowledge I had on the spider monster the other creatures it apparently encountered and fought. A deep seated urge tried to take hold of me once more by even thinking what I could create.

I only needed to actually hunt the right materials. And find their natural habitat.

Which might be a problem since I couldn’t find a portal in the back of the private little hellhole that my locker had been transformed into. Last time I checked, attacking wyverns hadn’t been a widespread problem in the area. Lung would like to count himself as a full-fledged dragon but I’d be the judge of that, thank you very much. He wouldn’t be missed all that much but there was still the problem that he was Lung. At least for now. Making an enemy of Dragon just seemed like a very bad idea all around.

What was I thinking about? Right hammer. Flame sacs. It probably wasn’t a great sign if I managed to sidetrack myself while distracting myself by flexing my Tinkering muscles. In an internal monolog.

Anyway. The sac. They were quite simply beautiful. A grayed, muscular bladder covered in veins glowing with a deep orange. They bathed the chambers of the hammer head – which could, by the way, actually rotate and unleash all sacs at once; ideal for a mighty charged attack – in the same
throbbing, fiery orange. Each one had their veins arranged structures in a beautifully unique manner.

I knew that they’d look like that just as I knew that there were better ones out there, ones that had a metallic gleam to them and burned with a bright hot white flame, and others like the elongated ones capable of producing raw lightning, ready to burn across the air and that wasn’t touching on the one producing more common poisons with various effects or the other elements.

‘Seeing is believing’ is how the saying goes and the actual thing surpassed even my power-assisted imagination.

The wonder over these components was even nearly enough to make me forget the stench oozing out of the locker behind me. To completely ignore the stares that became more obvious and daring now that I had calmed down.

The teachers had arrived not shortly after I had asked – no, commanded would probably be the better word – Mr. Gladly to call my father and escorted the students away in small groups at the time, probably herding them in empty classrooms to make life easier on the PRT when they arrived. Sophia, who seemed to have calmed down a lot and even looked… slightly defeated - despondent even - was led to the other side of the building than Emma.

Only a handful of students remained and I was glad that the teachers actually took initiative for once. I don’t know what I would have done if I had to endure a far greater intensity of whispers about me.

The teachers even came and tried to talk with me, see how I was doing and asking what happened and how I felt. Mrs. Knott seemed to genuinely care.

I didn’t answer them beyond nods and saying “I’m fine”. I didn’t know what happened to make me go as hard against Mr. Gladly as I did. Well, strictly speaking, I knew what happened. More than a year of bullying and disappointment on top of what happened that day ought to be enough to make anyone lash out just a bit.

But it didn’t explain how I reacted that confrontational and in his and Sophia’s face. It wasn’t like me and I didn’t trust myself to react better if one of the teachers stepped on a sore point. Especially considering how I got more and more ideas how to use their bones to forge gear.

I doubted that I’d gain any allies if I blew up again while they were apparently actually helping for once.

And that wasn’t even touching on my physical changes.

Sitting down, I had a clear view of my feet. They had lengthened and widened a bit and, similar to my hands, lost a toe each. Those toes had also grown and now resembled short, stubby fingers with a similar range of movement. Somewhere in the change, they must have busted through my shoes as the small tatters stuck between my wickedly clawed toes remained of the dirty old things. It was a pity since they had been pretty damn comfortable.

Combine it with how the proportions of the rest of my legs had changed – the bones of my thighs were shortened while those shins stretched by roughly the same amount – and I had the feeling that high heels wouldn’t pose much of a challenge to me for the rest of my life.

Digitigrade. That was the way my new form of locomotion was called. I believe.
I could probably make girls green with envy by wearing outrageous shoes without a wobble if it wasn’t for the fact that what felt like my big toe had needed to migrate further back, rotated a bit, and become opposable. Then there were the claws. Big, pointy claws probably two to three inches long each.

I had talons. I could grab things and – freaking out the various remaining onlookers as I tried it with the claw arm I brought – gained the flexibility to bring them to my mouth. It felt kind of weird being able to do that.

It would be a nightmare to find new shoes that would actually fit.

But it would be handy though if I wanted to smash things real good with one of the overgrown weapons my power urged me to make by picking up the slack where just friction wouldn’t cut it anymore. I had the feeling that I could actually grab the ground with my talons and generate so much more force that way.

As a matter of fact, I suspected that I had already been doing it subconsciously in my battle against the nerscylla. It would explain how I wasn’t simply yanked off my feet by the weight of the hammer every time I swung it.

My hands were a similar story: lost a finger, got claws, and they became sturdier. These pointy protrusions were shorter than the ones on my feet, allowing for grabbing things in a non-clawing way – as Sophia’s hand could attest – but still were hard and pointy enough that I could use them to manipulate fine objects. Ideal for high-tech Tinkering.

As to my face, I couldn’t really tell much beyond that my ears now stuck out half a foot on each side of my head.

I nearly facepalmed when I realized that I’d probably had to deal with elf-themed nicknames due to the ears alone. I was glad I was able to suppress the practiced motion. I had the feeling it wasn’t something you wanted to try without practicing it after recently getting very pointy object permanently attached to your fingertips.

Speaking, or, well, inner monologuing, about pointy things, my teeth had become some sort of hybrid between actual fangs and regular teeth. It wouldn’t hinder me too much with being an omnivore but I took it as a subtle hint from my body that meat had a bit higher priority now.

I might even try that Challenger at Fugly Bob’s. It might even fit in my mouth without much trouble if my yawns were any indication. I was pretty sure that normal, human mouth couldn’t open to such a degree.

It probably also meant that my mouth was even wider. As if it needed that.

Weirdly enough, one of the more confusing changes was that I had scales. Skin colored ones in the same tone as my skin that slightly darkened towards my feet and hands. All things considered, it was small fries compared to the rest but I was confronted by it more than the rest weirdly enough. This was likely due to how I hadn’t seen my face and that rest of modifications felt natural to me, fading into the background. My skin was something that was simply there. A constant. Sure, it could get cut sometimes and it would demand attention and I took rudimentary care of it but I didn’t really lose too much thought about it. Seeing something I had assumed as a simple constant change this much and to be confronted by it everywhere I looked on my body. It was… disquieting.
While on the topic on constants, apparently whatever happened to me during my Trigger didn’t include a visit from the Boob Fairy.

Life wasn’t fair.

At least it made crafting armors a bit easier; I could basically just wear any armor made for men. Slim, effeminate ones.

See? Sometimes I *can* see the positive side of things.

It was probably negated by the fact that those insights went hand in hand with self-deprecation.

I knew I looked like a freak but I wasn’t certain how I was supposed to feel about it. I saw how each individual part except my face looked like but the pieces refused to form a cohesive whole in my mind. I would need a mirror to make up my mind. I hadn’t asked for one.

I was too afraid what I’d see. Too afraid to lose it. I couldn’t risk it when there was still stuff to do and I was holding up more or less fine.

At least I hadn’t lost the one truly feminine attribute. My hair still flowed in all its, long, curly, brown glory.

My mind provided me with info on a red, flying, fire-loving wyvern that absolutely loved to spread its love to everyone in sight. And a fire spitting monkey. And multiple monsters swimming in lava, ready to produce beams of solid fire. And…

I was wistfully playing with my hair, contemplating fire and electricity proof helmet designs when I was startled by someone clearing his throat.


Looking up, I saw a neatly trimmed, brown beard framed by a midnight-blue helmet and silvery visor cautiously observing me.

I may or may not have actually squeed out loud when I saw one of my childhood heroes in the flesh. Maybe he even had time to discuss hair-protection methods. He had to have at least one to be able to flaunt that beard in a town with Lung.

“Miss Hebert?” he asked, his tone serious, even concerned with the slightest hint of annoyance.

“Yes?” I had the feeling he’d have the time right now.

“Before we continue, am I allowed to record both the audio and visuals of the preliminary proceedings? It would allow us to proceed at a much faster rate and anything not necessary for a case would be kept confidential.”

If it meant getting out of this place quicker and out of this set of clothes. Maybe start tinkering. It would also give the Trio less an opportunity to somehow get away with this.
I nodded.

“Miss Hebert, could you please give a verbal agreement.”

An irrational spike of annoyance and anger shot through me at the apparent redundancy, “I, Taylor Hebert allow this conversation and following preliminary investigations to be recorded by Armsmaster.”

The hero quietly grunted with grim satisfaction. Apparently, I passed some internal test, “All right. Before we continue I have to ask you one more question. I am informed that your father is on his way as we speak. Do you wish to wait on his arrival or can we begin without him?”

Dad.

I looked at the filth encrusted, stinking, ripped remnants of my clothes; at my claws and talons.

It would break him. Seeing his girl like this. It’s what I wanted to avoid after mom’s death. I didn’t know whether he could take another blow. He had been quiet, distant after her death and wasn’t able to recover completely – a certain amount of apathy still followed him wherever he went. But still, he tried to stay strong. For my sake.

It’s why I didn’t tell him when the bullying started. Both out of the probably misguided attempt to protect him and the belief that I could handle it myself or that it would pass.

I saw him starting to question himself when my grades started to drop apparently without reason as far as he could tell. It was due to the assignments and projects that “mysteriously” went missing or were destroyed but he didn’t know that. He’d simply smile and tell me that there’d be a next time. I couldn’t tell him then what truly happened believing it was too late to bring the topic. He was afraid of losing me. His constant reminders to stick to the safe routes and change them regularly; to bring the pepper spray he insisted on buying when I went for a run was enough to convince me of that. I wanted to spare him the additional pain.

And look where that brought me.

I was afraid how he’d react to see his little girl turned into a freak. A monster.

I was afraid of how much he’d blame himself when he realized how easily this could have been partially avoided if I had a cellphone. Neither of us did after mom’s crash. The association was simply too strong.

I stopped myself and focused on what I had to do. On the reason I stubbornly sat down in front of the tool that had caused the agony and would probably have more in store. I could cry later.

“No. We can begin now,” I answered and pointed at the grime that covered me. “I want to get this over with.”

“If that’s the case, tell me what happened,” he said before remembering he forgot something and adding. “Please.”

I wanted to start at the beginning, of the betrayal at my former friend’s hands. To tell the daily torment in detail. But I knew – no matter how much it hurt to admit – it wasn’t directly relevant to what had actually happened that day and would have to wait until the time arrived to find the guilty
And so I recounted what had happened. The weird strained quiet. The stank. The push. My glasses. The rancid contents of the locker which I showed simultaneously. He carefully stepped around the warped door as he took a closer look. He didn’t look happy. The failed breakout attempt using the baton that lay now discarded in the pocket dimension. The mad struggle to bust my way out.

The ignored pain and cracks of bones as a broke my hands and feet, something I only realized had happened as I recounted the event to the hero.

Armsmaster let me talk uninterrupted but I witnessed his mouth form into a sneer of disgust when the rotting contents came up. I saw it soften again as I told them about the blackout only to actually fall open slightly in surprise when I mentioned the cave and its inhabitant.

He kept silent except for the occasional grunt of empathy. That is until the gun hammer came up.

Even while unable to see his eyes, I knew they widened. His stance adopted a certain eagerness and he stared at the instrument of destruction with renewed interest.

“So you simply found this weapon? And it produces flames whenever it strikes something? Can I take a closer look?”

“I did find it but, if I get my hands on the right materials, I could easily make it myself,” I replied as I handed him the handle of the hammer.

The head hit the ground with a resounding thump.

“Brute, and likely Tinker,” I could hear him mutter before he added, louder and with a certain eager anticipation. “Could you try to explain to me how it works?”

“Sure,” I replied as I took back the handle and turned the hammer so we had a clear view of its business-end. “You see those bladder-like organs at the end of each chamber? Those are actually so-called flame sacs found in mainly fire breathing wyverns. They’re able to produce and store flames inside the body of the beast and expel them with enough force to form fireballs amongst or let it stream out to form short ranged breath attacks.”

“How many times can they be used before they run out?”

I didn’t waste time to answer. Who would have known that talking Tinker would be so much fun?

Besides, I wanted to show-off to one of my heroes. “I think as long as the sacs don’t get damaged and you don’t skip on maintenance, you can use them as much as you like. No fuel needed.”

Armsmaster managed to look at me in shock even in his power armor and with half his face covered.

“I’m able to take the organs, bones, tissue, and other things, and use them to create weapons and armors with other, synergizing materials. This often involves fusing organic and inorganic materials to a cohesive whole, imbuing the end product with their properties – the nature of the monster and materials it was made of. Here, for example, the flame sacs are temporally locked in place in their filled state after they were freshly harvested. They simply regenerate in a couple of seconds after firing. The firestones integrated into the chamber walls both accelerate the process as well as make the cylinder more fireproof and they increase the temperature of the flames as well.”
“Are there any other… sacs?”

I simply saw the possible ideas and running amok through Armsmaster’s head as he speculated on potential organs and their uses, appraising and rejecting ideas even as he improved the promising ones.

“There are all kinds of sacs, but most relevant to you would probably be the lightning sac. And to be honest the ones used in this gun hammer are rather low quality.”

“Have you thought of…” Armsmaster began before stopping and putting a finger on the side of his helmet, probably listening to someone over his integrated communication devices.

I was sure his tech worked perfectly fine without the gesture and got the impression it was something taught himself to do during civil conversations. Either to let the other know he isn’t completely listening or to shut them up. Either way, it was effective.

There was no doubt in my mind he wouldn’t bother in more hostile situations.

“Damn it, got sidetracked again into Tinker talk.” He breathed and continued, louder. “I was just informed your father just cleared the checkpoint and that he should be here any mo- “

“Taylor!” My dad shouted as he rounded the corner and saw me.

He dropped the bundle of fresh clothes and the bag containing notebooks and nearly ran towards me.

“What happened? Who did this?” He asked, his voice trembling, as he made his way over to me.

I, meanwhile, stood frozen as the torrent of emotions I bottled up was unleashed inside of me and suppressing the urge to run or hide.

And while a war was fought inside of me, I couldn’t help wonder why he had brought clothes. He didn’t know what happened and I was certain I hadn’t mentioned it when I asked Gladly to call dad.

Could it be…

“What am I asking? Are you alright, sweetie?” Dad continued as he had nearly reached me. “of course you aren’t. I have eyes don’t I.”

He looked so fragile. Dad was hurting. Badly.

And still, he tried to appear strong. To be there for me. To make sure I could rely on him.

He moved in for a hug and an irrational, insecure, and hateful part of me wanted to avoid it. To avoid getting my filth on his suit. Ruining it. He needed that…

The voices were drowned out as he pulled me in and would have likely crushed me if I hadn’t changed. The hammer slid from my grasp and I returned the gesture, reservations long forgotten.

“It’s alright. I’m here for you. You can let go now.”

It was too much. The dam was broken and there was no stopping the waterworks.
I buried my face against his shoulder and cried.
Chapter 1.4

I don’t know for how long I cried as the hurt and frustration of the last eighteen months were unleashed.

But it wasn’t just grief that made it last as long. It was amplified by the relief of not having to lie to my father anymore. Of not having to fake a smile while slowly crumbling on the inside. To stop hurting him with my good intentions.

I’d wish I he’d have learned about the problems in another circumstance but deep down I knew I simply would’ve found completely rational sounding excuse to not tell him every time I the pressure threatened to overwhelm me, bottling it up further instead.

Hell, if I would have looked normal, I probably would have tried my hardest to hide my powers from dad, adding another layer of stress and guilt.

The tears started to dry as I felt Armsmaster getting impatient behind me and I redoubled my hug, too bath in that warmth for a bit longer.

God, I missed this.

“Uh… Little Owl.” Dad gasped with a soft chuckle. “Ease up a little. Can feel my ribs creak.”

Very little of the haunted emptiness that plagued him ever since mom’s death was left. What kind of messed up world was it that I nearly had to die for us to come back together?

“Sorry,” I whispered as I let go.

“I was so worried when I got the call from Mr. Gladly urging me to come, saying you needed me and asked for your notebooks as well,” Dad said after a deep breath and massaging his ribs. “Didn’t know which one he meant so I took all I could find.”
I was torn between being amused, relieved, and mortified by that statement. I had filled a couple of notebooks with the exploits of the Trio alone so his pragmatism in taking them all would increase the chance of actually getting the right ones and it meant I got at least the opportunity to tell him about the torment instead of him having to read it in a notebook.

On the other hand, there were also that one I used to doodle in, fantasize about getting powers and which ones I’d like to get (the Alexandria package, of course), thinking of potential and sufficiently heroic sounding names.

Even costume designs. Ones involving more than a few capes and skintight leotards.

I’d have to make sure that notebook disappeared. It would probably lessen the visual impact of the spiky armor I’d be making if it got leaked.

There’d really be no escaping the fairy and elf themed nicknames on the parahuman online forums.

“It really didn’t help when he told me you’d need a fresh set of clothes and refused to clarify what happened in a somewhat panicky way,” he continued as he looked at me and at my clothes with renewed intensity while I was reeling with the revelation that Mr. G could care. If only he had started sooner.

His gaze didn’t linger on my hand or feet nor did it halt on my face. Instead, it focused on the filth that covered my clothes as well as the tears and the slash that showed my stomach.

I could feel the rage he had sworn to never show me rise and my head sank a bit in guilt.

But instead of blowing up, he managed to calm down again and gently grabbed my chin to raise my head again and he looked me in the eyes, a sad smile on his lips.

It didn’t matter that I was transformed in a freakish chimera of man and wyvern. I’d always be his little Taylor.

The realization hit me harder than I expected and had to fight the urge to start crying again. This time they’d be tears of happiness.
“So, Taylor. What just happened?”

“Right. We were distracted by your hammer before your father arrived and interrupted that. I still need you to finish your recounting of the events,” Armsmaster added, not quite able to mask his annoyance and impatience.

I felt a stab of angry irritation go through and I shot a glare back at him before seeing the claw arm laying on the floor beside him. It brought forth a surprising set of emotions, one I didn’t think I’d feel with everything else. A hungry urge to from it into something bigger, to fuse it with materials to make it shine. An annoyance that I was still standing here and the reminder that prime material was standing mere feet away from me.

It startled me as I realized how Armsmaster likely felt. For someone who’s a Tinker specialized in efficiency – someone that’s so devoted to being a hero that I could hardly believe the stories about his daily regime sometimes surfacing on PHO – doing nothing and waiting must be hell. Especially after I probably put so many potential new ideas in his head.

Dad meanwhile hadn’t noticed the hero’s tone of voice and was instead staring wide-eyed at the gun hammer on the ground and at me and back at the hammer and…

I guess that detail got filtered out as he first saw me.

“Give me a sec to bring dad up to speed and I’ll continue. Alright?” I answered, managing to tear dad out of his stupor and which Armsmaster replied with a gruff affirmative grunt.

I gave him the abridged of what I had already told the hero.

As expected, Dad took it far worse them him but I was surprised how well he managed to hide the angry trembles as I came to the part about the locker.

Then came the time to describe the fight. Armsmaster wanted to know more information about the nersenylla I fought. What I knew about the species beyond its appearance, its intelligence, and whether or not I knew of other monsters.
I told him that I could probably fashion a detailed drawing of its entire anatomy even if I didn’t know the appropriate scientific names and that it was a trapper, thus fairly intelligent.

About the monsters, I was surprised to notice that while I knew the names and general characteristics of other monsters, I missed the precise knowledge I had on the nerscylla.

I choose to keep quiet that I could produce a same drawing of the deceased hunter, him, dad, Sophia, my classmates, and teachers. Each detailing small little individual quirks. That I was able to do it for every living creature I had encountered up until now.

The fact that I got a rundown of his and Sophia’s skill remained unmentioned as well.

I got the feeling the PRT wouldn’t like that bit and might get paranoid about me.

Especially if they learned that I could do the same with humans and capes as I could with monsters and dragons.

Dad didn’t get angrier when I told them about the encounter with the demon spider in the cave. He was protective to a fault so I kind of expected him to get angry at himself for “allowing” this to happen. Instead, I could feel a combination of pride and awe coming from him after he recovered from the shock of me describing the arachnid.

Armsmaster was interested to hear that I could actually charge up my attacks to increase their destructive capabilities. It was apparently an interesting quirk of my powers. He also wanted to have a sample of the nerscylla so he could work out how much force I was capable of generating with the hammer.

He had apparently measured the weight of the hammer already when I handed it to him and after (too) much consternation (Armsmaster cleared his throat again when I took too long) I decided to part ways with a jaw fragment.

My carving knife had just gotten a bit smaller.

And then came to time to recount my after-battle actions. “After I smashed the nerscylla's head, I first made my way over to the fallen hunter and luckily found an antidote to stop the poison from liquefying my back and a potion to heal myself back up to full health. Then I made my way back to
“What. Did you just say you he had a universal antidote and something that could instantly heal your wounds? Can you make those as well?” Armsmaster suddenly interrupted me with an intensity that startled me.

And now that I thought about it I concluded that yes, I could actually make those things and more even more. Interesting what goes forgotten if you wield a giant-ass hammer that’s also a revolver somehow to kill a giant spider.

“I think I actually could if I had the right resources,” I began, letting the information flood me, trying to determine how these items work. “I could actually make better ones as well. Much better ones. The one I took was a regular one and was only able to repair a relatively small amount of tissue and bone damage. Couldn’t cure the poison. The antidote can cure a large variety of monstrous venomous but not elemental blights? Dousing yourself by eating a berry? Also, doesn’t improve immunity. Poison retains same effectiveness after recovery. Potions could be improved by… honey? Honey from indigenous bee species. I can make flash bombs out of a stone, a sap plant, and a lightning bug?! That’s why Tinkers are bullshit, I guess. Ancient potion can do what? I’d need a manufacturing chain to produce those though. I can shoot people to heal them, how does – “

“Taylor! Calm down. Take a deep breath and come back to us. Focus,” Armsmaster told me, shaking me a bit to snap me out of my fugue while dad stared at me with agitated wonder. “I take it you could make it but what would that take and how effective are those potions?”

I took followed his advice and took a deep breath concentrating on the potion, pushing aside the flood of new ideas that were still bombarding me. “I’d need an herb that I doubt can be found here. It already has a small healing effect on its own. On top of that I’d also need a blue mushroom and again, I doubt I can find it here. I could also make them more effective by infusing them with the honey of a certain bee. I will look for it if I can find a way back into that pocket dimension of doom but it still would be far from enough to do anything large-scale. I’d probably need to get a farm or something to grow it first. Huh, I know farming techniques as well? But anyway, they only heal a certain amount of tissue and bone damage. You know, sealing wounds, knitting organs back together, setting bones, replacing lost tissue, but they wouldn’t do anything to the cause of the injuries.”

“You said it only healed a certain amount. What happens if there are still injuries left afterward?”

“You drink another one or two, of course. Until everything is healed.”
Armsmaster gave me a level stare. “This is probably more important than I realized, isn’t it?”

“It would be invaluable for combat operations. For Endbringer attacks. For ER departments in hospitals. Even if it’s only a highly potent Band-Aid it has the potential to save countless lives.”

Oh. If you put it that way it does sound impressive. Dad was positively radiant with pride.

“I don’t know how long they’ll keep though and I have no idea how to access the place.”

“How did you get out of the cave?”

“After killing the monster I felt something tugging at me with increasing insistence as time went on. I had barely the time to carve off the dangling claw arm of my kill before I found myself back in my locker and I did my Kool-Aid man impression. I think I had about a minute after delivering the killing blow.”

“And then the PRT was called. What happened after you’ve busted out of your locker?”

I rubbed my head and looked at my dad with a lopsided smile. “At first I could only think about what I’d build when I got home and what I’d needed for tools when I noticed that everybody was staring at me.”

I had been standing in such a way I faced both dad and Armsmaster. I turned to face the hero fully. I wanted to see his reaction to the next bit.

“Then two of my tormentors waded through the crowd and started slinging abuse at me once again while I still dripped with ichor and rotting blood. They wanted me to run away. After the spider, they seemed fairly harmless though and apparently, it showed. When I then asked someone to phone the PRT, one of them flipped and assaulted me until a teacher, Mr. Gladly, managed to have her back off from me.”

“And then you’ve sent him to phone your dad on top of alerting us as well. He did mention you were rather forceful with your demands and more than a bit scared. Who did attack you?”
“Dad, could you please fetch the notebooks you brought?” I asked before continuing. “I don’t know exactly what happened there. I’m normally not like that, but I think that attack put me back into the same mindset I had fighting the nerscylla and caused me to be more confrontational. As to who attacked me…”

I looked Armstmaster straight in the eyes, or at least looked straight at the point where I reasonably assumed his eyes would be, “… It was Sophia Hess.”

I could have sworn Armstmaster slightly choked at that as his mouth transformed into a thin, angry line.

“I merely held her hand after she hit me squarely in the jaw with it so she wouldn’t be able to do that again. She improvised and used her other hand and feet instead while I held her with as little force as possible. I bet it has been filmed by one of the onlookers. There were plenty of phones out after all. It’s weird though that she reacted that way. When she approached me Emma had to support her.”

Armstmaster gave me a long, hard look at that last comment and I quietly wondered whether I had gone too far.

“Yes, dad. Emma,” I answered incredulously as he returned with the notebooks, defusing the mounting tension between the hero and me.

“I’ve also included the emails that were particularly bad as a printout and glued them in at their appropriate dates.”

“Taylor, why didn’t you tell me. And Emma? Weren’t you best friends?”
Dad…

My heart broke a little seeing him slumped over like that. It took a lot of effort to continue but I had to bring this to an end. To finally stop the abuse, the hurt. I couldn’t cry again.

“We were,” I whispered, my throat hoarse. “I don’t know what happened, dad. We had our tearful goodbye as I left for summer camp telling how much we’d miss the other and when I returned she was hanging out with Sophia and suddenly refused to talk to me and started telling me that I was weak and that I should be disgusted with myself. Madison joined the two just after the semester started and soon nobody stood up for me.”

“I was wondering why she didn’t come over anymore,” Dad said, anger in his voice. Anger aimed at her and the world but mostly himself. “I thought you had reached that age where sleepovers had become embarrassing. How could I have been so stupid? Do you think Alan knows?”

He started pacing now, desperately trying to retain his relative calm – to keep his legendary temper at bay. “He better not know. I’ve talked with the bastard just last week, discussing how nice it would be to have big barbecue feast as soon as the weather permits just like we used to do. I’ll wring – “

“Dad!” I interrupted before he could finish that sentence. “This is pretty one of the reasons why I didn’t tell you. I knew you and Alan were still pretty close and that you might do something you’d regret. He’s an attorney. He can undo us financially.”

It seemed to startle him and I moved in closer to hug him once more. A lighter one but no less genuine. I had missed those.

“You also looked so fragile after mom’s death.” I continued in a whisper while taking comfort from his embrace. “I didn’t want to trouble you with my problems as well. I… didn’t want to disappoint you. Seeing my grades drop was hard enough as it was.”

“Disappoint me? How could you have done that while you endured the continuous betrayal of whom you thought your best friend? If I should be disappointed with someone it’s me. If I hadn’t felt so sorry for myself I might have spotted it earlier. I might have – “

I squeezed a little harder to derail him before he gathered momentum blaming himself. He already had troubles to prevent himself from crying. I wouldn’t care but I knew he wanted to be strong for me. I let him.
“Oh, Annette…”

We held on for a little longer as Armsmaster was scanning the final notebook.

“So what will we do now, little Owl?”

“You’re asking me? Aren’t you supposed to be the adult?”

“An adult whose first reaction upon hearing the news was to go over to my friend’s house and harm him over something he might not have any knowledge of. I think I’ll put my trust in the one who has inherited Annette’s brain and managed to stay calm even as her abuser physically attacked her. After being put into that thing, being forcefully transformed, and fighting a monster.”

We chuckled softly at that. He did have a point.

“I might be able to help you with that,” Armsmaster commented as he put the last notebook back into the bag. “While nothing in the notebooks would hold up as direct evidence in court, it would probably be enough to get a warrant on the three considering what happened. This isn’t something that simply happens out of the blue. Add to this the witness testimonies we’re no doubt getting right at this very moment, perhaps even recordings of everything and my lie detector, and we’re considering starting a case against the three main perpetrators and the school. Just a couple more questions.”

“Sure, ask.”

“Did the staff know what was happening?”

“At the beginning, I’ve tried to solve it by reporting it to the teachers but it was always my word against the track star Sophia, Emma, the daughter of a lawyer, the little angel Madison, and whoever wanted to join their inner circle. They waved me off and when they began threatening me with punishing me for these ‘unsubstantiated’ claims and attempts at ‘slander’, I stopped. They weren’t subtle though. At least Mr. Gladly knew. Some of the stuff happened right in front of his nose.”

I didn’t know that calm speech could drip with venom.
“What!” Dad yelled with renewed rage.

“Calm down Mr. Hebert,” Armsmaster said, deflating him quite a bit. “We will certainly start a thorough investigation in this matter. There will be no more cover ups. Taylor triggered here under abhorrent circumstances and it will not go unanswered, starting with the question why apparently no janitor noticed the stink coming from the locker.

“Taylor do you have any idea who could have thought of this idea and who has pushed you in the locker?”

“Emma’s shtick was mainly trying to hurt me with stuff she knew from the time we were best friends and shared way too much. It probably wasn’t Maddison’s either; she did the constant barrage of the smaller stuff – put glue on the seat and ‘accidentally’ step on my bag with a project or taking my homework just before we have to hand it in. Sophia was a fan of pushing me against the wall or down the stairs and liked to one-up the ideas of the other two. The extremity of this is something she’d do. At least I’m pretty sure she was the one to push.”

“I see.” Was all the hero had to say to that.

No. if his mouth was any indication, it was all he could say without blowing up.

I, meanwhile, was starting to feel the events of the morning catching up on me. I was starting to get tired, and my stomach growled occasionally. I was hungry and I started to notice my own stink more and more.

“Armsmaster, sir?” I asked. “Do you need me personally for anything else? Otherwise, I could really use a shower and those clean clothes right now.”

“I’ve heard enough for now. I can manage the rest of the planning for the legal proceeding with your father who, seeing you’re still a minor, is your legal representative. If you allow it at least. Just bring your clothes to me for further analysis.”

“Go ahead, Taylor. Let your old man be useful for once.”
I hugged him once more just because I could and I had missed the true thing for so long before taking the bundle of clothes dad brought and setting off towards the changing rooms and showers.

It was weird walking the nearly empty hallways only populated with the occasional PRT trooper that led me through with a small nod, my claws on my foot softly clicking against the faded linoleum floor.

Apparently, they had been warned of my intentions in advance.

I reached the tiled room with probably more mold than was legal in short order and stripped my clothes as carefully as I could with my newly acquired claws in the same room I avoided for so long in fear of attacks while my scrawny figure was completely exposed. They had happened a couple of times until I decided that the smell of sweat wouldn’t make much of a difference.

I avoided looking in the mirrors.

I let the lukewarm water wash over my sitting form – it couldn’t get hotter with any of the other showers either and all of them were too small for me to stand under– and was confronted with my new form without any clothes obscuring it.

While apparently, the Boob Fairy didn’t work on Mondays (didn’t blame her for that), her brother the Muscle Gnome did. I had gained a bit of muscle. It was subtle but my stick limbs suddenly sported the lean, toned muscle of an endurance athlete. I was in no way buff, but it was probably an improvement to before even considering that I had picked up running a couple of months back. I even had a faint six pack.

And yes, I had scales everywhere.

Far too soon I forced myself to scrub myself until I felt halfway clean and thought about ways to break the news that I wouldn’t be joining the Wards without confusing dad or making Armsmaster suspect. And also tricking his lie detector.

I still didn’t feel completely clean when I turned off the shower but realized I’d probably have to take a soak in boiling water before that happened.

Getting into the shirt and hoody (no bra needed for the ironing board) was far easier than trying to fit
into my favorite pants with my weirdly angled legs. With a pang of irrational sadness, I ended up having to cut them above the knees due to the added mass around that area. At least now I had confirmation that my talons were very sharp.

I hadn’t even bothered to bring the shoes and socks.

I made my way back with the bundle of stinking, dirty clothes in hand, feeling refreshed but hungry if not a bit exposed showing so much leg. I had never worn short anything ever since starting in Winslow.

“If Annette knew how apt the name Little Owl would be someday…” Dad started as I came around the corner. “Hey Taylor, you’re just on time. We’re nearly done here.”

“Indeed. You will be transferred to Arcadia. The paperwork will probably still need a week to get through but you’ll be able to start as soon as that’s done. Your father and I also came to the conclusion that it’d be best for you to join the Wards. Now – “

“I won’t join the Wards,” I interjected before he could continue.

That actually managed to silence Armsmaster.

“Why, Taylor?” Dad asked, puzzled. “They’d support you, help you with Tinkering. You could join the heroes. You don’t even have to fight if you don’t want to. So why reject it right from the start. It won’t be like Winslow. They’re heroes.”

And so was Sophia apparently. And they were also fellow teens.

“I’m sorry if that came out too strong.” I hastily rectified, hoping I hadn’t vexed Armsmaster too badly. “What I meant to say is that I don’t think I’m ready now. I need time alone. To think. To get to grips with my power and my new looks. After what happened here in Winslow, I don’t think I’m ready to be the new kid in a group of fellow teenagers just yet. No matter how nice they are. Sorry.”

My plan was just to tell an incomplete truth instead of trying to come up with some contrived reason that talked around Shadow Stalker.
It was simpler. More elegant. Probably another thing in favor of Fae nicknames if the internet ever found out.

And I really did need some time alone with my powers. I didn’t know how I’d react when put in a room full of materi – capes that caused my power to whisper ideas into my head. Presenting stuff I could make and fill me with the urge to actually follow through.

I’d probably first need to find a way to hunt more monsters to distract it with before I’d manage that.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Armsmaster said with a sad smile on his face. “Either way, you’re still going to be transferred to Arcadia no matter what happens otherwise even if it’s just so we can keep an eye out for you. If news gets out that you’re able to make those potions you’d suddenly turn into a very high valued target for the gang just because of that. Add to that the fact that you have the additional Brute aspect and can make those weapons, I’m afraid that the gangs wouldn’t be able to ignore you.

“I can understand your need to be alone, but I must urge you not to take too long deciding on what you want and to be careful if you go outside. No matter how hard, don’t try to get raw materials off the streets. Contact us instead. Gangs have the pawn shops and scrap yards under surveillance for people like us that just start out. Normal Tinkers already have difficulties not outing themselves by their compulsive behavior but you don’t have the luxury of a secret identity.

“Speaking of which, we’re trying our best to keep the videos and photos off the internet and we are having everyone here sign a nondisclosure form but it’s a losing battle. Stuff will leak, and people will talk. While it’s rarely needed due to the stubborn adherence of the criminal cape element to so called the Unwritten Rules, probably the most important one for you being that Capes don’t target the unpowered family of known capes, the PRT is willing to offer you and your dad a safe house just in case. As hard as it is, I’d also advise that you go public on your own. To announce your existence yourself. It’s the only way you have a chance to effectively control the narrative. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered weakly as I realized how much was coming towards me.

“Fine. A couple of last things before you can go. First, I have to ask: Do you have any holes in your memory? Days, weeks, months you can’t remember or have you observed anything strange during that time?”

“No, I haven’t. Why do you ask?”
“You might be aware of the so called case 53 capes. Capes that had their forms changed during their Trigger Events. All of those we were able to find and contact were amnesiac, not knowing their true name or where they came from. Considering your looks, protocol demanded that I had to ask even though I was fairly certain of the answer. Are you positive you can’t change back?”

“Oh, I see. And yes. I’m pretty sure I’ll have to deal with this on a permanent basis.”

“Second, I want to invite you to the PRT HQ to have your powers tested. No strings attached. You’d be picked up at your house by a van and driven there. I’d recommend it to see how much you’d have to watch out with your brute powers. It will give you more self-confidence if you knew how hard you could hit an average person without maiming them. Something you might sorely need if you end up in a combat situation.”

“That seems sensible. When will that be?”

“Is Wednesday alright?”

“Apparently my holidays were extended by a week, so… Sure.”

“Remember to bring your hammer. Third, I need a cape name for the paperwork; while you probably won’t have a secret identity, it’s important to have a separate alias for cape activities as well. To better separate work and private life and reinforce the idea that you’re willing to play by the Rules.”

My first urge was to use nerscylla. It was my very first victory and it used material harvested from its victims as armor similar to what I’d do. But it sounded too… villainy and I couldn’t trust people on PHO to write it correctly. Especially since the word was meaningless to almost everyone.

As such, I decided to keep it simple. Descriptive.

“You can call me ‘Wyverian’”

It was shorter, rolled easier of the tongue and it had the association with wyverns and by extension Dragon(s), giving it more of a heroic twist.
“Might I ask why?”

“It’s what I am, Armsmaster. All of it.”

“Something from your newly gained knowledge no doubt. In that case, it was a pleasure meeting you Wyverian. I wished it could have been under better circumstances.” Armsmaster held out his hand.

I shook it. “Likewise, Armsmaster. One question though, what about the lawsuit?”

“Let the adults handle that. It’ll take a while to prepare everything but I’ll keep you up to date as best as possible and we will inform you if something unexpected pops up or we need clarification or a specific statement.”

“Okay…”

Dad barked out a laugh at my reluctance to let go.

He stood straighter than he had ever since we lost mom and I could look him in the eye. Becoming digitigrade really made a pretty big difference when it came to height.

We left the building in relatively comfortable silence, claw and hammer in hand, and got into the car.

Dad drove directly to the nearest fast food joint and surprised them with the size of the order before noon. Fugly Bob didn’t have an easily accessible drive-thru.

I sat beside him with my hoody down and my claws in it pouch, smirking at the bewildered lady as she handed dad one food item after the other which he piled on top of me.

I tore into the comically oversized meal as soon we were driving again, unable to wait until we actually got home.
The hunger and fatigue must have been worse than I thought as I could have sworn that I saw child-sized things with tails following us from the corner of my eyes. Some even popping up out of the ground.

I clutched the claw and the bits and pieces of jaw closer. Just in case.
The day had started so well for Sophia Hess.

Sure, she had to sneak into the school in the very early morning and cover the insides of Taylor’s locker with the rancid contents that had been collected before the holidays and festering ever since in sealed plastic bags near the boiler of her house.

But it was worth it for Sophia, she had a good feeling about the newest stunt of her design. Maybe – finally – she’d actually get a reaction out of the ugly cow instead of the usual passive resistance she showed whenever one of the Trio put their plan into action.

If Sophia was completely honest with herself, she was already getting bored with the Hebert bitch and would have likely moved on if Emma wasn’t as insistent to purge herself of that final weakness.

Sophia was mainly getting annoyed. Something about Taylor rubbed her the wrong way seeing as she refused to conform to her world views.

A prey would have been broken long ago and a predator would have retaliated as soon as it started.

“Unless they see you as so much more inferior that you’re not even worth the effort,” a traitorous voice whispered in the back of Sophia’s mind as she opened the last bag. It was the irritating one – the uncertainty that actually moved her to this new height even as she personally already lost most interest in Taylor.

With a giddy anticipation, she snuck out again. One way or the other she’d have the cow’s measure when she’d be done with her.

And if she turned out to be a very patient predator – well, she felt she could take her.

She was just skin and bones after all.

With the ease of athlete runner and the aide of her powers, Sophia made it back home just in time to mime the irritating morning routine. Just in case. Having an “alibi” never hurts.
Much to Sophia’s surprise, she found that her mother was less on her case as usual. Little of her usual nagging how she should be more patient and slower to jump to violence. She didn’t even complain that much about her workload.

Her brother was already gone and couldn’t bother her and when her little sister came down the stairs, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and she didn’t wander straight away to the television to watch her annoying shows, Sophia decided that it must have been her good mood showing.

The way back to Winslow was a torture, especially after she got Emma’s message that the others – their sad little thralls who desperately wanted to lick the boots of the top dogs – all got the message about what was going to happen and that nobody wanted to film it.

Sophia had to smile a little when both Emma and Madison made it clear that she’d be unhappy if anyone ratted them out. Especially since it was enough to convince the few doubters.

The air in Winslow’s hallways was charged with nervous anticipation.

Of course, Taylor didn’t pick up on it as she guilelessly stumbled her way to the locker, unaware of her stalker.

“How could I ever think that oblivious cow would be a predator,” she thought, noticing Taylor sniffing the air, smelling the reek of rotting blood and continuing anyway.

Her prey still hadn’t noticed her when she put down her bag and opened her combination lock.

Sophia lunged at her with a feral smile as she saw Taylor gagging, shoving her into the stinking locker and slamming the door shut.

She had to suppress a shudder of excitement as she heard something break in a squelching impact inside of the locker in the same way she did after a fight before Glenn declawed her for the public eye.

The feeling doubled as she got the lock off the ground and sealed her prey in that small stinking, little box.
Briefly, she felt worried as no further sound came from the locker but soon any concern of injury was replaced by glee as the screaming and banging started.

“Remember,” she addressed the gathered crowd, letting her gaze wander over them as she made her way back to Emma. “Nobody saw anything. I’ll let the bitch out at the end of the day so no need for worries.”

Nobody would surely blame her if she forgot by accident, would they?

“If some fucker does chicken out though,” Sophia continued, carefully letting a chilling cold creep into her voice. “This would be a mere prelude of what is to come.”

They’d wait for Madison to come back after disposing – or whatever she planned to do – of Taylor’s backpack. It would have given away the joke too soon if it was left standing in the hallway and apparently she had something extra special planned to truly make Taylor’s first school day of 2011 truly memorable.

“That was fucking great, Soph. You should have seen her empty face as you shoved her in. She still hadn’t realized what happened,” Emma said in between of barely contained giggles.

“Almost makes me wish that someone broke the fucking rules. Sucks to have missed that.” Sophia chuckled. “But have you heard the impact? That had to be her face slamming against the back wall. The bitch was too stupid to even put her hands in front of her.”

An uneasy silence suddenly spread through the crowd, ripping both girls out of their threatening giggling fit at the desperate banging of at the door.

“What the hell,” Emma breathed, looking at Sophia with uncertainty. “Why did she stop? Sophia?!”

Sophia blacked out, falling to the ground where she stood in view of the few who were looking at the two of them for guidance.

She saw two eternally shifting and undulating things float through space, each of them too big to comprehend, taking on forms that threatened to break her mind – vision that were purged from her
memories as she woke up again.

“God fucking damn it, Soph,” she heard Emma hiss even as she noticed she was leaning against the wall, a couple of feet away from where she was first standing. “Since when do you simply faint like some prissy bitch? Grit those fucking teeth of yours and get up.”

“Nononono,” Sophia whispered in return as the knowledge of a long forgotten boring briefing flooded her mind. “Help me up and keep me standing. Don’t trust myself to not fall over yet.”

“Soph?” the redhead asked, her previous annoyance more than replaced by concern. “What’s wrong? What just happened.”

“Somebody just triggered. Heard in my club that this would happen if I were around. We have to find them, shut them up for at least a while and clean the place up. We probably have to get Hebert out as well.”

Sophia grimaced in irritation as her friend wordlessly helped her up and she noticed that she indeed still needed the support. They walked back to the crowd – towards Taylor’s eerily silent locker.

Her gaze was wandering over the crowd when she heard the crash that would herald her world breaking apart.

She shuddered as she saw the door bend with three distinct indentations and simply fly off the locker.

There was no doubt in her mind that the creature stepping out of the stinking confines was Taylor.

“We have to get her away from that locker,” Sophia hissed and the other nodded in return.

They redoubled their pace even as the creature that was holding the massive chunk of iron on a stick in a single clawed hand apparently had sunken in some sort of reverie.

Sophia forced herself to continue as Taylor came to some sort of shocking realization and started looking around even though her instincts were screaming to turn around and get away.
She couldn’t do that. She couldn’t allow herself to listen to her inner coward and let Taylor simply ruin her life; get her thrown back into juvie.

She yelled at the crowd as she saw the drawn cellphones while working through the crowd together with Emma.

That’s when Taylor saw them both.

Her face had changed alongside the rest of her body. The jaw was elongated a bit and her nose seemed flatter – the angle between nose and lip less distinct. Her mouth seemed to have become even wider.

She stared and her slit pupils contracted, revealing even more of her bright orange iris that had replaced most of the white as well. She didn’t blink. She didn’t even blink one single time.

Emma shivered under the intensity of that stare. Sophia had to suppress the urge to do the same but for an entirely different reason no matter how unnerving Taylor’s gaze had become.

She recognized the newly minted parahuman’s stance and posture from all those times she was called into the office of that fat pig Glenn; when he complained how she still seemed too hostile and too eager to start a fight. It was the same way she held herself when she measured up opponents and felt them wanting.

But there was something that bothered Sophia even more. Ignoring the way she looked, Taylor’s altered facial expression shifted from coldly calculating to surprised recognition and ended at angry bemusement even as the intensity of her stare redoubled, focusing entirely on Sophia.

Shadow Stalker felt the voice telling her to flee grow in tandem to the pitch black pit that had taken up residence in her stomach.

She reacted the only way she knew how. Sling abuse, try to hurt the other girl and cower her. Force her to run away.

Even though Sophia could finally stand on her own again and she tried to stand tall, to look as big
and threatening as possible only to find out that she was still dwarfed by the freak who was looking unimpressed even while Sophia mouthed insults as soon as they came to her mind. Emma joined her, slinging barbs on her own only to achieve similar results of disinterest of their foe. That was until she brought Taylor’s mom up – Sophia swore to herself to ask her about the juicy details when they got out of this mess – and she actually seemed to hurt only for it to be quickly replaced by steely resolve.

Worse – she actually chuckled at their efforts with absolute contempt.

And then she managed to order some random schmuck around started to talk about contacting the PRT, easily casting Sophia’s angry complaints aside as soon as she shouted them. As if Sophia, the alpha bitch of Winslow, the track star that took Nazis down a notch when they tried anything simply didn’t matter anymore

When the crowd actually listened, Sophia started to realize deep down that her own stupid stunt would be her downfall.

And then Taylor smiled at Sophia.

It was too much. She could not accept that Taylor was anything other than meek prey, no matter how she happened to look like. It had to be a bluff.

With a practiced lunge and a faint – impossible to actually notice – trace of her power, she flew at Taylor with a battle cry leaving her lips. She felt her hand connect solidly and the blow that would have stunned a boxer did absolutely nothing.

She had to suppress a shriek as she felt a clawed, four-fingered hand close around hers like a vice.

Sophia activated her power once more to the slightest degree in a way she knew would allow her to break free with her opponent only thinking she simply slipped away, none the wiser of her powers.

Instead of being surprised at the sudden decrease of pressure, Taylor simply clamped down harder – pressing her claws in slightly and making it impossible to escape – while calmly observing her.

She was expecting something like that to happen.
The realization hit Sophia like a truck as she connected the dots. When she considered Taylor’s little slide show of emotions when she first saw her, the way she expected the trick, why she was so insistent on getting the PRT in Winslow.

Taylor knew Sophia was Shadow Stalker.

Shadow Stalker redoubled her frenzied, panicked attack, trying anything besides biting. The grime covering Taylor – grime she had mostly caused herself – made that a truly last ditch effort.

While kicking and punching, Sophia was confronted by the fact Taylor still held the giant, weirdly shaped hammer in one hand and that her feet were transformed in wicked looking talons.

The fact that Taylor held back and hadn’t returned a single blow.

The mutter words of desperation that escaped her traitorous lips when Mr. G broke up the “fight” were more honest than the act of spitting in Taylor’s face. The latter being more a habit than anything else and the only thing that managed to do was sneak something cruel in Taylor’s aggravatingly calm expression.

“What. The. Fuck. Sophia.” Emma actually hissed, clutching her phone as the latter retreated back to their corner overlooking the lockers.

“What just happened there?” she continued in a whisper. “Do you want to go back to Juvie?”

“I think she knows who I am Ems.”

“Shit!” Emma cursed, forcing Sophia to pay close attention. “Of course it got worse.”

“Worse? What happened?”

“Got a message from Madison just before you went batshit,” Emma answered in a tone that worried Sophia. “While looking through Taylor’s bag, she found a notebook. It was a diary documenting every single prank we pulled on her in November and December with a date and time. Every email we wrote. Every. Single. Thing. I managed to get my father to come over with some with some BS
story about how people were trying to have me suspended with false information.”

Much to Sophia’s dread, she felt a “but” coming, idly wondering what else had happened.

“But he didn’t sound that convinced and it gets even worse – Mads hasn’t answered ever since I described what happened to Taylor.”

Sophia sank to the ground. She felt it. She knew. Madison had smelled a sinking ship and abandoned it. By the time the PRT would ask her she’d have her narrative as a poor little girl being forced to hurt others stuff down.

“What do we do?” she asked weakly as she felt the fight go out of her entirely for probably the first time since she triggered.

“We will keep silent and wait for dad. Let him handle it. Please, promise me to not do anything stupid. Don’t say a word to the PRT. I don’t want to see a friend and in juvie.”

Sophia gave a small nod.

She felt empty, defeated and was actually glad when a teacher came to escort her to an empty room on the top floor. That way she wouldn’t see Taylor’s creepily distracted antics in front of the place that changed her – the place Sophia created.

But even as they climbed the steps while the teacher was saying something about having been ordered to keep Sophia away from the others and behind closed doors and how sorry he felt, Sophia could feel the angry embers inside her consolidating once more as she wasn’t confronted by the freak anymore.

That ember grew in size and density with every step as she fed it with her disgust over her own weakness.

By the time the door locked and the teacher had to escort the next group of students due to the understaffed faculties lacking the manpower to have him stand guard, a solid, fiery core had replaced the emptiness inside of Sophia.
She had realized that there was no way she wouldn’t end up in juvie at the end of this.

Looking out of the window, she saw that the PRT had yet to arrive.

Sophia was angry with herself for thinking Taylor was a predator, for falling for her bluff. The meek cow simply couldn’t have become anything other than prey in just a mere instance – not after showing no resistance for so long. It was simply impossible no matter how much the craven side of her screamed at her to run. To flee.

She took a couple of steps back and ran towards the window full speed, pushing herself as far as her shadow form as possible, long having decided that Taylor would out her anyway. Even if she didn’t, she’d be a fugitive and piggy would come for her. Piggy was just waiting to hang her even moments after she forcefully enrolled Sophia into the Wards. The PRT knew who she was.

She glided to the roof of a nearby building, made her way to the alley and dropped down.

Hitting the ground running, she vowed to at the very least fuck up the bitch that was about to ruin her life.

She’d show Taylor what it meant to be a predator.
I’m not sure what I expected when we got home. A nap, most likely, as the large, grease-drenched meal settled heavily in my stomach and collaborated with the general fatigue that had snuck up on me during the ride home.

I didn’t think it was that strange that I was tired. I didn’t get much sleep due to the now more than justified anxiety at the prospect of going back to that hellhole. Then there was the panic, the fight, the stressful tension afterwards; one I probably hadn’t really appreciated enough at the time with adrenaline coursing through me – if it was still that what my body used. I had all the rights to feel like needing a powernap after that. Especially after winding down in the shower and later the car.

All signs of fatigue were obliterated for at least the moment when we were suddenly surrounded by cats when we got out of the car. Mostly beige cats that were standing on their hind legs, holding pickaxes and wooden paws on sticks, and were tall enough to reach my waist.

They looked utterly adorable and if the slack, mellow – if not more than a little confused – face of my dad was anything to go by, I wasn’t the only one with that opinion.

It was nearly enough to drown out the part of me that sneered at the low-quality equipment those fuzzballs would make.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t my barely contained squee finally escaping that broke the silence nor was it a similar sound from my dad.

“So ya must be the unlicensed hunter that took down the nerscylla, nya? Cocoa’s the name.” the biggest and brownest one asked with a certain arrogance that made clear that he already knew for certain.

How do you react when cats suddenly start talking to you about things most people didn’t know? While surrounded by the rest of his clowder; each and every one of them armed with some kind of weaponry and a few even wearing helmets of sorts.

Even in the mad world of Earth Bet with all its weirdness and dangers, it wasn’t something that could be called common.

And we had someone who could turn into a literal dragon and solo an entire protectorate team and might even have fought off Leviathan by himself.

I could feel drool accumulating as I imagined what I might be able to make out of Lung.

Just this morning I was literally changed and fought off a literal monster and shut up a pair metaphorical ones and still, this was far beyond my expectations.

Dad chose to try and word an answer, his mouth wordlessly moving as he threatened to be overwhelmed by the day.

I settled to stare at the glaring of cats before me as my mind tried to untangle itself.
‘What’s the matter meow? Cat’s got your tongue?’

He was actually enjoying himself, the smug little bastard.

‘It’s been a busy day already,’ I answered as his arrogance reached an unbearable density. ‘So I might not have been distracted, but how did you know about the nerscylla? What are you and what do you want from me?’

‘Ah, purrhaps it would have been better to open with that, nya?’ Cocoa answered, rubbing his chin. ‘I see. I didn’t think it was pawsible that ya didn’t know already and was just a hunter trying to get around the fees. Especially considering your species.’

“We got reports from our scouts who were stalking the hunter who had chosen to furgo of our services – ya know just in case he found some intelligence in those caves – about an unknown, unarmed, unarmored wyverian killed the nerscylla that had slain the wayward hunter before he could reconsider. Bond, one of the scouts, followed you after they determined you were not registered in hopes of perhaps selling you our services. When he repurrted to have found a whole new area, it was booted higher up and landed in my paws.”

I had to suppress a shudder of excitement. These… felynes were from the same place as the cave. They could evidently travel to my home dimension and maybe even –

“Can you show me the way to your place?” I asked with probably too much enthusiasm at the thought of finding a way to hunt for materials and satisfy the urge I felt ever since I got the powers in a way that wasn’t an express ticket to the Birdcage if anyone found out.

“We were wondering why ya didn’t come back and claim the rest of the kill.” Dad, meanwhile, was rapidly looking back and forth at the lead felyne and me. ‘If ya can’t come back on ya own, we can’t help you with it, nya. Our ways are strictly felyne compawtible and weirdly all exits center around ya.”

“Taylor, are you actually talking to these cats?” dad carefully asked while I took a breath for my next question with an incredulity that surprised me.

I hadn’t realized that I probably – apparently - didn’t speak English with the cats. “Yes… I don’t know how to make it seem any less weird but I think they want to sell me something.”

“Why else would we come, nya?” the cat in question replied with what I could identify as a complex string of meows, yowls, chatters, thrill, and more, now that dad knocked me out of my autopilot. “Well, that isn’t entirely true. Purrliminary repurpts from our melynx squad came back very promising, nya. This place can make our tribe very rich indeed.”

“And apparently they can understand English, dad,” I added while increasing my hold on the claw arm.

The ringleader couldn’t quite decide whether he was supposed to be smug over his abilities or offended that I that I thought they wouldn’t be able to understand us. He somehow settled on both at the same time.

“So if you can’t get me back to your place, what can you do for me?” I asked as I noticed that dad didn’t have a cohesive response.
As I did I realize that I too was somehow able to produce the same complex string of sounds as the cats.

Great, now I probably had to be worried about being called a crazy cat lady online on top of any elf monikers my ears might earn me.

“Our basic package entails our carting rescuing service” The cat started as we all came to the conclusion that it be best to do business inside. “We generally give hunters three attempts until they’re knocked out or otherwise incapacitated befur we evacuate them entirely. No sense in losing customer meow is there?”

The boss cat had followed us inside while the rest took perch outside. Most of them at least. Looking through the window I could see one of them chasing an insect through the grass.

“If I were to employ you, could I extend the service to others as well?” The same place that provided the blueprints for the weapons and knew what parts could be used where had chosen to verify the felynes’ capabilities and experience with highly dangerous extractions.

It would be something nearly invaluable if they could do the same during Endbringer attacks. That was if I could sell the capes on the idea.

“It isn’t unheard of, nya. But a sepurrate deal would have to be made in such cases and it can’t be a part of regular duty. Would be too expensive for ya.”

I nodded, already kind of expecting that. “What about material transport? What could you do for me there? I know that it’s theoretically possible but I can’t bring more than what I can carry myself.”

“It would be pawssible but it would cost ya extra…”

“Would you like something?” dad asked after having changed out of his dirtied suit and into shirt and jeans, as he walked past us towards the kitchen.

“Milk, pawlease.” The felyne answered while looking like he was calculating the damages he’d incur on me.

“He’d like some milk and for me some tea, please,” I answered for the both of us and with a nod, he continued his way.

“Alright. Considering the need of posting people out here, the difficulty of transport and the uncertainty of regular work, it’d have to ask eighty-five purrcent of your kills’ mass.”

“No way. I need that material. Forty percent and not higher.” I replied, barely keeping myself from shouting at the smug little creature.

I instead gave him the evil eye.

Cocoa didn’t seem to care that I could easily make him into a cozy hat. Instead, I could see an interested and mischievous twinkle enter his eyes while at the same time he suddenly became more quiet, more serious.

By the time dad returned from the kitchen, he had to dodge around the occasional and passionately flailing arm and the look of worries was replaced by a bemused sense of recognition.
If someone recognized a tough negotiation it would be Danny Hebert – the head of hiring and spokesperson of the Dockworkers Association who was trying to keeping the union afloat in a post-Leviathan world and a gang infested city.

He was smiling when I asked for pen and papers and to let another felyne in an hour later.

Two hours later he sat behind the computer, likely doing research on his own while Cocoa and I were still bartering over the finer things. I took notes in English while he had the other cat do the same for him. I could see a couple of cats sleeping in front of the windows and on top of the fence, enjoying the surprisingly warm afternoon sun of the mild winter.

Three hours later a contract was signed and Cocoa was purring madly. He bid his goodbyes after finishing a glass of celebratory milk, went outside through the backdoor, and, together with the rest of the gathered felynes, burrowed into the ground and simply disappeared without leaving a trace.

In the end, I was able to lower the costs down to a “mere” 50 percent with me getting limited priority on what parts I needed. For that, the felynes would provide me with some basic materials – those that could simply be gathered or mined like ores, plants, and bugs – as well as transport the share of my kills I couldn’t carry with me when my powers decided to bring me back on top of the rescue service with chance of expanding the latter in emergencies. Additionally, I had also secured access to their information network and extraordinary item acquisitions for only a relatively small additional cost when I needed them.

The next day would already be the first delivery of basic herbs, mushrooms, and bugs to get me started. It would be enough for me to make a potion to show to the Armsmaster on Wednesday as well as some other survival tools. They’d also bring some special manure – mainly monster dung, apparently – so I could try to grow the healing herb myself.

On the other hand, I did have to agree to forge equipment for them with scraps they provided as well as my leftovers on their own on top potentially tutoring the felynes that wanted to hunt instead of simply gather or rescue if they requested it.

If I was a bit tired before, I was absolutely exhausted by the time they left and my face and throat felt weird from speaking the Felyne’s tongue. Sure, they understood English but I didn’t trust the sneaky fuzzballs enough – especially not Cocoa who was the recruiter for their tribe – that they didn’t “misunderstand” certain details when it was convenient for them. “Talking” the same language prevented much of that nonsense and as such I was willing to humor them. Even if that meant giving muscles a workout that much rather wanted to just lay back and relax.

No wonder dad often looked so drained when he returned from work even when mom was still alive. If he had to deal with that every day…

I would have gone mad if the negotiation would have gone on for much longer and I had a relatively strong position, to begin with. Even with the coldness and distance that had grown between us ever since mom died – one that was only broken that very morning – I had to admit. It was impressive.

He put his hand on my shoulder as I still pondered, looking into the garden where the felyne had disappeared. “Everything alright, Taylor?”

“Yeah, just trying to think while tired. Thanks.” I grabbed his hand and gave it a small squeeze.
It was the weird little things that I had missed the most without even truly realizing it.

“Are you sure. Nothing I might do for you? I Can understand if you want some peace and quiet – more than once I’ve thought about getting a big couch in my office for after the latest long meeting that barely produces any results. Especially after today.”

I turned to and looked at the man that only hours ago barely knew what to do with himself, barely managed to go through the motions without any real drive behind it, and smiled.

“I wish Annette was still here to see you. I couldn’t understand a word what you and Cocoa said but your fierceness reminded me of her even if she probably would have been a bit calmer than you – I’m likely to blame for that bit. She would have been so proud of you.”

I remembered I didn’t have the time to tell him the extent of the deal I struck and took his statement as a prompt to actually tell him as well as the verbal ticks I had to endure at the paws of Cocoa.

When I was done he looked somewhere in between shocked at the prospect of more felynes popping up around us, intrigued that they were somehow interconnected with my power, proud that I actually managed to reach a deal that left both of us unsatisfied, and frightened. “Do you really have to fight more of those monsters, Taylor? Can’t you just use regular components to make your stuff?”

Ah, that explained why he was afraid. Objectively I could see why he might feel that way but when I tried to find the same feeling I came up empty. Thinking back on the fight with the demon spider, I could remember only a hint of fearful respect instead of the gut-wrenching terror I was probably supposed to feel.

I could remember how dad paled when I reported the fight to Armsmaster but I couldn’t reach the same level of… investment.

I knew I could have died in that fight, easily, but that knowledge somehow didn’t really matter much. I’d hate to think what it would have done to dad and I’d feel robbed of seeing – hopefully – due justice being served to the Trio and the teachers. It would also be a pity for all the gear that would have gone unbuild.

Beyond that? I was startled by the fact how deeply I had somehow thoroughly accepted the fact that I could have died – could die in any of the fights and had found peace with that fact. It would be inconvenient and not much more.

An inconvenience that did little to distract from the wonderful ideas that flooded me while fighting the nerscylla and how much fun it was. It was probably best not to mention that.

“No,” I answered debating whether or not I should tell him about the other aspect of my power, the one that didn’t differentiate between man and monster. “I could do so little with it. I would be so restricted I would likely go literally insane. I need the materials I can salvage from the monsters – if I ever find the way to get to them. And I can’t simply be unprepared and unarmed. I can’t stay hidden and news about what I can make will get out sooner rather than later. I will get sucked into the cape business especially if you consider that I have improved strength and endurance on top of that.”

Dad looked at me with a pained expression, no doubt tormenting himself over something he could do little about because I hadn’t trusted him. I still didn’t trust him enough I realized as I came to the conclusion I couldn’t – wouldn’t tell him about how I could see parahuman’s powers.
“I want to be able to protect you, dad,” I continued, causing a rueful smile creep in his down struck expression. “Please. I’ll be safe.”

A chuckle escaped my lips. “After all, I have a felyne cart team watching over me even if it’s for the mere fact that I don’t hide potential payments. Trust them. I know they’ll do an excellent job in keeping me safe. Well, alive.”

“I’m not going to convince you otherwise, am I?” he asked and I shook my head. “And you’re sure that you can’t change back or something?”

I felt an irrational lance of anger and betrayal go through at the fearful sound of those last few words. Was his acceptance only played? Did he secretly hate how I suddenly looked now after the months of abuse he hadn’t notice? Was he disgus –

“Fuck,” dad cursed with a sadness and regret laced voice, tearing me away from my thoughts. “That came out completely wrong. You’ll always be me little owl, no matter what happens or how you look. It’s just… Well, while you were negotiating with Cocoa I’ve done some research myself. Most people don’t suddenly change as drastically as you when they get their powers. Not with their memories intact or other circumstances. I’ve also read that some changers can’t actively control their state so I thought that maybe… I know how you don’t like being the center of attention. Not after what happened. I saw how you reacted when Armstrong advised you to announce yourself before you let it slide out of your hand. I thought you mightn’t have had the time to consider the angle with everything else going on. I’m so sorry for bringing it up.”

Seeing my father squirm like that after finally taking an active interest in me again after all those years; it didn’t fully negate initial pain his comment caused I felt but I could see what he meant. I tried to feel my body, looked my mind for some kind of switch I might have missed before but I couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary. It was just that. My body felt completely natural to me. I felt great.

Hell, the only time I truly noticed the changes was when my consciousness had the time to clash with my subconscious. Times like when I initially noticed how my gait had changed at the very beginning before it had immediately become my new standard. My body moved as if I had been like this for my entire life even with the initial short disconnect.

Strictly speaking, I felt better than ever before. Faster. Stronger by far.

Looking at my own hands – claws, the scales that covered them didn’t startle me anymore. They no longer looked weird.

I hadn’t thought about ever since I realized how handy my farther opening jaw was for getting greasy food inside of me at high speeds. That was until dad brought it up.

I wasn’t going to flaunt it. Far from it. But that was any different from before. My hair remained the only feminine attribute I possessed – something I wanted to protect dearly.

In short, my lizardy-self didn’t truly register as truly different as the human me that woke up that morning and walked into the trap at school.

And try as I might. I couldn’t find anything resembling a switch and simply knew I wouldn’t find one.
“It’s fine,” I replied with a deep sigh. “And no, I don’t think it works like that. At least not for me. I feel great, actually. Honestly, I didn’t even think about it until you brought it up.”

Dad shrank back a little at the last bit. As much as some petty part in my rejoiced to see him realize his own mistake and being tormented by it, I didn’t want it to ruin my relationship with him. Not when we could finally have a true and new start.

I pulled dad in a hug, the warm fuzzy feeling that was coupled with it not the least diminished compared to the first time this morning.

“I better have to catch up with my daughter and grow a pair, huh?” he said with a half sob and chuckle. “I was so afraid I lost you. I’m still afraid I’m going to lose you. Please, no matter what you’re going to do, tell me. I’ve been worthless for far too long.”

I gave a small nod, breaking my heart a little, knowing that I wasn't ready to tell him about the other aspect of my powers. About Shadow Stalker, a ward, being one of my bullies. That I couldn't keep the promise.

“And please, don’t interpret this the wrong way; I don’t have a subtler way to ask. Can you actually still blink or has that become impossible?”

I stepped back and looked him in the eyes, confusion clearly showing.

“You didn’t even know?” he continued with a small laugh. “Of course, it wouldn’t if nothing feels different to you. I haven’t seen you blink ever since I came to Winslow. Not once. If I’m completely honest, it coupled with your changed eyes it raises the intensity of your stares well into the unnerving.”

“Wait, did my eyes change too? Well, considering I don’t need glasses anymore and what has happened to the rest of my body it wouldn’t be that strange but…”

“What you didn’t know? I reckoned you must have looked when going for the shower. Your irises have turned amber, the white of the eyes are gone and your pupils have also changed into vertical slits. The final effect is rather intimidating.”

That would explain why I could see as well in the cave that no doubt had to be rather dark.

I tried to actively blink and felt a membrane slide over my eyes horizontally just before my lids closed.

Huh?

“Right, you can blink but have also gained a nictitating membrane - "

"What membranes?"

" - nictitating. Inner eyelids found in cats and reptiles." My confusion must have shown as I saw him think a little before continuing. "Got to talk with one of the biology professors at one of your mother's cocktail parties. Don't ask me how but the small talk somehow got to that topic. I've seen a documentary not too long ago that reminded me of the term and it kind off stuck. I wonder how he's doing; haven't kept in touch with him after Anette's... I haven't kept in touch with a lot of people
from her world."

“Interesting,” I replied shaking off the surprise that shouldn’t have been one considering dad’s broad interests. "It almost makes me wonder what he’d think about my new form. Almost."

I probably had to keep away from scientist with the more flexible ethics and private backers. They had to be frustrated with all the irregular and sometimes reality defying bullshit the universe had started to throw at them for the better part of thirty years now. Operation theaters would probably feature on some nightmares now that I thought about it.

"Back on topic, I would have never thought that I’d ever seriously had to think about blinking techniques," I muttered tiredly in return, massaging the bridge of my nose while carefully avoiding to poke my eyes out with my claws.

It was harder to do naturally than it sounded.

“But first, go to bed. Get some sleep. I’ve seen zombies in movies that looked more lively than you. The rest can wait until you feel fit again.”

I couldn’t help to wholeheartedly agree with that assessment.

As I was about to turn and put that masterplan into action when a nagging urge reminded me of one last, pressing thing, “Dad, do you happen to know someone who has a forge or at least an anvil? I might possibly go batshit crazy if I can’t start Tinkering when I’m fully awake again.”

“I might know someone. I’ll ask around while you get some sleep. Go.”

With that I went up the stair, stumbling ever so slightly as the added fatigue of the afternoon truly mixed with the exhaustion of the rest of the day.

Going out of my way to avoid looking in the mirror of the bathroom I made a beeline to my room and simply collapsed on my bed.

I drifted to sleep almost immediately to the sound of my dad talking on the phone.
The empty, dreamless sleep I initially passed out into was replaced far too soon by visions filled with judging stares coming from featureless faces and mocking laughter. Filled with insistent whispers and shadows. It wasn’t enough to wake me and only vague impressions remained as was often the case. And there was also the mess I had created.

Even though I fell asleep faceplanted through exhaustion, I still managed to shred the mattress and covers with my talons with my tossing and turning.

Being completely honest with myself, I would never have thought that sleeping would be something that needed planning beyond finding the appropriate place before I woke up with the wrecked lower half of my bed.

I wouldn’t have thought that finding shoes would be a challenge either so there’s that. At this rate I’d have to go out of my way to lead a boring life with the unexpected problems and curveballs it managed to throw in the last twenty-four hours.

Guess I had to get used to letting my feet dangle from the bed in the future or get really comfortable with the faceplant position and hope for the blissful, relaxing dreams.

The stupid ears made laying on my side for more than a couple of minutes less than ideal as well.

Other than the technical problems that suddenly plagued my nearby future, I was surprised to find that I felt more than rested – I felt healthier somehow. The inconsequential little aches that remained from the battle the day before were gone. I didn’t feel any signs of aching muscles or tendons. I couldn’t even feel a strained neck or back from my less than healthy sleeping position.

Looking at the clock I was only half surprised to find out it was barely 4am. For a brief moment I even forgot what had happened to me and started planning an extra-long run to make the most out the surplus of time and energy. Mentally, I was barely outside of the block when I remembered that it might not have been the greatest idea. Not while still being an unknown to the Bay and with no way to camouflage myself. My gait had become rather unique after all.

My stomach ended up deciding my immediate plans by uttering a loud gurgle. I went down to the kitchen as quietly as possible as talons on a wooden floor allowed. The creaking of the few rotten floorboards intermingled with the scrapping tapping of my claws and were amplified with the near-silence in the house, reaching my ears with a cringe-inducing loudness.

I bee-lined to the fridge as I didn’t notice a change in dad’s rhythmic breathing and grudging rumbling of my stomach and began raiding it.

I was busy frying my second, large helpings of bacon and eggs when dad half-stumbled down the stairs and looked at me. At least I assume he tried to look at me but his blurry, unfocused, half-shut eyes made it a bit difficult to say for certain.

“Taylor, do you have any idea how early it is?” He grumbled as he tried and failed to actually focus on me.

I looked at the clock and saw that it was just half past. If I hadn’t already felt like being caught red-
handed getting midnight snacks I would be ready for the ground to swallow me for forgetting that he might wake up due to the smells alone. My stomach jumped to my defense before I could even formulate a proper defense for myself with a happy gurgle.

If the sudden rise in temperature was any indication, I hadn’t lost my ability to blush.

Dad barked out a laugh. “At least I don’t have to worry that you change completely,” he commented on the sight of my probably beet-red face which only helped to worsen the problem. “I forgot that yesterday messed with your metabolism – an achievement after seeing you wolf down the sheer quantity of greasy fast food. Be a dear and make some coffee while you’re standing and don’t let me disturb you. Might as well get truly awake now.”

I set the pot brewing as soon as I felt confident that nothing would be burned while cursing my heightened appetite.

When he came down the stairs a second time, clean shaven and wearing his glasses he gratefully took the cup I handed him and shambled over to the front door. I could hear his palm impact his forehead at the same time of the door opening – probably just then remembering that the paper wouldn’t be there just yet – only for it to be followed up by an inquisitive and confused “huh”.

I was sitting at the table, busily devouring the continuation of my breakfast as dad put a jute sack on in the middle of the table and used the distraction to steal a couple of strips of bacon.

He looked at me, sipping his coffee, daring me to object with a solitary raised eyebrow.

Considering it was technically his food I was decimating and the fact that I was silently making plans for a second breakfast I decided to grant him the small victory. I would need to think of another name though, dad had read The Lord of the Rings and wouldn’t let me live it down. No matter how tall I was.

Hell, he would likely find the oxymoronic nature a source of extra amusement.

Instead of objecting, I focused on the bag he dumped in front of me. When I noticed the paw print I practically dislocated my jaw to shove in the rest of my meal post haste.

Upending it, I couldn’t suppress a small whistle of admiration. Say what you will about the mobster-like tendencies of the felynese and their exorbitant rates – they do deliver.

In front of me now lay the first shipment of hunter essentials: an assortment of different herbs, berries, a multitude of still living bugs, mushrooms I didn’t want anywhere near Merchants, honey, and scales.

There was also a package tightly wrapped in leaves and covered with a wax-like substance. I didn’t open in to avoid ruining my father’s apatite.

Even though I knew I should have expected, a pang of regret and loss still went through me when I couldn’t find any additional materials harvested from the nerscylla I had slain. I brought it up during the negotiations but they were absolutely “heartbroken” to inform me that they had already cut it up and sold it. After all, they couldn’t be sure that they’d find me and it they didn’t have a contract by that time.

I hadn’t bought it then, and still didn’t when I surveyed the contents of the bag. But I had known I
was fighting a lost fight.

That didn’t keep me from using the “oversight” as a tool to get a more favorable deal.

Still, sucked that I lost the majority of my first kill though.

“A parcel from the cats?” dad asked in between of bites of freshly baked toast; I nodded. “Silly question looking at your borderline maniac grin. Don’t let me ruin your fun.”

“Actually do you know where we’ve stored the empty jars? I could use a couple for my concoctions.”

“Sure, how many do you need?”

I shrugged. I had no clue exactly how much I’d be able to produce with the stuff they had delivered and I didn’t know the exact dimensions of the jars.

“I’ll just get all the more or less clean ones,” he said as he walked away, taking another big bite of his toast and bacon.

Putting the material back into the bag I practically stormed into our basement. It wasn’t big and there were still soot residues on the walls from the time the coal furnace was still in use but it was out of the way and had the tools I could use.

It was also dark and damp enough to perhaps start growing the different mushrooms. The old chute would be responsible for keeping the worst of the smells out of the house.

When dad came to bring the jars, I already had built the frame for the mushroom farm and was jerry rigging a home-made condenser out of some old discarded pipes and parts cannibalized from the old, defunct heater. One that would fit over one of our pots and was powerful enough to keep water vapor from escaping and more.

I carefully removed and collected the spores from the blue mushrooms I wouldn’t use for my farm. The shredded remnants and the cut up healing herb in the pot dad thought we wouldn’t miss if something went wrong. I let both components extract and react at 160°F while I went back down again to start making vacuum filtration installation and mix the crushed bitterbugs with some honey I put in one of the jars.

Dad regularly came by to ask whether he could help with something or simply watch and ask the occasional question in the vain hope to try and understand the specifics of what I was trying to do.

The skepticism he showed when I asked him to prepare a rare steak and checking the timer on the potion mixture was quickly replaced when I made him drink a sip of a real energy drink to try it out. Any vestiges of fatigue simply disappeared – replaced by a wide-eyed wakefulness and drive I hadn’t seen in him for a while. He was only too glad to plant some of the herbs and berries in the backyard and buy panes of glass to make a small greenhouse for them. He also seemed more accepting to the idea of having the cellar transformed in one-part mushroom farm and one-part bug cages filled with things that might have come straight out of nightmares of the squeamish.

The rare steak was blended while dad – who would have been less than amused by such a sacrilegious sight – was gone and the thickened and reduced herb/mushroom extract was filtered and washed through my very own vacuum filtration system.
After adding the oil squeezed out of the mushroom spores to the potion broth and setting it to boil under constant reflux, I made my way back to the cellar and mixed together the nearly liquefied steak some water, and a bit of my freshly made catalyst in another jar.

When Dad came back he found me swiveling the jars containing the nearly finished potion with my feet – occasionally bringing them up to see whether the few crystals had dissolved again – even as I was carefully mixing stone dust and the sticky juices of the sap plant and formed them in casings.

He practically dragged me back upstairs as I was just about to suck the caustic and highly reactive fluids from the flashbug into the casings the next time he reappeared. I ended up shoveling the meal he had prepared in without much ceremony, feeling slightly annoyed that he had to disturb me at just that phase.

I remember him talking at me, but in between realizing that I had made too many casings for the amount of flashbugs I had, deciding what to do with the rest, and getting the food into me, only the few questions about the specifics of the small greenhouse left an inkling of an impression.

I do remember dad sporting an exasperated but genuine smile throughout the entire meal. Asking whether he needed more energy drink only widened it.

Being upstairs anyway, I started the extraction of the antidote herb in olive oil before going to the cellar/my budding mad scientist laboratory to continue with the flash bombs.

It was after I finished the antidote and was contemplating on whether it was useful to make pills in addition to the demondrug I was currently refining to actually sacrifice more of my limited might seeds when a shake tore me out of my concentration.

“… Taylor!” dad practically shouted in my ears. It didn’t seem that it wasn’t his first attempt. Oops. “World to Tayl – finally. And here I was, thinking that Annette was the master of ignoring any and all things when she was buried in a good book. We have to get ready if we want to get to the smithy on time.”

“What?” I asked, raking my memories in hopes of trying to remember the conversation when it would have come up. “Have you found a place I can use?”

“I told you over lunch…” dad began before shaking his head. “I should have known that you just nodded your head to move the conversation along. The grunts were very open for interpretation anyway.

“I managed to contact a smith I had recently interviewed so we could do the custom metal parts and castings in-house. He seemed an honorable enough guy, big and quiet and he mentioned that he was grateful when he got the job. Traditional smiths have it difficult enough with the competition of Tinkertech and the drop of interest in fantasy with all the capes running around – I think he might have somehow learned that I had inspired the board to create the job. He gave us access to his smithy at six pm with the sole request that we wouldn’t make it too late.”

“Lunch? What are you hurrying me around if we have to get there at six? I know I’ve been busy for a bit, but it has only been a couple of hours, right?”

“It’s half past four in the afternoon,” he answered, chuckling when he saw my mouth drop open in disturbed confusion. “You’ve been at it the whole day. Your stomach still has to be pacified, you
might want to change your clothes, and we have to drive through traffic to get there. We have to go in half an hour if we want to be on time.”

“What about work?” I asked, realization slowly setting in. “You’ve been here – with the exception of your shopping trip – the entire time. It’s Tuesday. You’re always so busy, especially on Tuesdays.”

“I’ve taken a couple of sick days,” he answered before continuing with more than a little hurt coloring his voice at my incredulous face. “Did you really think I’d let you alone after what you went through? I know I haven’t been the best father the past years. I see that now, but I won’t lose you again. The docks won’t go anywhere; I’m not going to risk you over it.”

“Oh.” Was all I could mutter without facepalming over my lack of common sense before exploding into a frenzy of movements.

I still had to finish a few ongoing reactions and clean the place up a bit as well as store the items I had already made without risking to lose them. Sniffing at the hoodie I had worn non-stop ever since changing into it the previous day I decided that I’d also needed a change of clothes and decided on a simple jeans with t-shirt and hoodie combo. I assumed that he’d have an apron I could use and while handling the piping hot pot without discomfort, I didn’t think I’d truly need much else. It seemed that the change made me more resistant and durable and it wasn’t like I’d have the ‘right’ clothes anyway.

Dinner – a lovely, meaty stew – was more mindless stuffing as my stomach enacted vengeance on my negligence during the day. The time it demanded conspired with a rainy weather that promised increased traffic to bother an increasingly impatient dad which resulted in more (near) jaw dislocating action.

If cape business turned out to be a bust, I might join eating contests or something.

“Do you think you can mass produce that energy drink of yours?” dad suddenly asked while we were waiting for the lights halfway on out trip.

“I honestly don’t know.” I replied, turning an exaggerated amount to enable me to see him with my face deeply hidden in the hoodie. “It depends on whether we can keep the bees over here or have to import all the honey. Why do you ask?”

“It works, Taylor. I’ve had a mere sip this morning and I’m still not tired without being wired like I’d be with a dose of coffee that would have achieved the same effect. Even though I didn’t really sleep all that well with everything going on and waking this early. All things considered, I should have been a zombie clamoring for more coffee but I’m not. People would pay for something like this. Something that truly works instead of just pumping them full of sugar and caffeine.”

It was worth giving a serious thought. I thought that I could probably make the necessary equipment to upscale the production, but just like the rest of what I could theoretically make, I was severely hamstrung by the lack of stable supply. The amount of honey needed for mass production… I simply couldn’t see it happening

Just like I lacked so much in regards to weaponry and armors, the areas where I felt lay my power’s true passion.

“I’m glad you liked it, dad, but it depends on so many factors out of my control – best no make to wild of plans. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we’ll have a private supply but beyond that, it’s probably
best to aim high. The PRT would probably want to buy some for emergencies alongside the potions. I’ll ask Armsmaster about it tomorrow.”

“Alright. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to pressure you into anything, it’s just I saw how much fun you had today making your stuff and thought it might be something you could do as an alternative to fighting and have fun doing it as well.”

I looked at his carefully calmed face concentrating on the road and trying not to show the anxiousness his white knuckles on the steering wheel betrayed. He was scared for me. No wonder with the likes of Kaiser and Lung roaming the streets of Brockton Bay, making it unsafe for anyone and for capes doubly so. Even without volunteering for Endbringers, heroes still died at a too regular rate. Too many monsters roamed the earth and killed for their amusement and fights between groups did occasionally escalate to untenable levels with deadly consequences.

The realization of his fear did soften the annoyance over his perceived underestimation of me enough to actually give it a thought. I could probably make enough things to have a parahuman group protect me, to hide from the front without anyone blaming me. The potions alone would be enough if Armsmaster initial reaction was anything to go by.

But I had killed a demonic spider before I even knew what was happening – granted I felt it was relatively low on the power scale but still… I knew could help so much more in the field. I just needed to make my first, proper hunting horn and I could actually continually buff my allies; I could shoot healing bullets at them if that made any sense.

And I could perhaps even help to break the horrible status quo that had held the Bay and much of the rest of the world in its grasp.

I might even get my hands on some of the more exotic materials my power – I – longed for.

“I’ll give it a thought, but I don’t think it’s going to work. My guts tell me I’m going to encounter more literal monsters sooner than later and I actually want to help. I will be fighting.”

Dad sighed with expected disappointment at the answer and had to focus on the road as some utter lunatics had joined the fray. It hadn’t been the answer he wanted to hear but somehow I knew that he expected it nonetheless.

“Don’t worry,” I added with a lopsided grin. “I’ll try to be careful and if everything else fails, I’ll still have the felynes watching over me.”

“You really do trust those cats?”

“Explicitly. I can’t explain how but I simply know that they’ll do a fine job. From what they’ve told me they even joined their Hunters in fights against things that would pale the majority of capes and kept them safe. Knowing what I somehow do, I believe them.”

We spent the next couple of minutes in silence, thinking. I didn’t think that the second to last bit reassured him much. I couldn’t think of much to lighten the mood after my last attempt and so I kept my head down in hopes of not being seen by the masses moving outside as we rode through the busy streets. It wasn’t as hard is would seem as long as nobody saw my extremities and didn’t get a long enough look into my hood to notice something was off. I focused on how to best use the little nerscylla bits I had as dad was likely contemplating ways to keep me safe and cursing his perceived uselessness if his expression was anything to go by. All the while driving to the one place that could
and would truly help me at this point and time.

He was the first to break the silence again. “We’re almost there. Just one small thing. While the smith, Sig, did agree that he’d let you use his workplace on my assurance you wouldn’t wreck anything, he also let his interest in seeing you work known. My guts tell me he isn’t the type to go around telling anyone about you instead rather keeping it to himself unless you tell him otherwise.”

I simply stared at him.

“Look, I know you’d rather not, but it’s an opportunity to perhaps start getting used to some scrutiny from an outsider that isn’t a childhood idol at the same time. In Arcadia you’ll have to deal with teenagers again and you do remember that Armsmaster has advised you to go public on your own; probably before you start there. I thought it might make the transition easier and having seen you in the zone, you probably wouldn’t even notice when you start working.”

I shut down my initial reaction to snarl at the mere idea. As much as the idea galled me, dad had a point. I had to confront it sooner rather than later even as I managed to avoid looking in a mirror for the last two days.

And if… Sig wanted to actually see it, allowing it might grant me access to his smithy more than just today. It might help me through the time until I managed to get one on my own. I also trusted my father’s judge of character so…

“Fine,” I managed to mutter, almost keeping the snarl out of it. “He better not be in my way while I’m working though.”

“Don’t worry,” dad replied while badly trying to cover up a laugh. “I think you two will get along just fine.”

The place was small – disproportionately so compared to its owner – and from the outside ordinary looking. It looked like a regular small, boxy, detached warehouse that was turned into a couple of small shops from the outside, with only the chimney poking out of the roof indicating that anything other than simply the selling of goods might happen in it.

Sig looked more the part. For starters, he was huge, a head taller than both dad and me, covered in thick muscles you’d get from years of physically demanding work. The short, gruff beard with the few charred patches, hair tightly bound in a ponytail, and leather apron finished the look.

True to my dad’s assessment, he was a man of few words and little patience for unnecessary bullshit. I got more reaction – a satisfied nod – out of him by how I easily replied his squeeze during the handshake in kind than when he first saw my clawed hand during our short introductions.

The biggest reaction, however, came when I got my gun hammer out the car to show it and the suspension visibly relaxed in return. He actually widened his eyes at that.

Entering the actual smithy and seeing the glowing forge felt like coming home without ever having set a foot in one, my newly gained instincts telling me what I could do with every single tool and machinery.

I smiled as I let the very same instincts guide me without Sig intervening or hindering me.

I didn’t know what it was that led him to trust me enough to let a teenage girl simply use the forge. It
might have been something dad had told him the previous day or due to something he saw in me. Maybe he was more knowledgeable about capes than his appearance would make you believe and was simply curious enough to tolerate some damages and the cost of the steel I’d use. Likely it was a combination of the above.

I couldn’t care as I started grinding some pieces of the jaw fragments into fine dust, carefully collecting everything. By the time I was folding the powder into the steel billet while braiding the hunk of metal with far more ease than should be possible, I had forgotten that I had spectators.

I knew how hot any part of the blade was even when I put them through a complex series of partial heating and quenching at different temperatures and I actually enjoyed the thick acrid smell that came when I stuck it in the oil-drenched flesh of a part of the arm I couldn’t use otherwise, knowing the benefits it would bring to the blade.

By the time I was working in whole fragments of the jaw into the spine in a way that would connect them to pores my previous work had created throughout the blade, Sig began to hand me hammers as I needed to form the weapon. The form the material wanted – needed to reveal its fullest potential.

The carapace of the claw was used to reinforce the spine of the blade as well as to form the handle and a small guard.

The sheath was formed with more of the carapace, lined with tanned leather I had found and infused with the extracted ligaments from the claw. Additional leather straps were fitted to fasten to the blade to it even as the blade underwent another cycle of repeated heating and cooling to ensure that the materials used truly fused and settled in. That they got used to each other and would play nice.

I had Sig fetch me some true whetstones when the time came to sharpen the knife and truly awaken the beast. I didn’t trust the machines would be able to withstand the pressure needed to open up the pores.

In the end, I held a knife in my hands that wouldn’t have looked out of place in the hands of a combat robot. The crimson blade flowed into the white spine with jagged edges near the guard with no discernable line where the predominantly steel components stopped and where the organic matter began. The handle was a grey with very slight, blue accents woven into it.

I pressed the edge against my scaly skin with only a hint of force behind it. The knife – my knife bit into my flesh with absolute impunity and ease that defied common logic. I smiled even as blood gushed out of the wound and dad started to cry out in alarm and horror.

I could actually start carving monsters now if they showed themselves again. I could actually start gathering the resources I needed.

Thanking Sig for allowing me to use his stuff took less time than calming my dad.

It didn’t really matter that I started chewing on an herb that had unconsciously found its way into my pocket right after. Neither did the fact that the wound simply closed itself in front of his eyes or the assurance that I would have been fine after a nap anyway.

I knew that I probably should have had a bigger reaction as well but couldn’t really bring myself to it. After all, the wound was healed, wasn’t it? There was literally no trace left of it.

It was only when we only arrived home that he calmed down enough to mention that I apparently
slid my inner eyelids – or nictitating membranes as they apparently were called – during the entire time I was Tinkering in the smithy.

It was interesting that I hadn’t noticed anything off.

In the end we called it an early night. Dad was still a bit shaken which was probably caused by the little sleep he got last night, the early morning, and the energy drink truly wearing off.

I was simply tired from a day of Tinkering and the sense of satisfaction I got looking back on the day didn’t really help to keep me awake.

When I got to my room I was pleasantly surprised to find the mattress and covers replaced. There was even a thicker plastic cover where my claws had wreaked destruction the night before.

With a smile on my face over dad’s unsung work, I let myself fall on the bed while making sure my vicious claws were kept clear of anything fabric. It took a while to snuggle myself in without ripping the covers, a time during which I found out that apparently my feet didn’t really get cold, but in the end, I lay happily clasping my knife.

Sleep took me soon after. Not even the prospect of dealing with the PRT and probably Wards the next day could distract me enough to prevent it.
Somewhere along the road leading up to the morning of the power testing, something horribly messed me up.

I wasn’t talking about how I had transformed into an exotic descendant of some sort of wyvern. No, it was my priorities that likely needed some looking at. Imagining being thrown into a small arena with a primordial creature with bladed wings for arms and glowing eyes filled me with gleeful anticipation more than anything.

Having to deal with peers of my own age? People whose exploits I followed, alongside the rest of the local heroes and villains?

My brain had some time to mull things through while sleeping, and came to the conclusion that a little fear and plenty of anxiety was the right response. It even woke me up to share its revelations with me. It then insisted I had to try it out to see whether those subroutines still worked.

They did.

It wasn’t that I was fearing being labeled “the freak” due to how I looked, or that I’d somehow disappoint them with my powers. I could understand those… a bit. I wouldn’t build lasers or anything else that truly screamed “Tinker” anytime soon, if ever.

No, it was more of a frustratingly fuzzy fear that they’d simply reject me just for being myself. Not for any specific reasons other than my very existence.

In addition, I was getting more and more nervous about the prospect of being confronted with a group of capes at once – each with their very own powers whispering ideas. I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to stop myself from drooling or doing something even more stupid.

I was still expendable, and I had a feeling; the fact that my powers worked on capes as well as monsters was something people would be wary about. It was one giant foot primed to stomp on my head if I revealed it this early.

It wasn’t surprising that I was surfing the internet, slowly and deliberately chewing on cured meat that had somehow found its way into our home when Dad found me. Lurking around the PHO forums and going deep down the rabbit hole that was the wiki had been a good distraction before.

“Had trouble sleeping?” he asked, somewhat mumbling as he spotted me.

“Yeah,” I answered while handing him a shot glass filled with Energy Drink. “Don’t know what to expect, and I really don’t want to be pressured into anything. By the way, did you know that Shadow Stalker hasn’t been seen since Saturday?”
“From what little Armsmaster has told me –” Dad answered as he took the shot, “Wow, that really wasn’t a hallucination yesterday – anyway, he told me to expect lots of smashing. And no, I did not know that. Is something wrong with her?”

“It really does work great,” I agreed, having tried out the brew myself. “It’s just… there have been more suspensions and bans handed out than normal. I have seen a speculation thread disappear myself. The PRT hasn’t officially made any statements. The tinfoil hat brigade is having a field day – at least, those willing to risk a strike.”

“It is something out of the ordinary. How long have you been awake, anyway?”

“About three hours, I think. We might need more jerky at this rate.”

“And I really hope we can grow some of your resources. I’ll have to take a second mortgage at this rate just to feed you.”

The guilt that lanced through me must have shown. “None of that self-blaming. I was only joking, Taylor. If anyone is to blame, it’s those lunatics that did this to you. They will be held responsible, no matter how badly Alan wants to protect his daughter. No, I’m just glad that you’re alright. That I still have my daughter.”

He pulled me from the chair and hugged me tightly. “I’ll gladly live with a ravenous carnivore for that.”

I chuckled in his warm embrace. It was almost enough to make me forget the formless anger towards my tormentors for making dad’s more difficult on top the shit they did to me. I had noticed the core undefined malice that was quietly brewing deep inside of me ever since the ride home from Sig’s smithy.

“So I don’t have to go on a diet just yet?” I shyly asked, all too aware of the piece of jerky hanging from my mouth.

Dad laughed – an honest, happy laugh – as he noticed the same offending piece of meat. “Don’t you underestimate me. We’ll manage somehow. By the way, have you seen anything concerning yourself since you’ve been awake?”

“Brockton Bay’s General board has come to the conclusion that a new player has joined our fair city.” Dad actually snorted. “And if the amount of deleted comments and warnings from the almighty Tin Mother is any indication, they have been speculating about my identity. Some ‘void cowboy’ especially had a hard time realizing he was fighting a losing battle. Not much going on now, though; it’s probably too early.”

“Still, more than yesterday.” I leveled him a confused stare. “What? I had some time to spare in the afternoon. Anyway, we’d better start thinking about how best to announce yourself before it reaches critical mass and you end up being called ‘Hammer Elf’ or something.”

I winced. “It really can’t wait that much longer, can it Dad?”

It would be really awkward if I finally had the materials to make a great sword or lance or anything other than the overgrown hammer I was using.


“Sorry, Taylor.”

Conversation petered out by that point. Dad went about his morning routine and found his paper instead of another bag on the front door. This left me with my thoughts as he ate.

When I wasn’t struggling with the fact that I couldn’t keep procrastinating any further with a task that might endanger Dad, I was thinking about how to solve even more immediate problems.

*How can I hide my cape-scan without getting caught? How do I get the topic on Shadow Stalker without forcing it or lying about my knowledge?*

I wanted to find out what the Wards – the people that dealt with Sophia while she was playing the “hero” – truly thought about her. Since I wasn’t able to find anything regarding her fate online, my finely trained paranoia caused that sub-division to conclude that they were covering for her. It was one giant conspiracy to keep their asses covered.

… Better actually see the people and talk to them before jumping to conclusions, no matter how hard it might seem at the moment. I was kind of certain I’d probably have to reveal that I knew who Shadow Stalker was. They would want to know *why* I didn’t want to join the heroes, even though I was otherwise willing to cooperate with basically all of their rules.

That would be difficult, without actually lying to them and making it somehow plausible at the same time. Sure, there were some circumstances that I could use to create something close to the truth, but that depended on Sophia’s whereabouts and how the rest would react.

I really did want to become a hero, to help Brockton Bay and maybe even the world – no matter how I looked. I wanted to help more directly than just producing Potions and hope for the best while the gangs were still roaming the street, though. That meant fighting, and I knew that solo heroes didn’t last long – not without being completely inept or sitting in unimportant neutral territory and not causing trouble.

The gangs suddenly found lots in common if someone annoyed them enough. They could always go back to destroying each other when the uppity girl with more brawn than brains was dealt with.

And then there was the aftertaste “vigilante” left in everybody’s mouths. Knowing the kind of equipment I could make, it would be a matter of seconds before I was labeled as another Brute venting her aggressiveness under the guise of “justice”. I would be a ticking time bomb, waiting to blow up in the faces of the normal people that managed to annoy me. It wasn’t like I would only be able to fight other capes anyway.

All of that would also do little to mitigate the reaction people would have if they found out I could use fellow humans to make stuff. Very powerful stuff. That was Birdcage-shaped kneejerk reactions without any warming up. Or, that was enthusiastic recruitment attempts by the gangs themselves.

I really hoped my “paranoia senses” were just going haywire and conjuring another shoe to drop. At least there would be another option if something was truly rotten in the PRT…

I was eating a stolen pancake, my thoughts still circling in my head, when somebody knocked on the door. Dad opened it to reveal an average looking guy in a nondescript uniform.

“I’m from the PRT to pick up a cape with the codename ‘Wyverian’ for the appointed power testing,” he said, with as much enthusiasm as a clerk agreeing to a mountain of paperwork, and
without looking into the house.

“Give me a sec to get my stuff,” I shouted across the room after hastily swallowing the last bit of pancake. “It won’t take long.”

“Take your time to mask, I won’t go anywhere.”

Mask? Why hadn’t they told the guy I wouldn’t have any?

I managed to spot Dad, offering his hand as I made my way up the stairs. “Danny H – “

“Please, no names. I’m on a strict need-to-know basis for both my and your safety. They’ve only told me the cape name, coordinates, and goal of the pickup. That’s all I need.”

When I reached my room and started piling my knife, a couple of Potions, an Antidote, some leftover Catalyst, and Flash Bombs into a bag, Dad still hadn’t replied. That still hadn’t changed after I polished up the gun hammer for good measure and changed into a hoodie I wasn’t that attached to.

I returned to the living room to a supremely awkward silence. Dad was apparently successful in convincing the agent to at least step into the hall. They were staring at each other with an annoyed disinterest, like two cats trying to intimidate each other.

“Don’t you have to get something, dad?” I asked as he only smiled at my arrival. He didn’t move to get a coat.

“I’m sorry,” he replied after one last glance at the agent. “I’m to be picked up at another location later during day after the physical part of the power testing. It’s apparently for my own safety.”

“That’s correct,” The agent agreed as he sized me up.

Weirdly enough he seemed more irked than startled at my appearance, his gaze basically flitting over my face before settling on a point in front of my feet. He gave the distinct impression of someone who’d drink to forget my features just to skip accountability, and was annoyed he’d have to go that far.

“I gather they haven’t told you about my… situation, or how I’ll have to choose between staying locked up or unmasking before ever donning one?”

“No, they haven’t. And frankly, it’s none of my business. Now if you’d be so kind to follow me. The sooner we get you to the Rig, the better it is for everyone involved. I’ll inform the pickup at the beach about the changed parameters while we are on our way.”

With that, the nameless agent turned and left the house, leaving the door open. I gave dad a quick hug and we said our goodbyes before I hurried after him.

He was holding open the back door of an average looking white-paneled van with the clear intention of urging me inside. I couldn’t help but notice that the vehicle was parked in such a way that it obstructed the view from the road to the front door without seeming out of place.

The ride to the pickup point was a boring affair. The only real distraction, beyond idly playing with my equipment or polishing my hammer even more, was provided by a folder named “Unwritten Rules and You: Things All New Capes Must Know” by the PRT. I didn’t believe that its appearance
was coincidence. Not the slightest.

Interestingly, despite being written dryly to convey its content in a no-nonsense manner – mainly that unmasking parahumans and going after their civilian identities, along with killing bystanders, were a no-go (someone should inform Lung, Hookwolf, and the like about the last part) – it still assumed a threatening undertone with one clear message:

No matter your allegiance, you were bound to get the short end of the stick if you pushed it too far - with or without the help of the PRT or Protectorate.

Unless you were strong enough to scare off the factions out for your head, it seemed. Lung or something like the Slaughterhouse 9 didn’t really seem to care too much.

I was sharpening my gun hammer (don’t ask, thinking about the specifics even hurts my head) when the doors of the van opened and revealed the sea I had been able to smell for some time now. I was wordlessly herded towards the small motorboat, and I resumed my journey to the looming structure in the bay.

The knowledge that a structure this elegantly designed, built to conjure up images of futuristic castles with its gleaming arches and towers, started its life as a humble oilrig was all kinds of awe-inspiring. And that was ignoring the mundane and more-than-mundane defenses as well as the team of people who called it their base.

We docked to one of the legs and I was handed over to another PRT agent who didn’t seem that enthused by my maskless appearance either. Or maybe it was because of the bag I was dragging along, as well as my hammer.

Since nobody asked me about either, I simply assumed that either they were informed or thought it was suicide to try and do something on the Rig. The cameras that tracked us while the newest iteration of Agent Smith led me through the labyrinthine interior of the structure (I was fairly certain that it contained countless hidden passages) made me believe that it was likely both.

After what felt like an eternity in the bowels of the rig, a journey that didn’t pass any windows and was illuminated by Tinkertech lamps, we ended up in a hall that eerily reminded me of a fancy school’s gym.

“You must be Wyverian,” the woman standing in the middle of the court said as I adjusted to the sudden change of scenery.


Even without her iconic outfit, even without her saying anything else, there was only one person who that could be. “Nice to meet you, I’m Miss Militia – an introduction that doesn’t seem necessary if your grin is anything to go by. I’ll guide you through the physical testing process. Any questions?”

Even though I didn’t quite have Miss Militia themed underwear, the production of which she probably actively prevented, she was still a household name. Member of the Wards initiative’s inception, reliable member of the Protectorate ENE and all around badass who remained approachable for the common folks.

… And someone who easily conveyed amusement at my totally-not-fangirling while having the
bottom half of her face covered by the American flag by the crinkling of her eyes.

“Only physical? What about the Tinkering part? Armsmaster must have reported that bit after we went off the deep end together over my hammer on Monday. Where is he, anyway?”

She let out a knowing chuckle, something that made it apparent she had experience dealing with Tinkers and their particular focus. “Don’t worry about that. Armsmaster will come to do that part in the afternoon, when he’ll be joining us with the Wards. He has some… paperwork to do right now. Now, if you would follow me.”

Miss Militia led me to something looking eerily like a changing room with a bundle of sporty-looking clothes. “I guess I have to change into those?”

“We won’t force you into anything Wyverian, but if you agree, we will work you into a sweat. We thought that you might like your clothes to remain relatively clean and fresh. There might be chance of damages during the later tests, so that’s something you might want to consider as well.”

Somewhat begrudgingly I admitted defeat to logic and practicality, and changed into the tank top and shorts the PRT had provided. Both of them fit perfectly. When I asked Miss Militia about that bit from inside my booth, she revealed that my sizes were determined as soon as I got onto the Rig. From there, it was only a matter of doing some minor adjustments before delivering it to the right place.

All in the time it took for me to get to the gym.

I managed to convince myself that this level of Big Brother wasn’t creepy. Not at all.

Miss Militia managed to remain completely unimpressed by the sight of my exposed, scaly form and ushered me back to the hall for a warm up. When that was done, she gave me a futuristic-looking device and instructed me to clip it on my ears.

“What about the rest? Aren’t there supposed to be more people present for the tests?” I asked, once I managed to maneuver the device to the correct spot on my pointy ears.

“The tests are largely remote controlled to protect our science personnel for any unexpected interactions. They will monitor us through the installed cameras and sensors. I’m only here explain things if you have questions and to give you company. I’ll leave the heavy thinking to the people who have studied for those kinds of things.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. What do I start with?” I asked, leaving the other reason unsaid and unasked. If I were to go villain on everybody’s asses, she’d be in a good position to take me out before I had the chance to cause mischief. Without providing hostages.

“I think we’ll start relatively easy with a condition and speed test,” she answered as she led me to a formation of cones that jogged my memories in a most uncomfortable way. “We then go over to power and improvise as things pop up.”

If you had asked me the day before how I’d imagined a PRT-sanctioned power testing to go, I would have answered by letting my imagination run amok. I’d have dreamed of science fiction levels of equipment, of simulated combat scenarios and virtual reality. All set in rooms sculpted out of white ceramics and chrome steel.
The thought that it might be the very same test I had done so many times already in school wouldn’t have crossed my mind. Especially not one that had been ripe with “accidental” collisions and stumbles.

But there I was, lungs burning, running back and forth between two cones to the same pre-rerecorded bleeps with no real concept how well I was doing. They had taken out the announcements of the different levels, but at least I felt I was doing fairly well.

After having pushed myself to my limit under the constant shouted encouragements of Miss Militia, I had a short pause before they had me sprint. Again, they didn’t tell me my times when I was done. Instead I was herded to a wall with protruding geometries meant to simulate surfaces ranging from mountain face all the way to glass paned buildings, and was told to climb.

To my eternal satisfaction, whatever happened to me also made me some kind of natural climber. Sure, I cheated by having an extra pair of opposable digits on my feet, as well as claws. Increased strength also helped a bit, but if the few comments from Miss Militia were any indication, becoming a Brute was no guarantee at all for becoming a climber, so there was that. As long as I could find footholds, I’d be able to get up. In an urban environment, that was all kinds of handy.

I shouldn’t have been that surprised, considering how much the idea of mounting raging, actively thrashing monsters appealed to me.

The next phase – after I had badgered an excellent second breakfast out of the Protectorate through Miss Militia – was, unsurprisingly, strength. After relocating to a room adjacent to the gym that had no occupied rooms between it and the outside, I was told to punch a dummy as hard as I could. Miss Militia assured me that nothing critical would break, nor would I endanger any lives as long as I aimed to the right wall. It was purely to get a first, rough reading.

What she didn’t tell me, and what surprised me, was that the dummy was calibrated to simulate a normal human being. That dummy was now skewered on my arm after I punched through its torso.

It made me glad I hadn’t actually lashed out at the Trio, no matter how much they had tried to win a Darwin Award by bullying the girl that had gone Kool Aid Man on a steel door.

That test was followed up by more punching as they methodically increased the toughness of the material. They told me to continue until either I started damaging my fist or I simply couldn’t break the plates anymore. Luckily for me, it ended up being the latter, even though it did start to hurt as well.

Then they repeated the test, this time allowing me to use the gunhammer. After the first, fully powered smash, Miss Militia asked whether I could turn off the gouts of flames the gun hammer produced. Apparently, the sensors weren’t really designed or calibrated to handle both brute force and extreme temperatures at the same time.

When I thought that I was finally done with these tests, they asked me to perform a couple of charged smashes with extra sensors attached to my torso. Then, the scientists asked me to start kicking the dummy. Apparently they had noticed that I literally grabbed hold of the ground to perform my hammer swings, and perforated the hardened concrete floor with my claws to do it.

I also had to test the sharpness of my claws and gripping strength to see whether anything funny was happening while I did my stuff.
The rest of what I presumed was the morning was spent bashing the “human” dummy. Only this time, I had the goal of only knocking “him” out without any impaling or turning people into fine mulch. Getting a feeling of how much to hold back when you can actually make a shish-kebab out of meatbags was hard. Harder than I would have ever imagined.

In the end, I actually managed to reach the knock-out-with-barely-any-broken-bones level with strikes that barely felt like tapping the dummy. With the hammer, it wasn’t much more than just lifting it against the poor dummy.

I could have never imagined that my punches would ever hurt, let alone kill a man. Perhaps that caused the troubles I had with getting a hang of it. Nonetheless, it did make me respect the so-called Brutes even more. Deep down, I knew that I wasn’t that far up that particular totem pole, and I had already plenty of difficulties. It honestly surprised me that Alexandria didn’t leave bloody smears in her wake when she was out to fight crime.

She could slug it out with the likes of Leviathan. For her, it must be actually painful to hold back that much power.

It was during lunch that Miss Militia had to attend other duties and my next trial started.

Armsmaster entered the room of which I had been the sole occupant just moments ago, looking on slightly on edge and frazzled. “Wyverian, I’m glad you’ve decided to come and be so disciplined during the tests. There have been a couple of Wards that complained more than they should have.”

“No problem, sir,” I replied while swallowing my presumably last bite. “I would be glad if they at least told my times or something. It would perhaps help the motivation problem certain persons seem to have.”

“We tried that, and it resulted in a Thinker Brute who attempted to infiltrate by underselling his Brute power by just the right amount to fool the on-board research staff. Luckily, he got arrogant, but he only managed it in the first place by precisely interpolating the likely variations of test results for the lowered capabilities he aimed for. For that, you need data.”

Without a warning he turned and started walking a way that made it clear he expected me to follow. “But enough about that, we’re only wasting time with these anecdotes. We’ll see to the other test we might want to do. We’ll start with you explaining what you’ve brought and presumably build.”

“Alright,” I replied as I dug through my bag. “I’ve managed to get some of the materials I need. Probably most importantly for you, I’ve been able to make a couple of Potions and something else you might even need now.”

Armsmaster simply stopped at the mention of the Potions and turned. Considering I had managed to find the correct jars, I pushed one filled with Potion alongside an Energy Drink jar into his hands.

“These are?”

“The green liquid is the actual healing potion. I don’t know exactly how much damage it’ll manage to repair per drunk volume but it should work. The yellow one is my own brand of energy drink. It works and you might appreciate its effects.”

“And these are safe for normal consumption?”
“I’ve used this batch myself without side effects and my dad was very happy with its effects yesterday.”

“Do you know of any interactions with caffeine or other compounds?”

“Dad drank his coffee just as normal on top of that without turning green, so it should be fine.”

“He would have probably sooner died of heart attack triggered through palpitations than turn green, but I see your point. So you don’t actually know for certain it’s safe?”

“No. Well, on its own it’s perfectly harmless and it does play nice with the rest of the things I make but with any medicine we use… I have no idea, actually. What about my dad? Where is he, we have to—“

“Easy, Wyverian. If nothing has happened yet, you’re likely in the clear. Just keep an eye out on him and tell him. Don’t give him more though until we’ve run some basic test to be sure, though. In here, please.”

I was reeling badly enough by the realization that I might have been irresponsible with simply handing Dad the Energy Drink and potentially harming him (or worse) that I didn’t notice what kind of room we entered.

When I did, I gasped at the beauty of it.

As much as I liked Sig’s smithy from yesterday, this was simply another thing entirely. It was still a smithy with a forge and everything, sure but it also had a sealed biological lab right adjacent to it with workplaces for chemical work as well.

And then there was the equipment. Ranging from induction forges to high-powered light microscopes and automated cell-sorters (there was a helpful name-tag on the large machine) all the way to modular glass equipment that would allow for almost any mundane chemical reaction (and, I had the feeling some others as well).

It was magnificent.

Armsmaster led me to one of the separated workplaces and asked me to explain the functions of the items I had been able to make.

And so I showed him my Flash Bombs and explained how they worked. That was all fine and dandy, but I ran into a bit of a problem when he wanted to know how bright those things could be, as he didn’t let me simply use one. I ended with settling on “very, very bright without the associated bang of a flashbang”. He wasn’t really happy with just that description, but it had to do if he didn’t want a live demonstration.

I also handed him an Antidote I forgot to give before, which he took for testing alongside the Potion and Energy Drink.

It was only when I was showing off my darling knife when I remembered what I forgot to bring: a sample of the Demondrug. Since Armsy was way too concentrated on my newest toy – eh, tool – I didn’t bring it up and instead started telling him just how sharp Mr. Carve actually was.

I was about to repeat the double demonstration of knife and Potion of the day before when I heard
the door of the lab open, revealing a trio of costumed teens.

*Biological improvisation and redundancies. Armor with khezu and yama tsukami basis –*

*Space manipulation. Armor and weapons with plesioth-plated ukanlos materials –*

*Time freeze. Tonfas made with dalamanadur/shrouded nerscylla-fused steel and bone cores bound to the neural controller. Full body armor with same materials gives emergency complete protection.*

The sudden influx of separate strands of information nearly threatened to overwhelm me. Something I couldn’t quite hide.

“– Are you alright, Wyverian?” the Ward clad in red – Aegis – asked, clearly interrupting his introductions when he saw me pale.

“Yeah,” I answered watching the reactions of the other wards. “I had troubles sleeping and must have turned too quickly. I blacked out a bit. I’m fine now. Thanks, Aegis.”

Aegis didn’t show a shred of surprise that I knew him. As the leader of the Wards, he was a public figure after all. Clockblocker, meanwhile looked at me, then my hammer I had propped up in the corner, and back to me in a way that conveyed doubt, even completely encased in his white costumes. Vista’s green visor didn’t quite manage to hide the intensity of her gaze nor her eager interest.

“Of course you knew me. Nice to meet you either way. I guess you’re also familiar with both Clockblocker and Vista?”

“I may or may not be a regular of the PHO forums and subscribed to various cape-related magazines,” I answered with an easy smile.

“Great, another geek. This one – ouch!” Clockblocker managed to mutter before Vista stamped on the ground. He suddenly started hopping on one leg, uttering carefully-picked but colorful euphemisms. I got the distinct feeling that he was recently reminded to use more PR-friendly language, as there was the occasional hitch between his curses that I wouldn’t expect from him.

He was the Ward who managed to announce *that* name before anyone of the PRT could intervene, after all.

“Don’t mind Clockblocker, Wyverian. He’s missing the filter between his brain and mouth every normal human possesses, and he thinks he’s funny. Tragic, really. I for one am glad to meet a fellow female cape and look forward to work with you, one way or the other.”

“Nice to meet you too, Vista. Don’t worry about Clockblocker – he’ll have to up his game to come even close to what I’m used to. He’d also have to believe in what he says.”

“Ah,” Vista replied. “I guess I might ease up on him. Maybe. A little. And would you stop pretending you’re still hurt to get sympathy points from the new cape? I know your costume has reinforced boots.”

“You’re a real spoilsport,” the young cape replied as he apparently instantaneously recovered. “Are you aware of that?”
Vista didn’t dignify that statement with more than a “pff”. It wouldn’t surprise me if she also rolled her eyes underneath her green visor. Aegis simply remained silent all together, but if his relaxed stance was anything to go by, he was smiling.

“Anyway, I do desperately hope that you have more humor in you than the rest of them. I might truly go mad otherwise.”

“You aren’t already?”

“Maybe a bit. But that comes with the job. Otherwise, I wouldn’t actually try to touch the baddies in all my squishy glory. Running away would be so much healthier.”

I blinked. I wouldn’t have thought that he’d think of himself as that squishy. He only had to touch someone once and they’d be done for. If something went wrong, he could simply freeze himself and weather the storm.

“You just have to relax. You might even enjoy yourself. I had to fight a thirty-foot long spider with nothing more than a hammer and my regular clothes. It was probably the most fun I had in years.”

And if that wasn’t depressing. Well, a bit.

“It’ll take some time to get used to that… Also, what? I’m surrounded by luna –“

The complaining teen’s head bobbed forward, shutting him up, at the same time as Vista’s right arm slapped the air. She was standing on his right.

Just the idea of teaming up with her was grand. I could feel saliva build at the mental image of every single charged Great Sword attack hitting – from every angle imaginary. Trapping monsters would be so easy…

“Oh, it was that big?” Aegis replied, slightly shaking his head at the antics of his teammates. “I’ve heard you battled something when you triggered, but Armsmaster failed to mention it was that big. Would you be up for some sparring afterward? Try and see how you fare against a normal sized target?”

I opened my mouth to reply but was interrupted before I even started. “She’ll have enough time to do that after we finish here,” Armsmaster said with a tone that made his impatience all too clear. “You’re too early anyway. I would still like to see her Tinkering in progress. You can watch if you like, but if you’re not quiet you’ll help Gallant and Kid Win on the console. Am I clear? You have brought material you can use for that, haven’t you?”

“Well… I used up most of my batch,” I began as the Wards silently nodded. “I kinda thought that I might get an idea here and improvise.”

“And has anything come up?” Armsmaster leveled me a stare.

“Well, I have a beginning of an idea. But I would need a demonstration of both Clockblocker and Vista’s power to be sure.” I blurted under the pressure of the hero’s hidden gaze.

It was true. Ever since I had seen their powers I had this itch. One that didn’t require the violent dismemberment of teen heroes, which was kind of a big plus in my eyes.
“Is any material fine?” I nodded and he handed both Wards a scrap of metal. “You’ve heard her.”

They followed the command with a shrug. I could see the materials change even without the twist Vista put in hers and before Clockblocker simply let go of his.

Without thinking I stepped towards the scrap Armsmaster gave the Ward in white and plucked it out of the air. This would work just fine. I smiled.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw Vista’s scrap violently twitch back in its original form. “No. What is this? Just, no. This is utter b –“

“Clockblocker.” Armsmaster nearly growled to shut up the young cape before he descended in a rant.

The teen complied with an audible gulp and a soft “sorry” even as Vista and Aegis simply stared at me.

“Wyverian, care to explain what just happened?”

“Remember when I told you about how I’m able to fix the essence of something?” I asked as I let go of the time-locked piece of metal. It stayed floating in the air. I could practically hear Clockblocker’s struggle to keep quiet. “I’m fairly sure I could do the same with materials that are changed by powers.”

“Any idea what the limits are?”

“I guess it has to be seen as valid materials, and it isn’t like I somehow cancel the powers.” I nodded to the floating scrap. “On the contrary, that would be rather unproductive of me.”

“Hmm. That’s something to be tested in the future when we’re better prepared. So, do you think you can build something?”

“If you find a dozen wooden planks, allow me to work with some metal sheets, and grant me access to the smithy, yes. I think I will be able to give a small presentation.”

The next hour was spent demonstrating my Tinkering to a silent audience.

Lasers cut complex, irregular patterns of grooves in the planks while I burned a time-locked plank to ashes (Clockblocker was surprisingly completely quiet during that) and mixed it with warped filings of steel and some Catalyst I brought. I then heated it until I got a homogenous, molten mass. When the grooves were prepared, I had them frozen and poured the glowing mixture into the three-dimensional network of grooves.

When the liquid cooled down to a thick, viscous state, I had Vista warp some more sheets. I started assembling its entirety using bolts that were both warped and frozen by the Wards’ powers, and the biggest hammer I could find. I felt the individual networks connect to each other as I went along, and soon I had built a box. The finishing touches were made in a matter of mere minutes. The lip and loop for the lock were bolted on with ease and the shelves and racks were a simple matter of cutting and bending the warped steel to shape.

“Tadaah!” I declared as I installed the last miniature shelf into the waist-high, wooden-looking trunk.
“It’s a box. You’ve made both of us suffer to make a box.” Clockblocker replied, apparently having reached the point where he’d accept console duty just to get it off his chest. “A box you’ve already filled with shelves for one reason or the other.”

He shouldn’t have worried, as Armsmaster was all too carefully observing my newest creation from every angle, opening and closing the lid repeatedly as he examined it.

Since the expected reprimanding of the hero never came due to Armsmaster being too busy to care, Vista also tested her luck by whispering something to Aegis.

I didn’t quite catch it as I was too busy staring Clockblocker into submission. He was actually foolish enough to contest it. I won easily.

“Fine,” he said as he admitted defeat. “It’s a case of ‘more than meets the eye’; care to enlighten us?”

I didn’t have to as my fellow Tinker reached a conclusion on his own. “It’s bigger on the inside. Much bigger. If you had actually taken the time to look instead of complaining, you would have seen it as well.”

I looked with pride as the Wards joined him around the box with renewed interest. “Actually it’s more than that if someone can get – ”

“Vista, can you give me the timer from the upper left cupboard, right of the fume hood?”

I scowled at the hero as he stole my thunder by setting the timer and throwing it in my box.

“Huh that’s strange, I could have sworn…”

“You have to close the lid for that to work.” I managed to say, hissing only a little.

Armsmaster at least had the decency to look a tiny bit ashamed before he did just that. “Sorry. It’s just that, knowing how you described the way your powers work, I had a guess about what it could do, due to what you used to make it. I got carried away.”

“It’s fine.” I replied after a deep breath. “I can understand. The box is meant to store the materials – things that often decay due to their organic nature – I need for my brand of Tinkering as well as the equipment I make. If the time-stopping field were active the whole time, you wouldn’t be able to use it, and it might lead to all kinds of complications. It also adapts its interior size to what is put in, to a certain point.”

“If you had told us that instead of trying to be all mystic, I wouldn’t have felt underwhelmed. And stop pouting, it looks less intimidating than you think.”

I didn’t pout, I scowled. Stupid Clockblocker should learn the difference. And Vista should practice keeping a straight face in these situations.

“Look,” Armsmaster said, oblivious to what happened around him once more, as he retrieved the running timer that suddenly was half a minute behind.

He then went off to find the largest piece of equipment he could lift that would fit through the box’ opening.
“Aegis?” I asked, deciding that Armsmaster would be too distracted for the foreseeable future. “Are you still up for some sparring?”

“Armsmaster?” The hero in question simply gave an affirmative grunt as he maneuvered an emptied out tool trolley into the box. “I think we’ll start with you using me as a punching bag first so I can get a read on you, and then we’ll start out with some light sparring to see how you fare. Is that alright with you?”

“How about we just, you know, spar? I’ve done enough strength tests today to last for the next couple of years.”

“I can’t really allow that. I know you have your strength enhanced, and presumably your body is fortified to be able to handle that monstrosity.” He nodded towards my beloved gun hammer. “But so am I, and frankly I have a bit more experience than you when it comes to fighting. I don’t want to hurt you over something this unimportant.”

“You do know I have potions that can heal me?”

“Untested ones. And what happens if I actually break something. Can they fix bones? And fast enough, at that, in the case of punctured lungs? No, I think…”

I started walking towards the anvil when he mentioned his fear of breaking me. I figured that explanations and reassurances would fall on deaf ears.

Just the tiniest flashes of the monster whose materials I’d need for Clockblocker made it clear that Aegis’ strength was utterly insignificant on the grand scale of things.

I carefully estimated the distance and angle of the anvil’s edge. It was time for another demonstration. As soon as Aegis’s speech petered out, I whipped my arm down on the edge with my full strength.

Two things happened immediately: The Tinker steel tool deformed ever so slightly; and with a loud snap and a lance of pain, my underarm broke into two neat pieces standing at a right angle.

“What the f – “

“Clockblocker!” Armsmaster shouted at the cursing teen, which elicited an irritated sigh from Vista.

The shout was pure reflex though, as he didn’t look away from his attempt to fit in large office chair into my box.

Vista’s irritation was soon replaced by confused horror once more. “Why did you do that? Couldn’t you have just, I don’t know, tried to convince us by talking?”

“That would have been a losing battle,” I answered as I started looking through my bag with my healthy hand. “And there was no way I could convince Aegis that I could fix bones at a useful rate.”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to be convinced by this.”

“Well for starters,” I replied, nodding to the tiny dent in the anvil, “It shows that I’m not that easily broken and… I should have opened the Potion before I did this. Vista, could you open the jar for me?”
The girl in forest green complied silently while Clockblocker had simply opted to sit where he previously stood in clear confusion.

“Thanks,” I continued as Vista handed the jar back to me. “Like I was saying, it’s also a good opportunity to show off my Potion. Watch.”

With that last prompt, I raised the jar to my lips and took a couple of gulps.

The feeling of bones sliding back to their place isn’t something I’ll likely ever be a fan of. The pain that my subconscious had nearly managed to isolate to the back of my mind roared back to life. It joined forces with the feeling of thousands of skittering insects and a wet “sucking” feeling inside my arm. It wasn’t very comfortable, which made the relief all the sweeter when it was done.

“Was that able to convince you?” I asked my wide-eyed audience, which included a disapproving Armsmaster.

I guess seeing a badly broken, twisted arm slide back to its proper configuration wasn’t something even capes saw every day.

“The way you demonstrated could have been better – a lot better actually – but you’ve certainly shown that it’s effective,” the sour-faced hero replied. “Just one question. Did you really have to pose when your arm was healed? If it’s an involuntary reaction, we have to keep it in mind when used in the field.”

“It felt right, I guess?”

“Well, that’s another thing to keep an eye out during our tests. Aegis?”

“Sir?”

“We don’t have more tests we can do without specific preparation. Escort Wyverian to the sparring ring while I continue testing her latest creation. I’ll inform the medical staff and on-board scientists for you. Try to find her limits without risking killing her. Ramp up slowly - the both of you.”

“Yes, sir!”

“One last thing before you go. I must stress: don’t kill each other.”

With that he turned back to face the box and put his hand to the side of his head in a manner I was still convinced wasn’t needed. At least not to communicate. It simply seemed too inefficient for Armsmaster.

I considered myself lucky that I had a trio of Wards to lead the way. I would, no doubt, have gotten lost in the bowels of the Rig. Even they seemed to hesitate at more than one junction.

This also allowed me to bring my hammer. It wasn’t likely that I could actually use it, but at least I wouldn’t have to excavate it from my box when I returned. Armsmaster was running out of things to put into it, and I had spotted him looking at the hammer more than once.

The ring actually looked very much like a traditional boxing ring. The sole exception was that this one was reinforced with more than a few Tinker materials. It suited me just fine.
First up was Aegis. We halfheartedly exchanged some hits before he took flight and it suddenly got more serious.

I could barely avoid his first dive with outstretched fists by jumping out of the way and it left me wide open for the follow up swooping kick that nearly dislocated my shoulder.

The next dive was avoided by a simple roll instead of blindly flinging myself to the side and as such I could avoid his follow-up attack.

By the time he tried the third dive, I felt the grin that had snuck on my face. I got a measure on how fast he could turn with the speeds he was flying at. As such, I avoided his torpedo impression by sidestepping, and I managed to punch his collarbone in with the same movement. He repaid the favor by cracking a couple of my ribs.

Ignoring the gasping Vista, we got truly serious right there and then.

Aegis abandoned his reckless dives in favor of plain and simple punching and kicking while floating above me, around me. The strikes, while less powerful, still hurt and they simply came from everywhere. I was already badly bruised when I identified the first tell and managed to sneak in my first hit ever since the shift.

From there, it didn’t take long for things to slowly tip in my favor as I could predict more and more moves, and the strikes from below stopped surprising me.

We stopped shortly after. For one, I was getting seriously tired while the cheating bastard Aegis was as fresh as when we started – even if he looked slightly deformed. For two, Vista finally had enough of our nonsense and forcefully separated us.

I tried to convince Vista to let me try fighting Aegis with my hammer for round two, but that only resulted in her loudly shrieking before my hammer somehow disappeared beyond the horizon.

As such, after healing up and drinking some Energy Drink, it was Vista’s turn.

She obliterated me. Plain and simple.

The only thing I managed to do was to run circles in one spot while she occasionally bothered to give me a slap in increasingly distracting places.

It pretty much made it clear to me that I would need a bow if I ever needed to take her out.

Clockblocker, who had been uncharacteristically tired the entire time, flat out refused to fight.

“So,” I innocently started as we walked back to the labs, freshly showered. “Where is Shadow Stalker? She isn’t here, she isn’t on patrol, and it isn’t likely she’s on console duty either if Armsmaster uses it as potential punishment.”

Aegis, Vista, and Clockblocker suddenly stopped and looked at me without uttering a single word.

They reminded me of deer caught in the headlights.

That promised little good.
“She had to attend some personal matters and is out of town.” Aegis was the fastest to recover of the three. “Why do you ask? Wanted to meet the Ward with the highest arrest rate?”

I did kind of feel bad for having sprung the question on them like that. Sure, I did it to try and get an honest reaction out of them just in case a cover-up was going on instead of an extended break or something for the shadowy Ward in question. In case of the former, I knew they would have some BS cover story ready.

Sadly, the way Aegis had to force the lines out of him; the strained way he tried to lighten the topic made it really look like they were hiding something. Vista’s disappointed sneer didn’t really help to convince me otherwise either.

It also shattered any remaining doubt I had about Sophia’s identity. After all, she could have been a recently triggered cape that just happened to have the same power set as Shadow Stalker who remained hidden up until now. After, all there were plenty of instances of similar powers popping up in the same family. One only had to look at Photon Mon and her kids for that so Shadow Stalker might have been Sophia’s elder sister or something.

… Yeah right. One only had to compare Shadow Stalker and Sophia’s general behavior to tell that BS. I still had to convince myself of the possibility, though.

Even if all of this stank of a cover up, I still didn’t quite know what kind I was dealing with. They might have her somewhere under house arrest until her fate was decided for PR reasons. The amount of complaining from Clockblocker on the PHO forums on the topic at the beginning of his career – one trend that quickly and abruptly stopped (the generally accepted theory was that he was threatened with an internet ban) – made it a likely possibility. One I didn’t really approve of, but… an understandable one. No matter how much my brain screamed at me to stop being so damn naïve.

No Taylor, the universe doesn’t conspire to screw you over. I’m sure there was a perfectly benign reason.

But no matter the case, it would mean revealing that I knew Sophia’s cape identity and vice-versa - doubly so since the question about me joining the Wards would come up before I left the Rig.

That meant revealing my knowledge in such a fashion that didn’t reveal my cape scan. With Armsmaster and his damned lie detector in the room. There was simply no way he wouldn’t be there if I dropped that bomb. He would probably tear himself from his Tinkering. If that wasn’t a scary thought.

I really didn’t want to join the Wards without at least knowing what happened. I deserved that much. That in turn meant that I had to try my luck with technically telling the truth. During my extensive
parahuman internet search spree during the early morning I came across an interesting bit about Trigger Events: Apparently there were some claims that capes in the vicinity fainted when newly minted parahumans got their powers.

I don’t know how generally accepted that theory was, but I had seen Sophia needing the assistance of Emma to stand. It wouldn’t be that big a leap to think that it was the result of her blacking out.

Then there was also the initial, angry reaction of Armsmaster when I mentioned Sophia’s name – one he couldn’t quite hide – as well as the Wards’ reactions. Add to it the speculation I had witnessed on the Forums, and I might make a convincing case.

… There was one problem, though. It depended heavily on whether I could convince myself that Sophia could have been any other cape before I got the unwitting verification of the Wards.

I felt the beginnings of a headache already, even just thinking about what was in my immediate future.

It just sucked that Aegis, Vista, and Clockblocker seemed so friendly. They also failed to say anything about my looks and – with the exception of Clockblocker, for some reason – treated me just like a normal human being. I almost started to wonder whether it was another order from the board – but for that, their reactions seemed too genuine.

First things first, though. “So it’s true, she does have the highest arrest rate?” Aegis nodded. “There were some debates on PHO about whether there were some maneuvers the Wards have participated in without the general public’s knowledge. But that wasn’t why I asked; I was just wondering, since I had already learned the whereabouts of the rest of the team. I didn’t even want to particularly meet her to be honest. From what I’ve read, she doesn’t have the nicest personality.”

“She really doesn’t,” Vista confirmed with a bitter snort. “You might even call her a true B- “

“Vista,” the Ward in red tiredly warned. “No matter your feelings, she’s still our teammate.”

I couldn’t help notice the particular, slight intonation and the bitterness that crept into his voice. “Any other particular reason why you wanted to ask? I couldn’t help but notice that you stared at us really hard just now. Almost as if you were expecting some sort of reaction.” I sighed and Clockblocker shuddered. Of course, I would forget about how uncomfortable and intense my gaze could become, even after Dad asked me about it. Hell, I had even neglected practicing “normal” blinking like he suggested.

“I hope you didn’t notice, but I think it would be better for everyone if we suspended this conversation until we’re back in the lab or some secure room. I don’t want to cause unnecessary trouble.”

“Oh,” Aegis answered as he tensed up. “In that case, best not keep him waiting.”

We spend the next couple of minutes walking in silence – its comfortableness definitely gone – and probably would have continued that way until we reached Armsmaster if it wasn’t for one incident.

Timeline splitting. Piercing made from remobra bones fused with gossamite ore and a setting of basarios shell for the crystalized neural controller.

The weirdly thin man that came around the corner and walked past us with not much more than a
glance (one that lingered just a bit on me) confused me in two ways. First, the materials needed for his Earring was cheap – shockingly so. I wouldn’t have to bother an Elder Dragon and instead could focus on a common monster and flying pests. Second, the man was walking around unmasked, dressed in the jacket of what looked like a PRT official.

Wasn’t the PRT’s entire shtick that they were the normal humans looking over the scary capes to make sure they behave? Why was a parahuman wearing their uniform?

“Wyverian?” Vista tore me out of my thoughts. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really – just thought I knew the man that just walked by. I was wrong.”

“Ah, okay. Look, we’re almost here, only two more corridors.”

I didn’t know what part of the identical, featureless wall gave away the information for that conclusion. It might just have been that I was too distracted trying to get my game-face on and face the music that was about to start.

A little sign on the lab’s door was all the warning we got that a visitor was inside.

“Who is that?” Aegis asked quietly as we saw my visitor.

“It’s my dad,” I answered with an ease that confused the Wards a tiny bit. “I wanted him along for the ride and since I’m going – have to go public in the near future and Armsmaster knows both bits – he probably got let through.”

“Right, I almost forgot.”

“Thanks by the way for not mentioning how weird I look or treating me differently because of it.” In hindsight, I was truly grateful for how they just went along with the ride.

“Ha,” Clockblocker replied a bit too loudly if the body language of the others were anything to go by. “We had joint training with Boston just a couple of weeks ago. You’re nothing compared to tinboy over there.”

“Weld is a very nice guy, Clock, and you know it.” Vista somehow managed to glare at the Ward in question through her visor. “But regardless of the idiot’s phrasing, he does have a point. Compared to some of the others we regularly deal with, it really isn’t that bad. Besides, it all gets drowned out by my space warping abilities.”

“Yeah,” Aegis chimed in. “I can’t really judge anyone for being weird to be honest. Not after that incident that had my arms and legs reversed until my powers managed to take care of that.”

I remembered reading about that one - a very unlucky encounter with Hookwolf during a regular patrol through what was considered a safe neighborhood. Luckily Battery and Assault were nearby to save them, but there were some leaked photos with a peculiar-looking Aegis circulating the net afterwards.

“If you put it like that, it does make sense I don’t rank that high on the scale of weirdness.”

“With your looks, perhaps not, but with your powers… Do you know how weird it felt to lose the mental connection with the metal I was warping?” Vista visibly shuddered. “And then see you make
“… Or to see you handle something that I know for a fact should be a literal example of an ‘unmovable object’,” Clockblocker added, a slight nervousness coloring his voice.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I had no idea how it felt for you. I’m sorry.”

“Ixnay,” Vista countered with an easy smile on her lips. “We got to see you make that box of yours. That enough was worth the discomfort.”

“But anyway,” I decided to bring the conversation back on track. “Considering soon everybody will know anyway, I might as well start with you guys. Hi, my name is Taylor Hebert.”

“Ah nice to meet you, Taylor. Sadly, we can’t return the favor and properly introduce ourselves without you joining us. Cape identities and safety concerns are taken pretty seriously over here.”

“Of course, Aegis. I would have been kinda disappointed and worried if that wasn’t the case.”

Beyond getting used to it, revealing myself had another advantage: I got a glimpse of their reactions and luckily there was no signs of any relieved relaxation. This probably meant that Armsmaster – or whoever clued them in – only revealed that Shadow Stalker and I had some issues or something without telling the whole story. Hopefully.

With our hushed discussion petered out, I turned my focus back to the men standing in the lab. I was delighted to see Dad happily going along with Armsmaster’s “tour” of my box on the screen. It looked like he was flying around with some sort of drone. The feed did make me wonder why a massive, extendable pole was laid out in between the shelves I had installed. What helped to lighten my mood even more was the fact that most of the lab equipment was back where it belonged instead of haphazardly thrown in my box.

Neither of them noticed when the door opened and the three silent Wards and I entered. Only when Dad turned to close the lid at Armsmaster’s behest did he acknowledge our presence, with a wink and a sly smile.

Like expected, the feed flashed a generic “lost connection” message across the screen as the probe literally lost all connection to both space and time. Armsmaster and the rest of us (apparently the Wards knew better than to disrupt the hero during his presentations for non-pressing manners) waited for two whole minutes before Dad got a sign to open the lid again.

Almost immediately, the program began to stutter, error messages popped up and simply froze.

“Did you see what just happened here Mr. Hebert?” Armsmaster asked pointing at a table of analytical data and a screenshots of before and after the lid was closed. “Time simply stops inside of that box as soon as it is closed, which likely causes the crash. My best guess is that the temporal shift causes a conflict in the communication parts of the program, which triggers a cascade of other problems. We didn’t think that time frozen drones could be that much of a problem with Clockblocker on our side, so someone must have taken some shortcuts. I’ll have to fix that mistake myself. But that’s beside the point – thing is wherever Wyverian’s box ends up, the one closing it must triple check whether someone has fallen in.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Armstmaster. However, shouldn’t you be telling that to the one who made the thing in the first place?”
“Ah,” the Tinker said as he turned around towards us. “You’re back. Glad to have seen your fighting skills in action, Wyverian – you’re a fast learner but it was clear you were missing your weapon. Aegis, what did I tell you about that dive of yours? It’s too predictable when used in quick succession, just look what happened. Vista, clever fighting as usual but don’t slack off as quickly even in a friendly spar. She might have friends or higher powered ranged weaponry.”

The heroes in question mumbled a slight acknowledgment as dad walked over to me. “Yes, sir.”

“Everything alright?” he whispered as he was in earshot. “Nothing hurt or broken?”

“I’m fine dad, the few cracked ribs were easily healed with my potion. No big deal.”

Dad actually winced. “Yeah, about that. Armsmaster told me of your little stunt you pulled to convince them to let you fight Aegis. What were you thinking? First that act over at Sig’s and now breaking your arm – damaging what sounded like quite an expensive piece of equipment in the process. Did you stop feeling pain or something?”

Oh, I should have guessed that such an amount of Tinkertech steel would be expensive. It would probably be best to deliver the first batch of Potion on the house to make up for it.

“I just didn’t feel like waiting around and discussing in circles,” I began, which caused an eyebrow to hike. “And to answer the last bit, I do still feel the pain - at least at the beginning. It’s just… I dunno. It just doesn’t bother me somehow. The pain just gets shoved to the side and I can just carry on. When I moved my arm around, it still hurt briefly and kinda sucked, but I wasn’t being attacked and I had my Potion. I didn’t really feel like it was that big of a deal. And no, I hadn’t really thought about damaging the anvil. I honestly didn’t expect I could.”

Dad massaged the bridge of his nose. “We’ll have a talk about this when we get home. Just try to refrain from other ‘demonstrations’, alright?”

As I nodded, I made a mental note to downplay any monster encounters, especially the injuries obtained while fighting them.

“– And what could I have done against her? Beyond my wit and my power, I’m just a poor, squishy boy. She has demonstrated that freezing stuff would likely do jack sh– absolutely nothing to stop her and while I have confidence in my quips, they aren’t exactly weapons grade.”

“While I do get your concerns, I’m still a bit disappointed you didn’t take this opportunity to try new things and go beyond yourself. If you have this little confidence without your Striker ability, I think an increase of your training is in order. Martial arts practice as well. I will work on the changed schedule as soon as we’re done here.”

Clockblocker couldn’t prevent the agonized groan from escaping his lips as Armsmaster addressed me. “Wyverian, you mentioned that you found the materials you needed just before we started. Is there anything special we should know?”

“Ah yes. Thanks for reminding me. When we got back home on Monday, I was contacted by a species local to the place I fought the nerscylla.” A certain eagerness came over the Tinker hero. “No, that doesn’t mean I or other humans can travel freely between the worlds. I asked and they assured me they were the only ones, and my Powers trust them. Anyway, I was able to negotiate a contract for material transport in case I end up back there, as well as regular deliveries of common
“What kind of creatures are we talking about?” Armsmaster asked with much of his enthusiasm replaced with caution.

“They’re felynes – cats that can walk on their hind legs and reach about the height of my waist while standing like that. They’re intelligent and are quite good at finding things, though they don’t appear to speak English. These cats are also quite common in that other place, and considered a people alongside humans and others.”

“These cats are also just clumsy, fluffy furballs,” Dad added which caused Vista to actually squee.

“And are these… felynes dangerous?”

“No. They might be a bit mischievous at times, but at heart, they just want to work with others and remain in the background otherwise. That reminds me: if you get approached by one, try to be friendly?”

“How so? I don’t know what makes you believe we’d do anything else unless they show hostile intent or are known criminals.”

“It’s just that they also offer another valuable service, namely a search and rescue one. They can get you out of all sorts of life-threatening trouble if you pay for the right price – one that is rather high. In my case a literal arm and leg – no, not mine. I wanted to make sure that nobody scared them off thinking they were a nuisance, as I managed to negotiate a provisional deal to hire more of them in times of extreme crisis. They’ll likely approach the Protectorate or PRT sometime in the future to iron out more definite terms.”

“And why can’t we just hire them on a more permanent basis?”

“Quite frankly, we simply can’t afford it. Our money is meaningless and they charge for the dangers of their job. To put it mildly, they regularly risk their own lives to bail out the unlucky hunter. With the amount of gang activity over here, it simply would be too much. Besides, I don’t know how many felynes they have on carting duty. After all, only a handful has revealed themselves to Dad and me and I haven’t heard any reports from elsewhere.”

“We haven’t received any reports either. I’ll make sure the Protectorate knows about it to avoid potential diplomatic disasters. What about the materials? Can they supply enough for you to start mass producing anything?”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to reach large scaled production anytime soon. I’ve started to grow some of the plants myself, but I haven’t gotten enough space and it’ll take some time to get a farm going. Besides, I’m not sure whether I can grow some ingredients in the first place.”

“I think either the PRT or Protectorate could provide some farmland. Can you tell me why you’re uncertain whether you can grow some of your ingredients?”

“It’s just that some plants and mushrooms grow in pretty extreme places – think inside active volcanoes and snowy mountaintops. I don’t know how they would fare in the climate of Brockton Bay or what the salt air would do to them. Then there’s the honey I need. It’s one of the main ingredients and while I could ask for some bees the next time around and try my luck, I’m not sure the resulting honey would have the same effect thanks to our more mundane flora. Maybe I have a
chance of succeeding if we do get a real farm set up.”

“What would you want from Taylor in return for the land?” Dad asked with more than a hint of skepticism. “It seems awfully generous to just offer it.”

“The easiest way would be the Ward program,” Armsmaster replied while Vista squirmed with impatience. “As a member we’d make sure that she’d be able to work close to full capacity and she’d be able to access the blueprints of other Protectorate Tinkers. In return we’d ask her to share her own inventions and methods and run new ones by our Think-tank for approval. It would also be expected that she participated in patrols, especially with her physical enhancements.

“If that isn’t agreeable for some reason, we could still work out a contract as we have with other Independents and the land would be a part of the payment for her products. However, her potions for example have to be proven to be effective even when given to normal humans, and there can’t be any serious side effects. Depending on her preferences, she could join some Ward activities and joined drills. Of course, everything would be declared void if she’s caught in criminal activities. I wouldn’t recommend this course of action, as she would have far fewer resources at her disposal. Tinkers, especially ones with natural secondary powers, are always in high demand – no matter their specialization. If the healing potion is as effective as it looks and word gets out, gangs would go great lengths to recruit her if she’s not careful.”

“So,” Dad began as he shifted his focus from the hero to me. “What do you think? You could finally become a hero. Just like you dreamed of.”

I inwardly groaned as Dad simply revealed one of my childhood dreams like it was nothing. I had almost forgotten how easily dads could embarrass you in front of your peers during my years in hell – I mean high school.

“Just like my dreams, huh?” That goal sounded a bit hollow now, knowing that animals like Sophia were considered “heroes” as well. “But no, Dad. I have to decline, at least for now. Armsmaster, could you tell me more about – “

“No!” Vista yelled before adjusting her volume. “Why? Did we do something wrong? What’s the matter? Please don’t leave me alone in this sausage fest. Please?”

Aegis didn’t seem to be happy with my decision either, Dad stood baffled, and Armsmaster’s mouth had transformed into a white line. Clockblocker was the only one who didn’t seem to be disturbed in some way. I could have sworn to I even saw a sigh of relief.

I couldn’t be that scary, could I?

“Sweetie, did something happen? I thought that this was what you wanted all along.”

“Nothing happened here and I still want to be a hero, it’s just… I can’t join the Wards with a good conscience. Not until some things are cleared up.”

“And what would that be?” Armsmaster asked, disappointment, anger, and anticipation shimmering through. “You seemed to get along just fine with Aegis, Vista, and Clockblocker – even if he has behaved a bit strangely – and if nothing else has happened to cause this, it begs the question what did.”

I swallowed. I really didn’t want to start this dance with the hero who had a lie detector.
“I can assure you that it really wasn’t anything the Wards did and nothing happened.” I took a deep breath. “It’s about Shadow Stalker.”

“I see,” Armsmaster stated before focusing on the Wards. “Aegis, Clockblocker, Vista, please escort Mr. Hebert to the lobby.”

“What’s the meaning of this? I will not go anywhere without Taylor! I – “

“Dad,” I said why laying my hand on his shoulder and giving it a small squeeze to calm him. “It’s better if you just went with them. You don’t want to hear what’s about to be said. Please trust me on this. I’ll be fine.”

Or at least, so I desperately hoped.

“Please, Mr. Hebert, follow the Wards. She isn’t in trouble and if she were I’d send for you, it’s just that for the sake of the safety of others I have to insist on confidentiality.”

“Fine,” Dad replied after having deflated enough and moved to hug me only to continue in a whisper. “If anything happens you don’t like, make a ruckus. I will come for you.”

“Look for loud bangs and bright flashes,” I answered with a lopsided smile. “Now go.”

I watched the door shut after the Wards and Dad with a terrible finality. Why couldn’t things just go easy?

“The only listening and recording device in this room that are still running are my own. Talk.”

Armsmaster was all kinds of scary when he was grumpy and I wasn’t about to improve his mood. “I know that Shadow Stalker is Sophia Hess.”

“Damnit. How did you find out? You didn’t go digging?”

“No, it everything just kinda clicked into place. I started to notice something was off when she was barely able to stand when I busted out my locker.” Technically true. “Then there was your reaction when I named her as one of my primary bullies, it was small but it stood out against the non-reactions of the others.” Telling the truth felt so much better than the elvish alternative. “It still wasn’t enough for to be certain. But after coming across a post on the web this morning – I had trouble sleeping – that proposed the theory that capes might faint during the Trigger of a new parahuman. With some linked articles it became clearer. Add the similarities in both Stalker’s and Sophia’s behavior and especially her cruelty, and how the Wards reacted when I asked them about her and there wasn’t much place for doubt anymore. Please don’t punish the Wards, though. I kinda sprung the question on them when their guards were down and was looking for a reaction. I wouldn’t have noticed otherwise even with Aegis’s lacking acting skills.”

I really, really hoped that his gear wasn’t sophisticated enough to pick the half-truths I had sprinkled in my narrative. After all, I did find that post and didn’t know about the phenomenon before reading it, and I had been reminding myself since the day before that the similarities could have been a coincidence.

“So another one slipped through the net. I need you to give me the address of the site when we’re done here and you’ve signed the non-disclosure form. You don’t have to worry about the Wards
either. Aegis might get some classes if I can find the slot in his schedule.” Armsmaster said, much calmer than before now he could focus on a task.

“Am I in any trouble?”

“No, not you. It’s just a matter of security for capes everywhere. We don’t want that information widely known. As you’ve demonstrated yourself, it makes identifying capes’ civilian identities too easy. You don’t have to worry about either thing as long as you don’t share your knowledge.”

“I won’t.”

“In that case, is there any way to change your mind about the Wards?”

“Wait,” I said, actually taking a step back in confusion. “I’m off the hook just like that? Sign a form and off you go?”

“In your case, yes. Your behavior has been exemplary until now, and you seem sincere in your desire to become a hero. We had already warned Shadow Stalker about her civilian behavior and how it could lead back to her after reviewing her interactions with the other Wards. Besides, I’m sure you’ve read the pamphlet in the van on your drive here. Even as a cape without a secret identity, you’re probably aware of their importance.”

“Yes, I’m acutely aware of them.” Dad would be such an easy target if I overreached, and I would not endanger him like that. “But that still begs one question: how the fuck was this allowed to happen? That bitch made me Trigger. She made me into this.”

Armsmaster actually winced and when he talked he could barely keep his rage out of it. “This happened because we trusted Shadow Stalker’s caseworker to actually do her damned job. We hoped that a solitary spine was found amongst Winslow’s faculties if something did happen related to a Ward on probation. I will personally make sure it won’t happen again.”

“That’s a bit too late for me.” Again, that bitterness I didn’t know could come so easily. “What will happen now?”

“The teachers are allowed to keep teaching until replacements have been found.” My anger must have shown. “We can’t negatively impact the learning of hundreds of kids that are at risk anyway, no matter how much we want this sorted out. It’s difficult to find so many teachers on short notice – but as soon as some adequate arrangements are found, they will be suspended until the end of the investigations. The PRT is having a field day with interviewing the witnesses and building a case against the guilty parties. Both Miss Barnes and Miss Clements have been suspended and are likely to face charges as well.”

“And Sophia?”

I could actually see how Armsmaster braced himself. “She ran away before we could take her into custody. She escaped out of a room of the top floor before we could arrive on the scene. She hasn’t been seen since.”

I barked out a short laugh. “Why doesn’t it surprise me that Miss “Predator” actually decided to flee with her tails between her legs. It does beg the question, though: Why was this covered up?”

“We didn’t want to spook Shadow Stalker as we weren’t sure what she had planned. The fear was
that she might be turned against us and join a gang.”

“And you think someone who has seen the inner workings of the organization, and saw herself forced to flee in spite of her problematic status, wouldn’t get more worried when there are no repercussions? That’s stinks of trying to cover your own asses.”

“I’ve told the Director that it wouldn’t work, that we should cut our losses. Miss Militia and the rest argued that we should be transparent and clear this up before it spiraled out of control if it is the decent thing to do wasn’t enough. She didn’t want to listen and chose to hold onto her failed experiment, arguing that we wouldn’t want to advertise a rogue Ward. She had the final say.”

“And nobody bothered to inform me? She already attacked me once.”

“Trust me, I’m distinctly unhappy about the whole situation. We had agents set up a perimeter around your house for that occasion but a total silence was ordered in the hopes to solve the situation before it became a true problem. An order that hasn’t only been useless so far, but even is about to lose the Protectorate a promising new recruit. Is there really no way to convince you otherwise?”

“If you’re serious about convincing me, at the very least start with distancing yourselves from Shadow Stalker. While I don’t like it, I can even understand not mentioning her role in my bullying; she was too well known for her identity to remain hidden. She has enough of a reputation in school that people won’t ask too many questions. Even then, there’s the case. It’s likely not going to feel right to join the Wards until after that has reached a just conclusion.”

“I feared as much. Even knowing that you’ll face far more difficulties Tinkering without the support of the Protectorate won’t change that fact?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Really, too bad. Could we help you with anything else before you leave?”

“Well, to be honest, I would welcome some guidelines about how best to announce myself as a cape without a secret identity. I’m kinda starting to get stir-crazy being holed up at home or hiding deep inside a hoody while traveling somewhere. I’m really starting to miss my morning jog.”

“I could give you some pointers while the specific non-disclosure form is being made.”

With that, we spent the next half hour going over potential drafts and tips on how to make that announcement together with some shabby looking guy from PR. We also discussed what I could tell my dad about what I knew and why I didn’t want – er, couldn’t join the Wards right now.

While Armsmaster walked me and my new cellphone to where Dad was waiting, he explained how he deemed my box safe as long as I kept it well maintained. I was able to bring it home since he feared that I wouldn’t be able to maintain it enough otherwise. He didn’t mention why that would be bad. There was no need really; after all, I knew exactly how much reality must hate my creation.

The ride back home was spent telling my abridged reasoning to Dad (the PRT finally got the memo that there was no real need for unnecessary secrecy in my case). While he didn’t fully accept it, it was enough that we were able to spend the rest of the way in comfortable silence with some small talk mixed in. Mostly talk about my box and how proud he was of me.

Once home in the late afternoon, Dad ordered enough Chinese to have the clerk jokingly ask
whether we were organizing a party and I contacted Tin_Mother to change my existing account into an official, verified “Wyverian” one.

It only took a single photograph of me and my hammer to convince her of my identity. I guess Armsmaster or the Hawaiian shirt had informed her already.

Then, I only needed to actually write the damned post that would end my quiet life while also saving me from the impeding cabin fever.

“Wyverian… Taylor Hebert…” Dad mumbled in between bites of greasy noodles as he went over my first draft before nearly performing a spit take. “… I don’t have any money. But what I do have are a very particular set of… Don’t target my father or friends… I will find you, and I will kill you. Taylor, don’t you think that this will send the wrong message? Just a bit? Especially in form of a modified quote from an Aleph movie. With the exception of the last part it looks fine though. Just edit the end and I think it’s good to go.”

With an annoyed grumble, I reluctantly edited out the last paragraph. Even though I knew why I had to out myself like this, it didn’t mean I had to like it – I was rather fond of some peace and quiet even though I knew that I wouldn’t get that in the near future. Neither did that mean I had to like the idea of potentially endangering Dad or any friends I might get (hey, I could hope). As such, I only wanted to give people a fair warning. Apparently that was too much.

Well, anyone stupid enough to try would learn soon enough. One way or the other.
The day had started out so well for Dennis. Well, the afternoon at least. School had been the usual drag tinged by just a hint of sleep deprivation from his patrol the night before. Not that it truly mattered since being only half-awake was pretty much the status quo. He even suspected that the teacher liked when he had less a mental capacity to wisecrack.

Beyond that, it was the same old routine of sitting in the stuffy classroom and barely paying enough attention to get just above the Ward’s minimum grades – without too much studying.

It was hard getting motivated to give one’s all if you knew that your life would solely consist of a glorified, high-stakes game of tag and then, hopefully, retirement. Dennis knew that his power was too useful to simply quit. Not that he wanted that – no matter the risks, it still beat pushing papers in a desk job.

You could even meet new and exciting people on a regular basis and – if you were lucky – they were even on the same side as you. One that apparently could handle Halbeard on their first meeting promised to be intriguing either way while increasing the chance of “friend” status at the same time.

As such, Dennis quietly listened when Piggot told Aegis, Vista, and him to play nice and not scare off the potential new recruit. He didn’t mind when she told them to absolutely avoid bringing up the wayward Ward, Shadow Stalker. The runaway delinquent wouldn’t have found a sense of humor if she were drowning in it. Sure, her inflated self-worth made it all the funnier to ridicule her try-hard, half-baked philosophies - but there was always the feeling that he might wake up with a bolt sticking out of his knee, or suddenly experience a prolonged period of bad luck near equipment and stairs. Deep down, Dennis knew that something wasn’t right with Shadow Stalker – perhaps even more so than the average cape.

Then there were the rumors about Winslow floating around the internet, which simply disappeared in an entirely PRT-conforming manner. The fact that Stalker disappeared the same day that Halbeard and the PRT had a large scale operation and the rumors started making the Director’s reasoning all too clear: Shadow Stalker had likely somehow caused the new girl to trigger.

It wasn’t something to joke about. Doubly so if an unwilling (and unloved) teammate was involved and it somehow led to a “monstrous” cape.

The only thing Clockblocker regretted while they were being ferried to the Rig was a couple of missed opportunities he could have wisecracked during the briefing without it causing him too much trouble. Not that he’d have trouble sleeping over it; after all, there’d be plenty more opportunities, and finding out the loner teammate’s hobby had been quite distracting.

Besides that, the short trip was spent in the relaxed back-and-forth between the excited Vista and the cautiously optimistic Aegis, theorizing how to integrate the new cape’s powers into the team.
The debate intensified when Halbeard’s brief description was complemented with the moderately impressive first assessment coming from the Rig as they made their way to the lab. Even though Dennis knew that it could have been far worse – she could have some Mover ability as well for example – he was once more grateful for his “panic button”. While Vista might have forgotten it for the moment, the main reason why they were told the results wasn’t for theory-crafting as much as it was for preparing them for the worst case scenario: Wyverian finding out about Shadow Stalker and deciding to hold them responsible.

Clockblocker’s good mood started to dwindle as soon as he actually met Wyverian. They were shown edited footage of the Armsmaster’s first encounter with the new cape, so her looks didn’t faze them much. It didn’t really compare to someone like Weld. Even as Clockblocker actually noticed the fine scales that were only visible close-up, it wasn’t that bad.

Instead, what hammered the same unease button that Shadow Stalker did, but with far greater vigor, was the way she moved. It started with the strangely complete stillness Clockblocker noticed in Wyverian when he entered the lab with the other two. Then there was the intenseness of her stare, one that wasn’t just due to its alien, unblinking nature.

It reminded him of a cat ready to pounce but somehow more… reptilian. Dennis wasn’t quite sure how much the scales and claws had anything to do with that mental image.

The slight sway just before Aegis asked if she was okay when she didn’t react to the initial introduction did little to ease the tiny, nagging voice in Dennis’ mind that insisted on running. The motions seemed a bit too precise, too practiced somehow. Something he hoped was the result of her change instead of something more fundamental – something more inhumane.

Wyverian’s geeky nature she revealed did manage to kick Clockblocker’s snark-engine into full automatic enough that he gladly played along with Vista’s chastisements. The latter managed to take his mind off of things, and no matter how much Vista protested, Dennis knew that she secretly enjoyed their little game.

The revelation that she apparently fought a thirty-foot long demon spider and actually enjoyed the encounter took him by surprise once more. Especially since Dennis could feel that she thought that he was the crazy one. There wasn’t a hint of fear when she talked about something that should have made any sane person run for the hills – especially for what felt like an easy-going, geeky girl.

When Aegis proposed some sparring, Clockblocker couldn’t help but notice the certain eagerness sneak into her stance – one that was subsequently shattered by Armsmaster, who brought the topic back to Tinkering and specifically, materials.

That momentary gloom was soon replaced as apparently an idea had formed and she asked for a demonstration of their powers.

Clockblocker didn’t give the freezing of his metal scrap too much thought beyond some eager expectation. There were always Brutes who thought that they could do anything with the things he knew would tell the Siberian to fuck off. It was a standard trick and the looks on people’s faces when they saw something floating in midair utterly unmoving would be enough for Clockblocker to happily perform the little demonstration. Even funnier were some of the Thinkers who realized that something frozen in space-time should do entirely different things than keeping their relative position on Earth.
The anticipation of seeing her reaction and the possibility of perhaps even showing off some things made Clockblocker smile behind his mask. He was convinced that this time, it would be her who would be at least puzzled.

Except it didn’t go according to plan. She simply plucked the piece of scrap metal out of the air and Dennis’ mind started to run damage control.

“It’s ‘just’ some power canceling Trump ability,” he told himself, actually mouthing the thought words to try and make them more real. “Or, fuck. She is a Tinker and you know how utter bullshit those are. Just relax. Nothing wrong here.”

His induced calm disappeared when he looked over to an uncomfortable looking Vista and the twisted scrap Wyverian was handling with absent-minded ease. It made Clockblocker realize that the powers weren’t negated even as Vista shivered. A conclusion that was confirmed only moments later as the new cape let go of his piece of metal and it happily floated mid-air as if nothing strange happened to it.

The next couple of hours were a haze for Dennis as he simply froze the planks and bolts that were handed to him and was forced to watch as the world he knew was systematically torn apart.

He would never have imagined that one could actually build something with the stuff he froze – much less that somehow the basic properties were inherited by the box that was built.

The infuriated question about the box’s function was the last vestige of sanity holding on and just giving up when they got the “tour” of the magic box of wonders.

An entirely unpowered box made by a cape that had none of the powers the box possessed to piss off both time and space.

Dennis was simply too tired to try his luck against anyone that happy to fight a flying quasi-brick without her weapon of choice. Especially not after seeing how well she fared. Not without the reassurance that his failsafe still worked. He had seen what had happened to the first couple of dummies during her strength testing.

The thing that almost reinvigorated him was seeing her struggle in vain against the space-warping cape who stood only feet outside of her range. It might have cheered him up if he hadn’t noticed the pensive, calm gaze aimed at the young hero.

Somehow Dennis knew counter-plans were in the process of being made that very moment. Reading her body language, he doubted it would be a simply knockout.

What little good mood Clockblocker managed to build up again was shattered when Wyverian suddenly mentioned Shadow Stalker on the way back to the lab, staring unblinkingly at him and the other Wards.

He thought that she didn’t seem that convinced by Aegis’ attempt at salvaging the situation. The renewed feeling of unease was redoubled when she didn’t – couldn’t explain the reason why she asked when Aegis confronted her about the question.

The apprehension, however, wasn’t enough for Clockblocker not to notice the way she stared at a PRT agent he had seen a couple of times together with the Director. It was the same way she sized him and the others up when they entered the room. That gaze reminded him of someone trying to
decide whether they’d want condiments with a particularly good looking piece of meat.

His wariness wasn’t too strong to stop him from trying to clumsily reassure her when she appeared to be uncertain about her moderately exotic looks.

He actually almost believed it when she apologized for the unease her Tinkering caused and the anxiety that slipped through her façade when she introduced herself as Taylor.

His sense of foreboding wasn’t nearly enough to suppress his exasperation when Halbeard announced that he’d schedule in extra training for him, no matter how much Dennis tried to explain why he didn’t spar with her.

He did feel something resembling relief when she announced she couldn’t join the Wards but still wanted to be on the same side, even as he felt the disappointment of Aegis and utter disbelief from Vista.

“So what is your problem, Clock?” Aegis asked when they were on their way to the briefing room.

Dennis silently cursed how easily it was to underestimate the strange Brute’s intelligence. Especially after Aegis had played along with some of the more harmless pranks. They had yet to be caught wearing the other’s costumes while they had to attend public functions as nothing more than living decoration.

He was the team leader not just through seniority – of course, he’d notice something was off. “Excuse me while I’m adjusting to the idea of some cape running around who can casually violate the very foundation of my reality.”

“Come on, she can’t be the only one who could have manipulated something you’ve tagged. I know you. I know you’ve already given these situations some thought, so what’s different this time?”

“Sure, but those would be some sort of power canceling capes, or ones with time manipulation of their own. Capes who I am very unlikely to meet even in our little hellhole, and certainly not now or alone. They’re unlikely to also be able to punch through you if they feel like it on top of that. Wyverian has no such powers and she just took the stuff I had frozen and used it to make some Freezer of Holding that doesn’t need any external power. Vista, didn’t you say yourself that it just felt wrong?”

“What?” the young hero asked, slowing down to think when she spoke those exact words. “I didn’t expect you heard that, the way you were out of it. Sure, I admit it does feel strange, but didn’t she also say that it has to be considered a resource for her to manipulate? With her hands? And have you seen her hammer? I don’t think she has the hands to spare to counter you and your sheets of paper if you somehow ended up on opposites sides. And that’s ignoring that she’s too sweet for that to happen.”

“I don’t think you understand just how much the way she handled the things goes against everything I know of my power. If I froze a single sheet of paper in the way of Squealer’s enormous constructs barreling towards me, that piece of paper wins easily. Things I freeze are immovable. She didn’t only handle the things I froze with fudging impunity without changing their properties, she burned and melted them somehow. Have you somehow missed the glowing, molten chunk of molten… metal that she left floating in eldritch, undulating shapes when she wasn’t using it?”

“No, we haven’t missed that, Clock.” Aegis punched in the code and opened the door to the
conference room. “While it was an impressive if not a slightly headache-inducing sight, I still fail to see how that would have too many combat applications. It appears she has to hold them at least in her claws to manipulate them. Otherwise, she would probably have used tongs while hammering some of the glowing… stuff into place. You could just have covered her in paper and tagged them in groups if you had actually sparred. She would have had to move every single sheet paper out of the way individually or in small groups, which would leave herself open for more.”

“You’re making too big of a fuzz about it,” Vista added as they seated themselves on one side of the table, taking off her helmet. “Are you sure you aren’t trying to hide something? Wait, does she actually scare you?”

“No! Well, maybe a little…”

“You didn’t have a problem with Weld,” Aegis chimed in as he leaned back and hovered his feet just over the table. “At least not with his general being. I agree that he might seem a bit too stuck up but everything considered, it’s understandable.”

“Yeah, and Wyverian seems far more fun, so unless you’re scared of her claws or something, I don’t really get it.”

“What about the way she just stares at you unblinkingly?” Dennis asked.

“Well, I admit it is a bit freaky, but that shouldn’t be enough to shut you up. What gives? She apparently works with kitties. She can’t be that bad.”

“You really haven’t noticed it then?” Clockblocker asked, thinking how best to explain his unease to his fellow Wards. “You know how she looked at us when we entered the lab?”

“Yeah, what about it?” Aegis shifted to a more upright position.

“I’m sure you remember how Stalker liked to go on and on about the whole ‘prey and predator’ thing when she first joined us before PR told her to stop and gave her an extended period of console duty? How she tried to move in a certain way to appear more intimidating?”

“Sure, why do you ask?”

“I can’t help but wonder how she simply breathes everything Stalker tried to be. When she looked at me, she reminded me of one of those furballs you love, Vista, who tried to figure out how tasty I’d taste.”

“That’s bullshit,” Vista replied causing Aegis to stare at her through his helmet. “What? Anyways, even if she looked at us like that, it doesn’t fit with how she behaved. Just look at how she huggy she was with her father. She even apologized when she heard that her Tinkering was slightly uncomfortable to me.”

“And her breaking her own arm on purpose was entirely ordinary as well?”

“I admit that was a bit… unexpected, but I assumed that she simply didn’t feel the pain with the way she waved it around,” Aegis spoke, as Vista didn’t answer right away. “I know I don’t, so I might not be the best judge for that strangeness. Besides, even if she did feel it, I just chalked it up to her Tinker powers getting the better of her.”
“I did as well,” Vista added. “I’ve seen Armmsmaster do plenty of self-destructive things already, and we all know how we still have to drag Kid away from his workplace to stuff some food into him. Wyverian just wanted to show off her Potion and just forgot some finer points along the way. She just Triggered, she’ll get better as she gets used to things. It maybe explains why she freaks you out so much. She has had this body for less than three days.”

“But –

“Clock, are you sure you’re not just freaked out by her general looks and are jumping to conclusions here?”

Any response Dennis might have had was silenced by Armmsmaster entering the room and looking distinctly unhappy. Much to the dismay of Vista, he brought the news that Wyverian wouldn’t join them in the immediate future thanks to Shadow Stalker. He then asked the Wards about their opinions of Wyverian and Dennis was forced to try his reservations once again, only for them to dismissed by the hero as well.

“Clockblocker,” Armmsmaster said in a tired voice after hearing everybody’s views. “Try to dial back that paranoia of yours. If you think that isn’t possible you can always ask for professional help – I suspect, you might have a slight phobia for reptiles for you to be so uneasy. Try to be nice to her as long as she doesn’t work against us. I – we – really want her on our side and I don’t want to see any more burned bridges. Understood?”

Dennis nodded, knowing full well that there simply was no point to do otherwise. “Any more questions before I meet with the Director?”

“Just one, Sir,” Aegis replied, looking serious. “What will happen in regards to Shadow Stalker?”

“I don’t know yet. It’s why I have to go to the Director as soon as possible. You’ll get the edited minutes of the meeting like usual. Anything else?”

“Does that mean we will stop using Taylor as a honey pot to attract Shadow Stalker?”

“Those troops are only there to protect her just in case, Aegis. They are hidden since we simply don’t want to force Shadow Stalker to escalate. I urge you to stop suggesting otherwise. You are free to fill in Kid Win and Gallant as soon as they finish their patrol and take the rest of the day off. Velocity will take over Clockblocker and Vista’s shift. You are free to comment on any thread Wyverian makes on PHO as long as it won’t compromise our operations. Dismissed.”

A still excited Vista, an unconvinced Aegis, and Dennis left the Rig in silence. The first was happily texting her impressions of Wyverian to the two patrolling Wards so they’d be in the Know as soon as they were finished. The second was quietly trying to convince himself that the ambitious Tinker had only the best intentions in mind regarding Shadow Stalker and Wyverian.

Clockblocker decided meanwhile he might as well visit his father in the hospital. He suddenly had the time and somehow felt he needed to see him. He reasoned it might calm the mental turmoil he was feeling. At the very least it gave him some more opportunities to think and order his thoughts himself.

Then he’d go home and keep an eye out on the forums to stand ready and be supportive when Wyverian posted. Dennis realized that Armmsmaster wouldn’t have mentioned PHO if he didn’t know about her plans or even helped her out.
After all, he thought it was a good idea to stay on the new Tinkering Brute’s good side even without his suspicions.

He chuckled as he thought how he might still convince the hatchling draconic overlady that he wouldn’t taste good – even with ketchup.
The reactions on my announcement were… interesting, I guess?

There was no call to arms and no plans for pyres and the best locations were being made; no questions which stores still sold pitchforks or what the best home-made torch designs were.

No, instead the reactions were generally pleasant and curious – if you ignored the few blatantly threatening comments of obvious goons affiliated to one of Brockton’s very own gangs.

I knew those were coming as I uploaded the same picture I send Tin_Mother alongside my statement. The mods were warned what I was about to do and only the very few new users (or the even smaller number of idiotic veterans were) were stupid enough to try open hostility or threats.

However, no matter how good the mods were at moderating and giving warnings I could still see certain trends among my dissenters. For the ABB goons, it was the mere fact that I chose to align myself loosely with the “wrong side” that was enough to land on their shit-list. I got another entry for trying to “mock” the Dragon of Brockton Bay before spouting that my meager imitation would go splat if I ever angered Lung.

The thought of a rampaging Lung should’ve probably been terrifying if I wasn’t immediately distracted by potential rage-dragon gear I might make in the future. It took some time to convince myself that anything Lung-related would be a very, very stupid idea. For now.

The neo-Nazis tried the traditional freak-of-nature-that-should-be-put-down-for-her-own-sake-routine but didn’t really get it going due to low-flying banhammers.

All in all, there was nothing I hadn’t already expected nor anything that got to me. It felt like amateur-hour with how impersonal the comments felt compared to the last few months.

The thing that confused me the most was how Rune, our resident telekinetic racist decided to chip in and actually defended me. It was just too bad that soon it became clear that it wasn’t due to sympathy for me as a person but more due to me being white and now “defiled”. Which led to a tirade where she assumed that probably the “inferior races” were behind the attack.

It caused a focal outrage from the other users, warnings, and some more temporary bans.

I was pretty sure that the Merchants were simply too high, stoned, and generally shit-faced to even operate computers.

What was stranger was how… genuinely excited and welcoming people generally seemed to be over my introduction (even ignoring the Winslow students desperately trying to get on my “good side”). I could remember feeling the buzz myself whenever news of a new Ward was published after all Capes were exciting and only the minority decided to try and protect the rest of the people. Everybody knew that it was dangerous work with the villainous Capes outnumbering the Protectorate and rogues – besides everybody loved good news.

I simply couldn’t have imagined that people would get ever excited over me.

Luckily I got distracted enough by the people asking about all kinds of things to become
overwhelmed by that strange, new feeling. At the beginning, there were a few asking about who was involved in the incident (it took some effort not to out the Trio after all they had put me through) until a PRT official made it all too clear that no question to an ongoing investigation would be answered on a forum. After that, the occasional lazy user asking the same got an irritated link to the official post.

Then there were the questions regarding my powers. I hadn’t mentioned my Potions or Energy Drinks since they were still awaiting approval and I didn’t want to get anyone’s hope up too early. Instead, I kept it relatively vague by saying it had something to do exotic materials manipulation and that I had become a competent smith.

I had some fun using the smartphone the PRT provided in case they wanted to contact me to finally demonstrate one of my Flash Bombs. Dad prevented me from showing off my knife and instead insisted I should simply swing my gun hammer around in the air if they wanted some measure of my increased strength and something I could make.

There was some speculation about in which classes I’d land when I’d start in Arcadia the following week. Then there were some questions about my claws and the like and I answered the ones that seemed to come from harmless curiosity.

One brave user even asked whether I had scales everywhere.

I – being a naïve idiot – actually confirmed it. Only after a… suggestive follow-up question and more mod action did I realize why he asked.

Dad may have come and see what caused the strangled noises I made and the frantic typing. It only served to increase my desire for the earth to open up beneath me. The fact that he couldn’t quite suppress a chuckle at my expense after he heard what happened and saw that it was already dealt with didn’t help either.

So I wasn’t used to even think anyone would be attracted to me, sue me. After Winslow where only Greg even noticed me without trying to hurt me that part had kinda died. And I’m pretty sure he only even almost tried was because he thought I should be desperate and knew he wouldn’t score with anyone else. Otherwise he would have attempted to defend me when I was tormented right under his nose. At least once.

The realization that it was another thing I might have to relearn was enough to make me groan. Right when Dad came out of the kitchen with some warmed up leftovers for me. After some prying, I admitted my newly found problem.

This time there was no chuckle at my expense, only deep sadness, and a deep, pulsing rage when I inevitably reminded him of my ordeal. He simply asked whether I wanted to talk about it or see a professional – both of which I declined – before shambling off to bed, reassuring me that whatever it was he’d be there for me. No matter the time.

All the while the Wards left some comments. Clockblocker had apparently found his wit (and puns) again after I left and Vista nearly banned herself after a particularly nasty comment left by an E88 goon; her apology half an hour later seemed reeked of PR-team running panicked damage control for all the sincerity it showed. Aegis’ statement was probably the most formal one, vouching for my character during the short time we’ve met and stating he looked forward working with me. Meanwhile, Kid Win seemed mainly interested in my tech and showed a keen interest in my weapon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gallant had the most apologetic tone in the one post he made. From
what was known of his powers, it wouldn’t surprise me if he felt responsible for not sniffing Shadow Stalker out.

Speaking about the little Miss “Predator”, the PRT put out a statement that evidence for some small-time theft had been found. This broke the terms of her probation and caused her to flee when she caught wind of it. They advised people not to approach her since she likely to feel hunted and instead urged to report any sightings of her. The post also urged her to bring herself in as a sign of goodwill.

I was too irritated to go through the comments – especially with my thread still going strong.

Even though I knew it would probably be technically correct and that they couldn’t probably say more without risking her secret identity and family, it still stung that it was a simple warning. It plain sucked that they chose a petty crime as the reason for her flight instead of something caused by her being a horrible person.

I couldn’t help to notice that this story didn’t put too much responsibility on the PRT while still technically complying with my demands of distancing themselves from her.

I got the distinct feeling that they wouldn’t like the majority of the weapons I could make.

I had to remind myself that it would be unwise to start antagonizing either the PRT or the Protectorate. If they somehow figured out the full extent of my powers, it was still way too easy to make me disappear. I hadn’t really done anything useful and caused them no small amount of troubles in the first three days of Capedom.

More importantly, they only had to leak the info and the public would likely clamor for my capture – it was way too easy to compare me with Glaistig Uaine. No Cape in their right mind wanted to be compared to her. At least, not without overwhelming firepower if they wanted to stay outside of the Birdcage. People got all kinds of nervous around parahumans who could gain the powers of other – especially through their corpses.

Then there was the fact that I might be seen as a Biotinker on top of that. Bonesaw had badly ruined their reputation with her monstrous creations. Doubly so if the rumors of stitched together corpses of Capes were to be believed.

So I stuck to my plan to be the friendly, helpful neighborhood Cape and ignore the anger I felt towards Shadow Stalker, my reservations towards the PRT, and that post in general.

Another thing the post did was making me aware of the time: somehow it was already far past midnight. Sure, I was aware that Dad went to bed some time ago, but last I checked, time wasn’t supposed to jump forward like that. Thinking of my box I admitted that time wasn’t supposed to do a lot of things. Space as well.

So, after one last affirmation that I didn’t join the Wards due to my direct involvement with the ongoing investigations and it feeling unethical for the moment, I said my goodbyes.

While making my way up the stairs of the dark house, I couldn’t help to feel happy about two things.

At no time during what turned out an extensive QA session was my dad brought up during the conversation. No questions, no threats, nothing. It might have had something to do with how quickly Glory Girl (it didn’t really surprise me her being among the first posters) announced that looking for trouble would have to go through her. Apparently, she had already heard the news from Gallant,
decided I was cool, and determined we were friends.

… It was a bit overwhelming if I was completely honest so I was more than a bit relieved when Laserdream and Shielder made their friendly introductions before reminding Glory Girl that patrol was about to start.

The virtual silence after her goodbyes was refreshing and surprisingly long. Nobody actually posted anything for whole two minutes.

I smiled as I fell face-first into my bed in the same position that had somehow spared the bed from my wicked claws the previous night.

This time, my sleep was a whole lot more peaceful.

As a matter of fact, it was peaceful enough that I slept in and was half tempted to simply turn around and go for a second round. After the madness of the last couple of days, I was pretty sure I deserved it.

… Too bad my stomach had different plans entirely. The angry growl it uttered was loud enough that I felt it throughout my entire body.

As such, I suppressed the urge to reach for the glasses I didn’t need anymore (which would have risked slashing up all kinds of things) and carefully disentangled myself from the fragile covers. On the way downstairs and actually took the effort to make a pit stop in the bathroom to actually witness my blinking – no matter the protests of my stomach.

I blamed the fact that I had only just woken up for not realizing that I’d see fairly little with both eyes closed in my first couple of attempts. The next few were more successful thanks to switching to winking but that didn’t really help all that much either.

Sure, I could actually see the nisci… nicti… my inner eyelids slide over my all-encompassing iris before the outer ones closed but that was about it. After five minutes of strained practicing, all I managed was to close the inner eyelid much like Dad told me I’ve done during my Tinkering – this time with a conscious effort.

I wasn’t closer to dialing down the potential creep factor. Apparently, my blink protocol was very much pre-programmed and the inner eyelids had to be included. I felt like I would sooner learn to blink with only my upper-left outer eyelid than preventing the translucent membranes from doing their thing.

That didn’t prevent me from opening and closing the inner eyelids in a feeble attempt to perhaps find some sort of mental lever I could block during the blinking process.

“Good… morning?” Dad happily greeted me from the living room, tearing himself away from what looked like a documentary. “Yes, it’s still morning. Barely. Not that it surprised me after hearing you go to bed at 4 am. Are you still trying to get the sleep out of your eyes or is something else stuck?”

“Huh? Good morning to you too. But no. After seeing how weirdly Clockblocker reacted yesterday I decided to actually try and control my blinking. After trying some repeated ‘inner blinks’ just now – you don’t want to know how weird this feels by the way – I think I sadly have to conclude that it’s impossible.”
“Oh, why’s that?”

“Those, what are they called again?” I began, closing the membranes again for emphasis and pointing at my eyes for good measure.

“Nictitating membranes.”

“Yeah, those. I think they simply close before anything else. After paying attention, normal blinking kinda feels like first having to force my eyes shut after sliding the membranes in place. Or they do it at almost the same time, but still, the feeling remains.”

“So much to the plan of artificially blinking more than you need to.”

“Pretty much what I thought. I don’t think people would feel more at ease seeing the tripled eyelid miracle multiple times per minute.”

Dad chuckled at the idea. “No, I think you’re right. It would make for a potent intimidation tool though. Just mix in a couple of half blinks and you’re probably set.”

“And why would I need to do that, Dad? I’m trying to become an exemplary hero. Not some kind of scary vigilante.”

“And it never occurred to you to use some light scare tactics to perhaps defuse a situation before it started?” he asked before continuing with a sly grin on his face. “Or to get some fellow teenaged heroes into line if they feel uppity?”

“I would never!” I lied through my teeth, thinking of the little staring match with Clockblocker. “But in all seriousness, don’t you think it would be a bit too much?”

“The way I see it, it’s part of you and, sadly, people might get nervous because of it anyway. With that in mind, why not own it and perhaps even put it to some good use?”

“I’ll… think about it,” I replied as I remembered the reason why I even bother to abandon my bed and continued my trek to the kitchen. “But first things first. Do we have any leftovers left from yesterday?”

I really couldn’t blame that the takeaway guy had asked about the party. It had been enough food that we weren’t able to finish all in one sitting. Luckily Chinese tasted just as good reheated and it apparently it was soon lunch anyway.

“There were, but I fed you those before I went to bed yesterday.”

“I see.” I opened the fridge. “And the ham and eggs?”

“You ate the last of those as well. I wanted to buy some yesterday but then agent Smith appeared and I didn’t really get the chance afterward. They made it pretty clear they wanted to know where I was. Today, I didn’t want you to wake up in an empty house. You could still make some toast.”

“It might be enough to hold me over until you can get something more substantial.”

I didn’t like the mischievous glimmer in his eyes. “No, it will be enough to sustain your very own shopping trip.”
“What?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking. Announcing your presence to the world on an online forum is all fine and well, but that won’t introduce you to the average citizen older than thirty or so.”

“Sure… but what does that have to do with…” The words petered out as I hopped onto his train of logic.

“Yes, it will be your very first introduction to the general public.”

“And why can’t that introduction be me handing in a couple of muggers to the police?”

“I don’t think I’m mistaken to think you want to live a normal life outside of your Cape-persona?” I shook my head. “Seeing you have no secret identity, I thought it’s best to make everybody as comfortable as possible to you. For that, you don’t want the first impression to be the powerful and potentially scary cape. No, you want it to be of the friendly neighborhood girl, just living her life. First impressions go a long way and it will help to differentiate the two sides of you in the future.”

Sometimes, I hated it when dad talked sense. “Fine. Will you come as well?”

“About that,” he said, looking a bit awkward. “I have a legal appointment with PRT representatives to discuss the proceedings with our appointed lawyer. I have to get going in less than half an hour. Sorry”

With that news dropped on me, I toasted a couple of slices of bread, and then some more to try and pacify the beast for now with some jammy goodness.

It didn’t quite work as well as I’d like and I encountered one last problem before I could go.

“What’s with the knife?” Dad asked as I returned downstairs in a hoody and improvised shorts combination. Still no shoes.

“To defend myself with, of course.” That earned me a level stare. “What? Weren’t you extremely reluctant to even let me go on a run on my own – even with a pepper spray?”

“First, that was before anything happened and you weren’t happy about it at all. Second, there’s a very big difference between a common pepper spray and a knife. Especially yours. Third, no Cape or gang would risk starting anything in broad daylight with plenty of witnesses who will be looking.”

“But what about regular muggers and the like?”

I didn’t know how he could pack this much disbelief into a single stare. “I pity any idiot stupid enough to try and mug you. I got the rundown of your strength tests and I definitely wouldn’t want to try my luck with you. And if everything else fails, do like Spider-Man.”

“Huh?”

“Confuse them and scale the nearest building; another thing Armsmaster was excited about was your proficiency at climbing. He said that it’s a valuable skill in the urban environment. Anyway, my main point is that there are so little situations where you’d need your knife and we’re trying to put people at ease. People get all kinds of nervous by big knives. You’ll be fine. I believe in you.”
With a grumble I detached my knife from my belt and with a wave, I stomped my way out of the door as dad answered the phone.

With a deep breath, I turned away from the locked door and started my trek towards the store a couple of blocks away.

Three streets away I started to hope I’d simply get lucky and avoid running into anyone. I should have known better.

As soon as the thought entered my brain, a mother with a young boy came around the corner up ahead. He simply stopped, his eyes went wide, and he pointed at me.

“Mommy, Mommy! Look a fairy!” I, remembering that being friendly was more important than insisting on the correct nomenclature, simply smiled and waved at him.

The mother in question flinched and tore her gaze from me to gently take down the boy’s arm. “Jonathan. What did I tell you about pointing at people? It’s rude.”

“Sorry, Mommy,” the boy in question replied quietly. “I just wanted to show you the big ears.”

The mother gave Jonathan rubbed his head before facing me. “I’m terribly sorry about that. You know, kids? Are you new here? I haven’t seen you before.”

“No problem,” I replied while working my mouth into another smile. “I Kinda expected something like this to happen. But, no, I’m not new here. I’ve lived further up the hill for my entire life now, it’s just… stuff happened a couple of days ago and this is the result.”

“That’s why I thought you reminded me of someone. My condolences.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I somehow felt that she didn’t mean the tribulation I had suffered through. No, she looked like she was pitying me as I approached the corner where they came to a standstill. What didn’t help my mixed feelings was the way the boy stared at me wide-eyed and open-mouthed as if I was the coolest thing since sliced bread.

So instead of testing my well-practiced speaking skills (thanks for that, Emma), I went for simple introduction just to smooth things out later.

I knew I had made a mistake to offer my hand when the mother’s attention honed in on my clawed appendage. And slid down to the wicked claws on my bare, talon-like feet.

She pulled her son closer. “I’m terribly sorry, I just remembered I had to be somewhere. Nice meeting you. Goodbye.”

To give the last word more emphasis, she started walking, the brisk pace almost dragging the boy along.

I could make out his confused protest even as I continued my own trip.

By the time the buildings started to become high and cramped together enough to actually form alleys, I had encountered dozens of other people.
It was during these brushes that I saw the true nature of Brocktonites shining through. These people had lived with rampant gangs for far too long to not adopt an automatic ignore mechanism when encountering something potentially dangerous.

I could see the tension in the otherwise polite nods they gave in reply to mine. They were firm believers of going for the live-and-let-live approach when dealing with people who might snap them in half.

There weren’t any other kids that suddenly shouted out and I had the distinct feeling that these people weren’t in the demographic that would visit websites like PHO – let alone actively post on the forums. After all, the teenagers would be in school at that time.

By the time I exited the store with two dozen of eggs, some bacon, and other groceries Dad wanted me to get, only a single person had recognized me.

Well, maybe more had recognized me, but at least only one had the courage to actually greet me. We got into basic small talk while I shopped after I had corrected her that – at that moment at least – I was Taylor, not Wyverian. I could barely remember anything about our conversations as soon as we left the store. I think it was something about the weather.

I prepared myself for more of the same for my way back when I heard a commotion from one of the alleyways up ahead. Walking there in a half-jog actual, fearful shouting had intermingled with hissing cries. When I actually got there, a disheveled man ran past me with three more right on his heels.

Beyond them, I was greeted by a raptor-like creature with dull, red skin and green feathers. Yellow ones adorned his head and I couldn’t help to notice the thickness of its brown scales on his… hands. He turned his head to better look at me, revealing the flattened end of his tail and the spikes that lined it. He had also brought five friends; smaller and brighter once without the yellow feather crown and more mace-like tails.

At the same time, ideas started flooding my head. Blueprints of all kinds of weapons and armors he would allow me to make. I smiled as I set down my groceries (no sense in wasting money).

“Everybody get back!” I shouted over my shoulder as I began running towards my future coat. “I’ll handle this!”

I left the part that they’d only end up as maccao snacks unspoken. No need to create extra panic.

The great maccao, the alpha male of this particular species recognized my intentions as soon as I set foot in the alley and answered my charge with a loud cry that fell somewhere between a hissing, strangled cat and some freak bird of prey.

I reached behind my back as I entered my own leaping range to get…

… Nothing. My hands grasped into the empty air a couple of times before I remembered that I was completely unarmed.

And I still didn’t have armor.

Also, the great maccao, who was warily watching my approach and readying himself for his own attack, was larger than he looked from the street.
Up close, I realized that he was almost a head taller than me and almost as long as the nerscylla I killed during my first involuntary test run. The normal maccas weren’t that small either, standing more than half the alpha’s height.

Fuck.

I knew that this particular monster shouldn’t be that much of a problem. Hell, the hell-spider had been much stronger and she hadn’t survived to tell the tale. The problem was that my instincts assumed I had any kind of oversized weapon – which I hadn’t. I blamed the heat of the moment and whatever came over Tinkers for my massive stupidity.

My train of thought was fatally derailed as the great maccao took the initiative and charged me with small, zigzagging hops. I ducked under the punch it delivered with the entire weight of his leaping body. Only half a moment later I had to roll away from the broad tail that swiped past my previous position.

When I stood back up, he was balancing on his tail, looking down on my and menacingly raking the air with his legs. The way he towered over me, distracted me long enough that it nearly would have ended then and there if my hearing hadn’t improved as well by whatever changed my body.

Just in the last moment I faintly heard one of the normal maccao approach and leap at me from behind. I was quick enough to barely sidestep the flying, brightly colored raptor.

The raptor’s bad luck didn’t end there. Its path brought hurtling straight at the pack leader who unceremoniously clawed it out of the air, splitting its side open in the process. The bleeding carcass landed at the base of the alpha male’s tail with one last, pitiful cry.

When the second leaped at me from behind, I decided I would have to deal with the small fry first, no matter how my instincts shouted at me that I could ignore them. My instincts weren’t used with situations where they weren’t armored or didn’t have any means of healing.

I didn’t have the luxury to ignore these things and so, I became a lot more proactive.

This time, I didn’t just sidestep and hope for the best. Even as I moved my left foot to rotated my body, I felt how my claws dug deeply into the ground, anchoring me as I brought my interlaced hands over my head.

With a shout, I brought my hands down onto the flying creature’s back with all the force I could muster. The force of the blow rocked me even as my hammer strike connected with the maccao’s spine with a sharp crack. It lifelessly slammed into the ground with another visceral crunch. Only three more small fries to go.

The great maccao, however, hadn’t planned for any celebrations on my part as he launched himself at me at the same time his pack mate hit the ground.

I let myself fall to the ground to avoid the talons raking at me mid-flight – grateful for the newly found flexibility which allowed me to do it with one foot still stuck in the ground.

Two of the remaining maccas took the chance to attack me. Apparently, they had learned from the untimely end of their two predecessors as they didn’t leap at me. They didn’t even do the same.
The one approaching from the front went instead for a bite while the one from the back appeared to be content with running past me.

I punched the one trying to take a bite out of me in the nose with enough force to lift it from its feet and launch it into a building with a heavy thud. My plans to check whether that had finished the job were rudely interrupted as pain lanced through my back.

The other bastard hadn’t been happy with simply running past and instead had chosen to deliver a spinning strike with his spiked, mace-like tail. The blow knocked me face down. My hoody did little to protect my back from the blow nor did it prevent the spikes from puncturing my skin.

The pain disappeared with the same speed it appeared as soon as my body apparently decided I was fine. It being replaced with an angry sore feeling and warm, wet spots where my wounds were.

The maccao seemed to realize the mistake of his stunt a fraction later than I: the momentum of his strike had carried him dangerously close to my talons.

Using my unoccupied hands and my newly gained flexibility, I lanced backward towards the monster.

I felt the claws of my talons sink into the flesh of the struggling monster as I tucked myself into a ball to bring my hands closer to its head.

One hand reached around its skull as I delivered a punch in its throat with the other with enough force to break its neck.

In a fit of annoyance over my wounds, I twisted even as I was falling down and slung the lifeless body of my attacker towards its boss. He simply punched it aside.

Too bad said boss rewarded my acrobatics with going on the offensive once more. With frightening speed, he closed the gap in between us and suddenly turned.

I could barely roll out of the way of the tail strike that managed to crack the tarmac. That strike was followed by a second one and a third, and a fourth.

All the while I was rolling around to avoid the deadly strikes, getting dirt into my wounds in the process.

By the time of his third strike I had noticed his rhythm and by the fourth one, I wagered a glance towards the last remaining member of the pack.

To my growing irritation, it had decided that I wasn’t worth the trouble and was about to run away. Towards the audience, I had now only noticed.

I saw how the great maccao wanted to make the fifth and final strike pack some extra punch by hopping upwards and took my chances and launched myself towards the fleeing dinosaur with my claws.

I hit the ground running on all four by the time I heard the last strike hit the ground with a loud crack. Two steps later, I had managed to get myself running normally and sneaked a glance backward.

The great maccao let out an undulating cry even as it balanced itself back on its tail. Somehow I
didn’t think he prepared the leap to protect his last pack member as much as to finally get an attack in.

The problem I faced when I reached the fleeing maccao, was that the alpha’s leap would carry it right into the crowd if I decided to dodge.

I couldn’t allow that to happen. How could I allow that to happen as a rookie hero?

So, when my ears – who were working on overtime – picked up the crunch of explosive force being exerted behind me, I decided to do something I would probably consider extremely stupid in hindsight.

I grabbed a firm hold of the fleeing creature with both hands, grabbed the ground with my feet and swung.

To my surprise, the maccao wasn’t that much heavier than the hammer I wished I had at that moment.

That surprise, however, was tiny compared to the surprise of the leaping great maccao as I brought my living hammer, er, flail down upon his head with a wet crunch.

He crashed onto the floor in front of me – dazed – as I let go of my improvised “weapon”. I looked around the alley to find anything to finish the job as I almost immediately ran out of time. Only moments after his passionate encounter with the ground, the great maccao got back to his feet and glared at me with murder in its eyes. The seriousness of the stare was somewhat undercut by the way he staggered.

That didn’t mean however that I was in the clear. Far from it. I knew that soon he’d regain full control of his body and then he’d be angry. I had to finish it quickly before that could happen, losing me the upper hand.

Looking down, I found the solution in the only “weapons” that had been able to inflict wounds on any of these creatures.

With a swiftness that managed to surprise me, I scaled the wall of the brick-lined building and as soon as I reached the first floor, I flung myself on the back of my future coat.

The effect was nearly instantaneous. I hit the feathered back of the great maccao with a heavy thump and could barely burrow my claws into its back before it started to desperately buck me off.

Holding on for dear life, I felt warm liquid starting to pour out around my feet as the trashing tore open the back of the beast.

When he came to the conclusion that I wouldn’t be shaken solely by thrashing and quieted down, I took it as an invitation to start hammering with my full force his back even as he tried to reach me with his own hands.

The smile that crept on my face when I started to actually do damage on the beast was soon replaced when I realized that it was simply too superficial. The spine of the overgrown raptor was too springy to break from this position and my legs were losing grip as more and more flesh was shredded.

I had to finish this quickly before he did manage to shake me off and possibly run away or go for
audience-fueled snack break afterward.

Luckily, it appeared the wounds on his back were hurting too much for him to try thrashing again without exhausting his other options.

The one he went for signed his doom.

He started snapping at me with his mouth when he noticed he wouldn’t be able to reach me. It might have worked if I hadn’t embedded my claws into its back for something resembling grip. His first bite surprised me with the flexibility of his neck and nearly took off my head if I hadn’t been able to pull my upper body back.

His mistake was that he went for a second chance while I was expecting it and was in a position to do something about it. The gaping maw came for the right hand I tried to stabilize myself with.

I grabbed one of the ridges around his eyes with my left hand and pulled at the same time I got my right one out of danger. I felt the creature desperately pull his head back from but the way I overstretched and twisted his neck prevented him from overpowering me.

Moments later I plunged two clawed fingers deep into his left eye, shattered the bone of the socket, and buried them deep into his primitive brain. I wiggled my fingers.

The great maccao drunkenly collapsed in a boneless heap, nearly trapping me beneath him.

I leaned against the wall as the fatigue washed over me and I watched the last few spasms run through the feathered dinosaur’s body. The gray goo and bone fragments coating my fingers were flicked off with an afterthought.

Quietly, I vowed to set up a weapon fetch system through the felynes. I needed them and I certainly did not want to repeat the experience of weaponless combat.

The lifeless body of the great maccao made me imagine how much such a service would cost me and I shuddered.
It didn’t take that long before my body returned to what I assumed was my resting state. It was… 
nice to feel muscles relax I didn’t even know I had – never mind knew how to actually use them. 
Even if that meant becoming more and more aware of the occasional fearful whisper as my breath 
began to slow down.

I had tried to stand up to check further down the alleyway to see whether there were people 
wounded there. That action was met by a couple of fearful screams and some more camera flashes.

So I sat down again, becoming aware once more of the wounds on my back as I leaned against them.

At least now that I could breathe normally again, I could actually do something to alleviate the 
coming headache the PRT (and I) were likely about to suffer. It was time to take out my new and 
fancy smartphone provided by the protectorate.

I still wasn’t quite sure how I was supposed to feel about it. I knew Dad didn’t like that I had the 
thing that led to the accident. For me as well, holding the device in my hands, it reminded me of that 
time; of the painful void, Mom’s death left behind.

But on the other hand, I could actually contact people on the go; I could contact Dad if something 
big happened without running for the next payphone. I could also access the internet and get all 
kinds of information without waiting in line at the library. It helped to balance out the pangs of guilt 
is still felt.

The biggest problem was that the one who designed the phone obviously didn’t have claws in mind 
– the damned screen didn’t react on the pointy ends on my fingers, forcing me to angle them 
awkwardly only for the phone to decide to suddenly register the tips of the claws just to mess with 
me when I actually tried to type.

I was pretty glad that they had made the “contact console” button nice and big after wrestling to put 
in my (lengthy) password.

“They’re supposed to keep the line clear in case shit hits the fan. You know, 
practice radio discipline and everything.”

“Right, I wanted to call off the emergency that was no doubt called in on my position.” I felt a ripple 
of relaxation go through the crowd at the same time I saw familiar forms appear around the alleyway. 
“You might want to connect me through to Armsmaster or Miss Militia or someone.”
“Could you be a bit more precise? Give a street or something? Also, if you’ve already dealt with it why do you want one of the heroes?”

“Look, I don’t know how people will react when I start moving around too much right now. We both know there’s a tracker in this thing. Use that.” Somehow the felynes managed to part the crowd and let one through wearing a big, straw hat formed in a cat-like form. It ran on top of a barrel and moved with frightening speed.

“Another lucky guess or did you take apart the phone as well, Wyverian? If it’s the latter don’t let them or the wards know. They’ll find ways to annoy you even if you’re no Ward. Ignoring that though, what happened?”

The felyne with the hat and the discovered eye patch I noticed when he came closer introduced himself as the “Transpurrter” before starting to load the carcasses in the barrel. Somehow.

I looked at the cameras and phones that hung forgotten in the hands of my foolhardy crowd. Petting cute cats was far more important than continue filming the new Cape. “Just look on the PHO or something, I guess videos will be up soon enough. Long story short, I’ve encountered some materials and they wanted to eat me. So – “

“Transpurrter,” I said to the cat about to stuff the last regular maccao in the barrel. “Could you transport one of those to the Rig?”

“Wyverian, could you repeat that? There was some interference and the connection went out right there. I could only hear hissing.”

I ignored the Tinker on the other side of the for the moment line. “Easy. But why wouldcha want that, missy? It still counts to ya total and we ain’t taking any less than fifty purrcent, nya.”

“I know.” I was all too aware that I’d lose out on precious resources. “Just do it and transport the rest to my home. I’ll be there as soon as possible to start working out the shares with Cocao.”

The Transpurrter simply looked at me one last time in slight confusion as he closed the lid. He gave a slight nod and set off the same way he entered the scene: running atop the now filled barrel with only a hint of control.

If I had learned anything from my previous interactions with the hero Tinker, it was that he’d appreciate it if he could analyze a larger sample. He might even refrain from being too annoyed which in turn might prevent the PR team to descend on me like a flock of vultures. Hopefully. It might even prevent him from coming to the wrong conclusion and think I’ve just killed a group of unknown capes in cold blood. Or that I somehow summoned them to our little corner of the hell dimension. He of all people wouldn’t believe for one second I’d do something like that while being completely unprepared.

It still beckoned the question what the fuck did cause them to appear right in front of my nose.

Still, it did suck that I’d lose out on materials even though I knew that I’d have enough for an armor and still have some leftovers.

“Holy Shit!” Kid Win suddenly shouted out on the other side of the phone. He probably stumbled across the first pictures if his tone was any indication. “Give me another sec, I’ll patch you right through.”
The crowd had started to disperse in somewhat of a confused haze after the felynes had disappeared once more which left nothing more to pet. Since there weren’t any monster around anymore, most of them simply decided they had other things to do and wandered off.

“Miss Militia,” the walking private armory with the same name answered only moments later.
“Wyverian, what’s happening. Talk to me.”

I did. The story somehow didn’t manage to improve her mood.

“So let me get this right, you were out on a grocery run and just happened to come across six creatures? Ones you would get if a Biotinker got the bright idea to fuse a raptor with a kangaroo?” I could imagine her pinching her nose. Vividly.

“Yeah, that’s about right. And then I saved the people they were chasing and neutralized the threat.” Neutralizing sounded so much better than killing. Or brutal slaughter for that matter. I still found a sliver of bone under my claw only moments before while recounting my little adventure.

“By killing the monsters in question with your bare hands.” Too bad Miss Militia saw right through my attempts at PR-speak. “May I ask why you were unarmed in the first place?”

“Well, the hammer would’ve been a bit too unwieldy and Dad thought that carrying a big knife would send the wrong message. It won’t happen again.”

“I see.” I heard some typing. “He’s still with our agent. I can still make sure he’ll hear my opinion on this matter. I can see his concerns and the idea behind the reasoning is decent enough; he simply made the mistake of trusting in common sense.” She actually huffed in amusement. “That’s just massively underestimated the stupidity of some gang members. Ambitious groups of ABB and Empire goons might think it’s a decent chance for promotion if they see an unproven, unarmed cape walk around. And who knows what the Merchants might think period? I wouldn’t put it past them to think you’re an actual dragon and follow Don Quijote’s footsteps. Common sense is more of an actual super power than people may think.”

“And a knife would deter those?” I wasn’t complaining but it was somewhat hard to understand. After all my knife wasn’t that impressive.

I could make so much more.

“Yes. Don’t forget you’ve announced yourself as a Tinker and that blade as your creation. It does help upping the intimidation factor. How sure are you that those monsters weren’t someone else’s creation?”

“Kinda completely. I know those beasts… so unless there’s some extreme freak coincidence going on, they’re from whatever place I ended up in.”

“Which begs the question why they appeared now. Do you have any ideas?”

“None. Absolutely nothing like this happened since I triggered.” Maybe I had been too busy mentally breaking down my fellow parahumans imagining equipment based on them. Not something I was going to share though.

My eyes fell on one of the pools of blood that still remained. “That reminds me, Miss Militia, prepare
a freezer or something. I’ve sent one of the corpses to the Rig. Thought Armsmaster or the science team would be interested in examining it or something. The rest of the corpses are already taken care off. Only some minimal damage and a bit of blood remain on the scene.”

“I’ll make sure to warn the staff. Who will bring it?”

“A cat with a barrel. Probably. I forgot to ask for the details on the how.”

“A cat… right, you’ve mentioned those. I’ll make another – “

“There you are!” a voice suddenly called out above me. One that accelerated enough that I heard it pitch up slightly. “What happened here?”

“Wyverian, what happened? Who was that.”


The first instance I saw the platinum blonde descend to street level, the sight managed to fill me with both awe and terror at the same time. She was almost literally radiant. Then I remembered the information my powers had fed me, isolated the feeling, and put it in its very own room in my mind adjacent to the part of me that was still quietly babbling in terror. I had the feeling the latter was slowly on the mend. She wasn’t screaming anymore.

The part that was busy bouncing around because we were noticed by Brockton’s very own flying brick was stopped in her tracks when the armor designs came through. It would look far more like a schoolgirl outfit straight out of those cartoons from Aleph’s Japan than Glory Girl’s costume. Those shows with the silly wands and naïve, bright-eyed, idiotic girls. Even the optimistic part of my conscious wasn’t sure that I’d ever be confident enough to actually wear that thing the coming decades. I could stop myself from nodding in agreement with that assessment.

I wasn’t sure either whether I wanted to know what kinds of fans such an outfit would attract on the endless expanse of the internet. At least if one momentarily forgot about it hypothetical origins and even with those there’d still be some who’d be in love with it.

... Although, it wouldn’t get dirty so it would cut down on maintenance…

This time, it was my turn to pinch my nose. “Nothing happened, Miss Militia. That was just Glory Girl arriving at the scene.”

“And she wants to know what happened,” the girl in question added while surveying the site, giving a soft whistle in acknowledgment. I guess the place where the great maccao tried to smash me looked almost impressive with the series of star-shaped cracks and the general blood splatters in the alley.

I relayed her message as I stood up to actually greet her. “And knowing her, she’ll be very unhappy if she doesn’t at least get the basic gist of things.” I heard Miss Militia sigh while Glory Girl flew closer to the cracks in the ground. “You may tell her about the fight but try and leave out that you knew the monsters. We’ll have to – “

While she was talking I actually started to pace a bit. It might have been the underlying anxiety about the whole “monsters popping up over here” overriding the joy of actually coming across materials
that caused it – I couldn’t imagine that people were as eagerly awaiting trans-dimensional, prehistoric predators as I. Or I simply started walking when I realized that it wouldn’t cause panic anymore. After all, the crowd had nearly fully dispersed and the few who remained had calmed down significantly with a heroic metaphysical heavyweight nearby. It might even have been a combination of both.

Point was, I was walking and Glory Girl saw my wounds. She didn’t like what she saw. “WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR BACK?”

She was really loud. “ – What was that about your back, Wyverian?”

“I might’ve forgotten to tell about how I got wounded during the fight. Glory Girl just saw the result from a tail swipe of one of the smaller critters.”

I was very aware of how Glory Girl was right behind me (“It’s oozing!”). “How do you forget a wound that – never mind. How badly are you hurt, do you need a pickup or any other help?”

I focused on my wounds, allowing myself to feel the burning, stabbing, distracting pain again. That was, of course, also the point when Glory Girl decided to poke the flesh between two newly made holes.

I hissed at the pain and felt my ribs creak at the sudden movement. “I think I have about four open wounds on my back,” I started while Glory Girl was mumbling in the background. “The whole area generally feels like I’ve been hit by a meat tenderizer and I think I might have a couple of slightly cracked ribs as well. But that’s to be expected when you get hit by spinning tail swipe of a four-foot-and-change-tall raptor. With a mace for a tail. But all in all, I’ll be fine.”

“What?” Miss Militia asked incredulously – a sentiment that was echoed at the same time by the heroine gingerly inspecting my back.

“No, it will not be fine.” Glory Girl was the first that recovered. “I’ve seen these kinds of wounds when… never mind that. I’ve seen these before. These wounds are already getting red and swollen and need to be cleaned out. I’m sure that Amy would also order you to be still until she’d heal you if she was here. Spines are more easily damaged than you’d believe.” Knowing the girl’s reputation for being a more… traditional interpretation of a Brute, the implication was pretty clear.

She also obviously didn’t know of my Potions. Of course, I hadn’t talked about them in my post and the following discussion the day before because I didn’t want to get people’s hope up before it got the all-clear. I would have thought however that she’d hear about them through alternative ways – there were plenty of rumors floating around about the kind of relationship between her and Gallant.

Miss Militia, however, did know about them and blissfully saved me from the second part of the teen’s anecdotal infused chiding.

“Wyverian, could you give the phone to Glory Girl? Unless you want something else, I think it’s probably best to get you to your Potions and preferably be inside while we sort the monster situation out. It’s going to be quicker if I explain. Less talking back.”

I held up my phone up and passed it behind my head with a little waggle. “It’s Miss Militia. She wants to talk to you.”

The suddenly silenced heroine took the phone.
Freed from her probing, I turned to observe her silent call. Well, a silent call with the exception of the occasional affirmation she intoned with a nod. And barely contained arm movements.

And an outcry. “She can make WHAT?”

I guessed that was the moment Glory Girl learned of my healing in a bottle.

Only minutes later she handed my phone back, her anxiousness replaced with a certain eagerness.

“Wyverian, you’ll be escorted home by Glory Girl and you’re to stay there until we can figure out what just happened. Collecting and analyzing any data as well as running it by the Thinktank to find the possible cause will take a bit of time.

I didn’t like the sound of that I had stuff to do; an armor to make. “Does that mean I’m under house arrest?”

I didn’t manage to keep the paranoia out of my voice entirely.

“No, no, no. Unless we find proof for malicious intent, we can’t force you – we don’t want to force you. You deserved that much. It might still be a freak coincidence. Let me rephrase it. We hoped that you could stay there since nothing like this had happened during the last three days.”

“I don’t think I could do that.” I honestly replied, managing to control my emotions a bit better. “This encounter made it extremely clear that I need a suit of armor for additional protection. Even forgetting protection, I’m starting to run out of clothes and that might survive future encounters. Besides, I’m already kinda jittery to make it now that I have most of the materials I need. I won’t be able to stay put.”

Miss militia winced while glory girl started to rock back and forth on her feet. Mid-air. “Alright, I’ll give people a warning but tomorrow is the soonest I can get anyone with enough experience to escort you. Please, try to hold on until then and whatever you do, make sure you prepare for a repeat.”

“I didn’t plan to make this a habit. I won’t be leaving without at least a Potion and my knife ever again.”

“In that case, go now. We’ll get in touch soon.” She didn’t sound that happy. “Before you go, one last thing: try to downplay the danger in the forum and don’t imply you enjoyed it. I’m afraid Glenn has already been notified of the video that was posted online and he just might make an exception and deal without someone outside the Protectorate. Ask one of the Wards how much fun that is. Have a safe trip back.”

I murmured my goodbye before putting my phone away. I suddenly had the eerie premonition that I wouldn’t like the armors I had to wear when – if – I joined the Wards.

“Ready to go?” Glory Girl asked as she swooped down to my level once more.

“Let me get my groceries and then, sure. By the way – and don’t get me wrong – but aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

She laughed at that. A very clear joyful laughter that almost seemed practiced. “Don’t you start at
Arcadia next week and don’t know? We get ‘vocational’ time in the afternoon. It’s all kinds of great. Sure, there are plenty that actually are doing their first paper pusher job in some government branch during that time as a diversion but it’s mainly thought as an excuse for us Capes.”

“Oh.” It made sense to have something like that in place.

“Yeah, and here I was flying around, looking for mischief and enjoying my flight when heard about a commotion this away. Had to ask some people to actually find the place and look who I find? Brockton’s newest independent Cape covered in blood.”

I was way too glad to find the bag of glorious eggs and meat right where I left it to comment on that remark.

“Ready?” Glory Girl asked as I finished checking the bag’s contents.

“For what?”

A mischievous grin appeared on her face. “Flying of course. You need to fix your back and I’m way too pretty to let dirt get all over me while walking. Besides, it’s faster and I want to see that ‘potion’ of yours before I tell Amy about it. It’s also simply way more fun.” She actually put up air quotes and I wasn’t sure she was aware that she did.

I agreed with her that getting home quicker would be nice – I had to make sure that I got my fair share of my kill. Even if I trusted the little furballs completely, not every day you got the opportunity to fly parahuman airlines. It wasn’t like I had any reason to get nervous about whether or not she’d be able to carry me the small stretch. I knew her powers and that she could carry far heavier than a (now a bit less) scrawny girl for far further than a couple of blocks. I only had to shoo the pain back into its corner and convince Glory Girl that I’d be just fine and I was ready to go.

Too bad that I hadn’t completely thought it through when I told her I’d be up for some flying. Of course, she didn’t allow me to just ride on her back. She argued that if I talked the talk and claim I was alright I should walk the walk as well.

She was no fancy sky horse to be ridden and she was quite insistent that she wouldn’t start that day.

I really was on a roll providing the internet with amusement that day. I wasn’t sure what I’d like the denizens of that hive of scum and villainy to focus on: The fight or the pictures that were bound to pop up of me being flown across the skies in a bridal carry.

It was a position that caused the quarantined bit of me to start complaining about her housing and claim that it was definitely awe and adoration she felt and not terror and that it was absolutely fine to feel that way.

I vowed to talk to Glory Girl about her aura if I got to know her a bit better. It might mess people up a bit if she wasn’t careful and I didn’t even know she was aware she was doing it constantly.

The silence that reigned in the air was just a bit awkward.

“Soos,” Glory girl began as we entered my home. “How long will it take for your ‘potions’ to heal that wound of yours? I’d love to stick around but and make sure you’re alright but I also kinda need to get going again. Brandish somehow gets nervous when I disappear for too long? Can you imagine that?”
“Can you wait here for a moment?” I asked when we reached the empty living room. Dad hadn’t returned yet. “I have the Potion down in the basement. It gets cramped very quickly even without the delicate equipment around.”

“What do you want to imply with that?” I wasn’t sure how much of her indignation was mocking.

“Nothing. I’ll just be quicker alone and to be honest, it isn’t that impressive in the first place. Just a workbench, a box filled with insects, stinking mushrooms, and some basic tools.”

I actually managed to pick up her “tssk” while descending the narrow stairs. The annoyance and impatience showing through disappeared soon enough after I took a couple of sips with my back turned to her. I still had half a jar of Potion left.

“And just like that, it’s healed? No dirt or bugs stuck inside?” She sounded a bit too enthusiastic about that.

“Yes.” Panacea was her sister.

“Fractures?” This amount of damage was trivial for the healer Cape.

“Gone.” She could apparently even replace lost tissue if the biomass was provided.

“Side effects?” A misplaced kind of hopefulness had crept into Glory Girl’s voice.

“None. At least not with me. It’s getting tested by the PRT to see whether it also works on non-lizards.” Disappointment flashed across her face even as a snorted at the last remark.

“Why haven’t they informed my sister yet? She could have told them whether it was safe in moments and even if something happened they’d be patched up in no time flat.” She was out the door in a matter of seconds. “I have to go. I have to tell her and… It would make things so much easier. Anyways, nice talking to you. Bye!”

She hadn’t stopped outside, instead of starting to fly immediately while mumbling to herself. At least she remembered to give a wave before she truly blasted off towards the city center.

With a daze, I closed the door and decided that it was finally time to feed the monster that lived inside my stomach. I would need the energy for what was to come and a moment to order my thoughts would be welcomed greatly.
Thanks to the user Roffster (on SB and SV) for betaing and proofreading the chapter

It took a veritable stack of Monte Cristos to get me to the point where my stomach stopped its threats of impending riots. It was even enough that I felt fit enough to deal with the Felynes after Glory Girl. Sure, she seemed nice enough but it had been awhile since I had to deal with someone with such an…enthusiastic disposition. And that was ignoring the whole aura deal she had going on.

Luckily, through what was no doubt impeccable timing and not at all a squad of catstalkers, the Transpurrter barreled into the garden, jumping the fence in the process and stopping with a power slide.

Show off.

I mean, it wasn’t even the weather for it, with it being winter and moist and everything, but still he managed to kick up a dust cloud with his breaking maneuver. On the lawn.

“Heya,” I greeted the felyne as he dismounted with a flip and opened the barrel. “So were you able to get one of the maccao to the Rig?”

“Sure, who the hell didcha think I am, nya?” He replied with an incredulous stare as he dragged the first corpse out of the barrel. “I was in and out befur any of them humans noticed me.”

“How did you over… never mind. Where did you drop the body?”

The eyepatch wearing felyne shrugged. “Looked like some canteen. Thought it was fitting. Not much use for a single maccao ’sides eating, nya? They could certainly use the extra kick with how bland efurrything smelled.”

I massaged my nose. I had the feeling that I would hear of this soon enough. I just hoped that my warning prevented the place from going into lockdown. Also, the cat seemed to way too proud of his pun.

“Do you know when Cocoa ar–” I started to ask, hoping to change the previous topic and ignoring the future headache for now, when a familiar brown coated felyne exploded from the ground a mere foot from me.

Didn’t these furballs know that there were normal ways to enter a scene? I really started to wonder why the internet hadn’t exploded yet with sights of the ridiculously cute critters.

Which reminded me that I hadn’t checked on PHO the entire day. Oops.

“You called?” the felyne ringleader asked while shaking off some dirt clinging to his fur.
“Yeah I did,” I admitted with a sigh. “Shall we start looking how to divide the jumpy lizards, then?”

“Tut, tut,” the cat replied with a small nod. “Furst you start a hunt without notifying us. Then ya didn’t even offer basic hospitalities. How could we pawsibly start like this, nya?”

“I take it you both want milk?” I asked with a barely suppressed sigh.

“Pawlease.” The grin on his furry little face was nearly unbearable.

“Sure.” The nonchalance didn’t quite manage to hide the Transpurrter’s excitement.

After they finished drinking the milk I grumpily got for both of them, we started the solemn process of dismantling the beasts I killed.

The beasts were carefully skinned before the felynes and I spent a solid five minutes searching the abdominal cavity of the great maccao for any gems of crystalized bird wyvern enzymes. I couldn’t help to notice that the cats almost knew better where to look for the gems even though my powers fed me with a scarily accurate anatomical maps.

With the delicate work out of the way, it was time for the tougher and bloodier job. The kangaroo raptor’s organs were removed and put on a pile – without a gem, the organs didn’t have any inherently special properties – and the felynes had me twist the arms and legs off of the corpses while they went to work cleaning the meat off the rump bones.

In the end, we had a couple of neat piles including offal, high grade cuts of meats, overgrown, reddish chicken legs, lean meat spareribs and finally finishing up with the hides and loosened scales.

All in all, the process had taken the better part of two hours.

And then, the fun began. Negotiations.

My first proposal of simply taking two hides of the smaller maccao and the entirety of the great one’s hide on top of his head was flat out refused. Then it was my turn to refuse the counter offer which consisted almost entirely out of the meaty bits of the monsters I had slain with my bare hands.

Another hour of hissing and yowling later, we had come to a conclusion which made us both equally unhappy. After that, I had the divine pleasure of bargaining for the rest of the materials I’d need for the armor I wanted to make.

It was only when Cocoa and the Transpurrter left that I realized how it would have looked like to outsiders. I hadn’t changed my clothes and if I looked bad before, the dissection of the beast certainly hadn’t helped. While before the blood of differing origins had mostly been concentrated around my legs and back with some bone fragments and other fluids spattered on me for good measure, this would be something else. I felt like I was almost completely covered by blood and worse by the time I begrudgingly waved goodbye to the two.

I counted myself lucky that the elderly couple next door wouldn’t likely think of filming the action and uploading the video. I wasn’t even sure whether they even knew about the internet thing.
After that epiphany, I went about the solemn task to transport my meager prize into my box of wonders.

In the end, I managed to grab one and a half complete hides from the regular maccao and about a third of the great maccao’s hide as well as all the feathers that came with those. I also got my claws on enough of the impressive looking loosened scales for the armor as well as a two tail spikes and half the bright yellow feathers that adorned the head of the alpha.

Also, I didn’t have to worry about food for a week or so. Okay, maybe less. Either way, I got a couple of legs and arms as well as an appetizing blob of offal and some ribs.

I had to trade in every bone not still attached to meat as well as more scales than I cared about to get the other, more exotic materials I wasn’t sure I’d find here. I wasn’t sure whether there were any amounts of crystallized microbes on dear old earth (and if there was, I wouldn’t be able to afford them) and I was absolutely certain that I wouldn’t find any huge, mutated brachiosaurus walking around.

Iron was a different problem. Trading for it would have gotten me dangerously close to actually risk not completing the armor and I figured I would be able to get plenty of it here. I didn’t think Sig had charged for the materials I used when I made my knife, and he might not charge me for the armor either. If that failed, I could still visit a junkyard or similar or “borrow” some from the Boat Graveyard. I mean, it wasn’t like someone still needed that.

I almost didn’t notice my dad return home in the evening after I had finished sorting things out. I was too busy carefully rotating one of the great maccao’s thighs on a spit I had jerry-rigged together out of random things I had found in the shed. I was hungry and after having to listen to the Transpurrter bragging about how much better the meat from their dimension tasted, I simply had to try. I hadn’t seen Dad use the things I cannibalized, so it should be fine.

Even though I didn’t detect Dad entering the garden, he certainly saw me. “What happened to your back? Miss Militia told me you got hit but…. She made it sound like it wasn’t more than a scrape.” I felt his gaze bore into my back and a shudder run up my spine. “No, that doesn’t sound right. How much did you downplay the wounds? Please, tell me those Potions of yours fixed everything up.”

“It was nothing they couldn’t fix.” I mumbled, quietly cursing that I had caused Dad more distress.

“Just how big were those spikes to leave such holes?” I practically heard the gearshift happening inside his head as he realized something else. “Why are you in those clothes still? And why are you covered in so much blood?”

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eyes – eye. I had to keep an eye on the meat, after all. He looked agitated but at the same time guilty, remorseful.

“I’m fine, Dad. It was just a tail swipe from one of the smaller critters. It was just too bad that those bouncy raptors have spikes on their tails. You can maybe even see the thing if you ask Miss Militia next time. I’m pretty sure they got the one that managed to hit me. But anyway, my Potion took care of it, no problem. I even got to meet Glory Girl! She’s… let’s just say she’s energetic… and bouncy.”
“Ah. And your clothes and the incredible amounts of blood?”

“Well… I, we still needed to dissect the maccao and since I didn’t want to ruin even more clothes, why bother getting changed?” I pretended to ignore Dad shudder at those words.

“I can’t help to notice that you aren’t cutting apart anything at the moment. And what is that you’re roasting? It smells delicious.” Dad was visibly calming down.

“By the time I was done and had organized everything in my box, I had gotten really hungry. I suddenly had this plan on how to make a decent spit I could use with the femur still inside the chunk of meat. One thing led to another and before I knew I was slowly spinning the wheel and couldn’t leave without risking burning it. I have to control the intensity of the fire as well.”

“How much longer will it take?”

“Fifteen minutes or so? I only have to keep rotating it while the fire dwindles.”

“Scoot over, take a shower, and change.” He actually made shooing motions at me.

“Huh?”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t mind actually getting clean so I’ll take it from here.” He flashed a smile that couldn’t quite hide his wounded pride. “Or do you believe the barbecue champion has lost his touch? Please, let me do this. It’s the least I can do to apologize.”

“What, you don’t n – “

“Taylor, please, get cleaned up. Even though you apparently don’t mind right now, I can assure you that you’ll feel much better afterward. We can talk later, after devouring this monster.”

I chuckled softly when Dad moved me off the stool with a small push and started turning the huge chunk of meat. I then realized just how big the thigh actually was. An attempt to hug him was swiftly dodged and instead he pointed at the door with a stern look on his face.

It might have worked if the goofy grin didn’t ruin the effect.

And damn, if Dad wasn’t right about me feeling a whole lot better after showering. I hadn’t even noticed how much my clothes stuck to my scales before I had to peel it off.

Neither had I noticed the stench that had started to build up.

After some careful maneuvering in the bathtub - I didn’t want to ruin it with my claws - and throwing on a new set of clothes from my rapidly dwindling collection, I made my way back outside.

We ate our meat in silence. Dad had sliced off a steak-sized piece with my knife and went to make himself some salad to go with it, while I ate straight from the bone.

It was delicious. The inside was soft and tender while the charred outer layer exploded in a riot of taste without me even having to put any marinade on it. It was pleasantly spicy without any peppers added and the smoky taste complemented the meat itself
really well. The meat itself was some weird cross between chicken and venison. It tasted really, really good.

Good enough that I actually managed to devour the entirety of the thigh.

“So…” Dad began after cleaning his mouth, looking into the glowing embers of the spit. “Do you want to start addressing the elephant in the room or shall I?”

I gave a noncommittal shrug. “All right. First things first, I shouldn’t have told you not to take any equipment with you. I know, I should have started with that, but then I saw you and the blood and kind of blanked out.” His shoulders drooped at the recent memory.

“I was so scared for you when Miss Militia told me what happened,” He continued with a fragile whisper. “At least until her lecture began.”

“So does that mean I can take weapons with me next time?” He winced.

“At least your knife. I’m still not thrilled about the prospect of you lugging around that hammer of yours since it’s likely to send the wrong message besides being impractical. But in light of what happened today, it might be for the best. Miss Militia and I did agree that we had to look for alternative ways for you to get the gear you need. She wanted me to ask whether you could make some sort of pouch similar to your box.”

Right, I wanted to ask the cats about any weapon transport services. “I don’t believe I have the right materials to make a bag work. The textiles and hides I’ve encountered up until now are too weak to hold the hammer – let alone any additional gear. I might find something suitable but until then it’s not happening. I’ve been thinking about setting up some kind of system but that’ll take a little while.”

“At least you’ve put some thought into it already.” He chuckled nervously. “You don’t want to know what Miss Militia had to tell me.”

But I did want to know what the heroine had to tell and apparently it showed.

“She came baring into the room just as we finished with the legal stuff,” Dad went on to explain. “She zeroed in on me and started an hour long oral presentation what were and weren’t things you could – should do as a new public cape.”

He chuckled. “Long story short, it was a very elaborate way of telling me that I ‘was a naïve fool that should have known better’ but with language that really doesn’t need repeating. I don’t want to corrupt you.”

Dad looked pensive for a moment while I simply gaped at the mental image that refused to fully form. “I really hadn’t expected that kind of language from a heroine with such a pristine and professional public image.”

“Somehow I can’t really imagine her like that,” I replied when I finally managed to make my mouth work again.

“Good. Try to keep it that way.”

“Alright… But speaking of her, while she did tell me she’d rather have me stay put until they’ve come to some conclusion, she did say she wouldn’t mind too much if I started making my very first armor set.” I bounced a bit at that thought. “Sorta… Well, she said
I was supposed to be escorted by some PRT agent just to be sure. But do you think I can access to Sig’s place again? Maybe I’d be able to finish it tomorrow as well.”

“Will the armor have spikes?”

I blinked. “What. No of course... No, this one won’t. Just some feathers, a fancy cap for some reason, and metal plating. I know, It’ll be boring but at least it’s a start that is unlikely to break the first time something else decides to come visit.”

I made my biggest puppy eyes possible. I’m not sure it worked in the way I intended. “Fine, I’ll see whether I can reach him. I don’t think he’s going to mind after seeing you work last time.”

I was probably nearly literally grinning from ear to ear (stupid transformation, my mouth was big enough already) as he made his way into our home.

“One thing, though, do you have everything, or do you still need things?” he asked as he stuck his head out the backdoor.

“I still need some iron. I didn’t have enough material left to barter for that after having a maccao delivered to the Rig. Since iron is the same stuff in both dimension, I thought I could simply get it here.”

A brief flash of pained panic and regret flashed over his face. “Of course, I’ll see what I can do.”

I watched him continue his way to the phone once more as I felt a steely resolve form. I remembered that look. It was the same one he had given me after he asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I had asked for something stupidly expensive. It had been my first birthday after Mom died and I still very much felt the pain of her loss and sure enough, I did get the present.

It was only months later that I started to piece together that Dad simply hadn’t been able to afford it and had to borrow some money from Kurt and Lacey. I knew he didn’t like it and the reason I found out was by overhearing a quarrel between the three about when he could pay them back. They insisted it was for a good cause and they didn’t mind and Dad stayed stubbornly set on paying them back as soon as possible. Dad probably won.

The worst thing is that I couldn’t even remember what I wished for that jeopardized their friendship.

The point was, he was likely going to do the same thing again and since I actually stopped and thought about it, it didn’t surprise me. We weren’t that well off in the first place and my freak diet had to put a strain on Dad. Apparently Sig did charge at least something for the materials after all. Or maybe it was a once off deal. It made sense in hindsight. It wasn’t like he could actually learn too much from me due to Tinker Bullshit going on and the Smithy was his source of income. He couldn’t just repeatedly give away materials on top of babysitting me while I was forging. He probably needed the iron even more than I did.

I had already found a way to cut costs on feeding me thanks to those delicious hopping raptors and I knew just the way to help save money on the whole iron problem...

Dad told me he managed to get access to Sig’s smithy the same time as on Tuesday...
while I was booting up our ancient computer.

I wanted to check on my threads and perhaps answer some PMs I received in my absence. It wouldn’t be that bad, right?

Of course, I was wrong. The PM icon showed a double digit number highlighted by an angry red that actually increased as I refreshed. I suddenly had my very own dedicated activity thread and the one I made to introduce myself had exploded again with a couple of hundred messages.

I just turned the computer off.

Sure, it was a far cry from the attention the more popular heroes (and infamous villains) got but still, it was overwhelming. I had never thought that boring old me would ever get noticed without becoming the target of another cruel prank. I might have been there the previous night, tirelessly stalking my very own thread and jumping on every opportunity to answer the things I could and actually talk to the people who thought to give me their time. I hadn’t noticed the number of posts while actively contributing. Suddenly seeing the hard numbers was… scary.

I took it and the fatigue I was starting to feel again as an excuse to go to bed early. Dad wished me good night and went back to reading.

I fell asleep nearly the moment I faceplanted on the bed.

… and woke up again at three in the morning.

I silently changed into some old clothes I used whenever I wanted to help with gardening, carefully lifted the gun hammer off the ground, attached the bag with the items and a Potion I took to the Rig to my belt, and carefully climbed out of the window to avoid the creaky steps and rusty door hinges.

It was time to get some iron and this time I’d go prepared.

The first leg of the journey to the Boat Graveyard was uneventful. Peaceful even. The neighborhood we lived in had fairly little gang problems and no law abiding citizen was awake this early on a Friday morning. I might even have enjoyed it a bit too much.

The second leg through the docks would have been more of a problem if I didn’t have these handy claws to climb with. I got onto the first building when I knew its density had become high enough for me to attempt some heroic roof hopping. The first climb was enough to convince me to actually ask Armsmaster whether I could have one of those magnetic quick releases for my own weapons. Climbing with only one hand while being pulled to the other side by some oversized weapon was easier said than done. I initially even tried some swashbuckling action but had to abandon that course of action when my jaw started cramping up and I realized that it still inhibited my motions massively. It might have had something to do with the fact that the hammerhead was nearly the size of my torso.

Luckily I inherited the stubbornness of both Mom and Dad and wouldn’t be defeated by something as trivial as a mere wall. I only even misjudged the weight of my hammer and the effect it would have on my jump one single time. Sure, I nearly made a Taylor-shaped dent in the building when the one-sided weight messed up my jump and pulled me to that side but it was still only nearly, so it shouldn’t count.
On an unrelated note, six-story drops somehow don’t hurt anymore.

By the time I actually reached the Boat Graveyard I had slowed down considerably to avoid the worst of the people who lurked around here. Something I abandoned when I actually reached the first lumbering ship and started imagining what I could make with this amount of iron.

Of course, it had to be refined and everything but my Powers insisted that it wouldn’t be a problem and I decided to believe them.

The next fifteen minutes or so were spent picking out a ship that wasn’t currently occupied and didn’t look like a lair of some deranged Tinker.

The rustbucket I settled for was a large, decaying thing, but I had already decided that it would be my rustbucket, damn it.

I took my hammer and bashed it against the hull with all my might. The glowing, oozing dent was a beauty to behold.

I don’t know how long I kept smashing my poor little ship but in the end I did know that I ended up with ten large sheets of thick metal, some of them still with softly glowing, undulating edges.

When the Transpurrter showed up and offered to get the sheets back home for a mere single metal plate, I was nearly insufferably smug with my decision to get some iron for free and get the chance to get to play with my hammer.

That was probably the moment when fate decided to knock me down a peg. Just because it could.

The Transpurrter was barely out of sight when a deep voice spoke up behind me. “I heard something interesting was happening at the Boat Graveyard. So I go and what do I see. The wyvern fletching came out and play.”

I felt myself flinch and slowly retracted the hand with which I was waving the Transpurrter goodbye. I turned.

Dragon. Transformation Conflict depended. Armor and Weapons made by combining fatalis materials with raging brachydios based inlays and neural controller at temperatures exceeding the sun. Parahuman’s scales used to increase the equipment’s effectiveness further or make decorations.

I didn’t have to see the ornate mask or the tattoos that covered his bared torso to know I that Lung was casually walking up to me.

“Ummm. Hi?” I managed to utter.

This was bad. This was very bad. This was not someone I wanted to face without very heavy armor nor someone I wanted to fight with the only weapon the gun hammer. This amount of fire would do absolutely jack shit to him. I might be able to give him a relaxing massage if I hit hard enough.

But hey, maybe he just wanted to talk.

“I saw the video and liked what I saw. Such ferocity without hesitation. Not even
wounds fazed you. I can’t help but notice your wounds were already fully healed. Is it regeneration or did you Tinker something?"

The chance for a strictly social meeting was dwindling. “Thanks, I guess? Why do you ask? I could have visited Panacea, have you thought of that? Glory Girl was right there after all?”

“Tinkering then. Excellent.” Fuck. “We have spies watching the hospital. You didn’t go there. You wouldn’t need to lie about regeneration.”

At least as long as he was talking, he wasn’t trying to kill me.

Reason enough to keep it that way. “I still fail to see why that would matter.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to recruit you?” The otherwise cold eyes shining through his mask adopted an amuse crinkle.

“You are aware that I’m trying to be a hero?” I asked as I finally managed to reboot my mind. What was going on?

He actually laughed. “Trying but not succeeding. Not well at least. You have too much fight in you. You kill too easily. People are afraid of the way you fight and will want to change you. They might succeed for a while but you will get frustrated and mess up.”

His stare lost any semblance of humor. “Then you’re a burden. Someone to lock up when they become too inconvenient.”

It was definitely business then. “But I’m not Asian.”

That excuse sounded weak even to me.

A sentiment shared by Lung if his gravelly laughter was any indication. “Not even addressing your problem.” The vocal landslide stopped as abruptly as it started. “You not being Asian doesn’t interest me. I care about your powers. I would be a fool to pass up on a healer, a Tinker and a Brute all in one package. You can join as a lesser dragon if ethnicity is such a concern to you. The rest of the world can think what they want.”

I was desperately thinking of an excuse and ignoring the fact that I was worried about how people looked at me. If they thought that the little fight against the maccao pack was bad, what would the reaction be if I actually used a weapon? How loud would the outcry be to lock me up if the true scope of my powers were revealed?

Lung took my silence as an invention to continue his sales pitch. “If you do foolishly think you’ll be fine, let me offer you something else. Ask the PRT what they’d give you and I’ll increase it by half. I can give you the materials you need. Any materials. You could build whatever you want without people trying to limit you – cage you in.” His rumbling voice dropped nearly another octave. “I could care less about any monsters you summon.”

My heart nearly froze at his last remark. Was the common consensus already that I somehow summoned them or was that the conclusion Lung arrived at. I really hoped that it was just him getting it nearly right again just as he did with my Potions. Things were already getting complicated enough without people getting nervous over that as well.
I wished I could actually summon the monsters; at least then I could have avoided the mess. I would have simply fought somewhere in the countryside and be done with it.

And then there were the things he offered. Sure, I had to join the gang, but I’d be protected by the dragon who had fought Leviathan in single combat and had all the materials I needed. He wouldn’t be a successful gang leader if he didn’t honor his promises after all.

I would be able to build the really fun stuff. Giant blades, spiked armors, anything that would give PR a collective heart attack. I could even deal with that bitch, Sophia.

I had to restrain the urge to literally slap some sense into me.

I still wanted to be a hero, no matter how difficult it would be. I wanted to make Dad proud. I wanted to inspire the next generation of kids to do their best.

Besides, Lung could only protect me for so much until he too decided that I’m a liability.

“What if I still don’t want to join?” I finally asked while slightly shifting my grip on the gun hammer.

“You can resist and I get to play and then you join under the same conditions I’ve told you earlier.” He loosened his shoulders and cracked his knuckles to emphasize the point.

The reptilian part of my brain (one that had certainly grown) recognized what Lung wanted to do: he wanted to show dominance through force.

He wouldn’t kill me. No, I could do fairly little if he did that and then this whole thing would just have been a massive waste of time.

Instead he was only going to badly hurt and maim me until he broke me and I submitted to him.

Which would cause huge amounts of heartache to Dad, I’d likely run out of Potion before I really recovered and – he had pyrokinesis. I could already smell the faint stench of burned hair.

Deciding that diplomacy had officially failed I went to the next logical step.

I smashed my hammer into Lung’s side with a quick sideway blow and an audible crack and the dragon of Brockton Bay folded over.

While he was reeling from my initial strike I brought the hammer up and smashed it down on his head with far more strength than the first strike to his side. He wobbled a bit but kept standing even as I felt the hammer deflecting more than expected after shattering his mask.

I rotated on my axis and delivered a final, rising strike right into the gang leader’s chin. Incredulously I watched the hammer bounce off the metallic, split chin.

His hands and feet had grown claws that would have given me self-esteem issues if I actually cared. With only three attacks Lung’s neck had started to elongate and I couldn’t help but notice the metal scales thickly covering the place where I struck first.
From that center, the rest of his skins was in the process of shredding to make place for further scales.

He roared and fire exploded out of him.

I had chosen to abandon plan A (hoping to overpower him before he could do his thing) and moved on to plan B (advancing towards a future victory).

I hopped backward to avoid his vicious swipe and had to roll to the side to dodge the subsequent fireball barreling towards me all the while I was rummaging through my bag.

My hand formed around a tennis ball-sized orb and I threw it right in Lung’s face.

I don’t know what he expected but he certainly wasn’t impressed by the little orb. He didn’t even try to do anything as silly as dodging the puny projectile.

He roared in furious agony and disgust as the dung bomb exploded in his face, getting into his eyes, his nose, and his mouth, coating everything the horribly smelling concoction touched.

I turned and started running with tears in my own eyes due to the foul stench.

My hand was already busy searching as soon as I started my actual retreat. So when I heard the first unsteady footsteps of his pursuit it broke off a protruding bit of another, slightly smaller orb and whipped forward.

I felt my inner eyelids instinctively slide into place as soon I saw the object fly. Moments later my eyes were fully closed and still the world simply became white for the briefest of moments.

A whimper and a more inhuman roar sounded behind me and I took a chance to take a look over my shoulder.

In between the white spots of my vision I could make out Lung stumbling around, obviously blinded.

I redoubled my pace, ignoring the danger of running around at this pace half blind myself.

By the time I hit the start of my roof-hopping highway I could barely see enough to not mess up the climb.

When I was halfway through my detour filled tour of Brockton Bay’s rooftops I had come to the conclusion that going completely independent wouldn’t work for me – not anymore – and started going down the depressingly small list of options outside the Wards.

…

I groaned as I imagined Miss Militia’s reaction on this particular stunt. She probably wouldn’t be happy.
Sophia was bored out of her mind.

It had been two days since the dimwitted cow had ruined her life, and she had only left the house once to go to a smithy or something.

Shadow Stalker had watched the Hebert household ever since she’d gotten some money and a spare crossbow she had hidden after fleeing Winslow High. She had figured that she’d be there before any PRT snoops started staking out the place. Even if Halbeard was the one who’d have the bad luck to deal with the Hebert freak, she had reasoned, the rest of the operation wouldn’t be efficient enough to prevent her from raiding her own home.

She had found it empty, her mother no doubt working hard enough to feel all self-righteous about it and her little sister off to grandma or something. Sophia didn’t really care either way; she wouldn’t miss the annoyance either induced.

The spare crossbow, the same, bigger model she used during her vigilante days, as well as a dozen or so bolts and her old hockey mask were still inside the floor where she had left them.

Sophia had found the small savings her mom had hidden soon after and taken it. She felt it was mostly her fault with her constant nagging and shitty excuse for a boyfriend that she had turned out this way. Sophia never did something right in her eyes and if the evening wasn’t filled with an annoying tirade about not being grateful enough, a similar one was being launched about her “anger management problems” as if it was Sophia’s fault that everyone was trying to get on her nerves.

She had taken the money with only moments of consideration, thinking her mother might be good for something for a change.

When the PRT agents had arrived, Shadow Stalker was already in the sewers, using her powers to the fullest to get away and avoid getting filth on her. She couldn’t use the roofs around her previous home since that was what the PRT would expect. There were other, less dignified ways to get around that Sophia was willing to take to get her payback.

She had arrived nearby the freak’s house after her target. The crappy car stood in the driveway and, not so surprisingly, “innocuous” people had formed a perimeter around the block. That was something Sophia had counted on, it wouldn’t matter either way. She wanted to make sure the Hebert girl would get a lesson she’d remember and those things take time, time to learn about her cowardly ways and strike when she was unaware.

No, what had surprised Shadow Stalker was how the agents had set up the perimeter; it would do all to prevent her getting to the house and break in. It was no formation to keep her out and protect the cow that was cowering inside those walls.
The agents had one goal in mind and that was to wait for Shadow Stalker to show up and cause trouble. Only when she’d been well and truly distracted would they move in and burn rush her with foam and Tasers.

Sophia had felt almost insulted that they thought that something that obvious would work. She had taken a position in a tree overlooking the Hebert residence, using that slight to keep her focused as she peered through the detached scope of her crossbow.

The freak hadn’t shown herself to the rest of that Monday and the only thing that had kept Sophia from taking a shot to at least get some reaction out of the household was the cat that had joined her. Cats were alright in her eyes – after all, they remained true to their predatory nature no matter how domesticated they had become. She had petted the little guy before she went off to buy and eat some food.

She didn’t expect any of the Heberts to appear for the rest of the night. Why should they after holing up in there the entirety of the day? With a growing annoyance, Sophia found an empty attic and slept a restless night.

Tuesday had been more of the same with the exception that the cow’s father did some gardening and gone out for groceries. Sophia’s interest had briefly piqued when some sort of sack had appeared on their porch somewhere before dawn without her noticing but that was it.

Come afternoon, another wave of frustration over the cowardly cow and how she had wrecked Sophia’s life had come and gone. She was bored once more watching over the cow and texted Emma, asking how she was holding up, out of reflex.

Sophia silently cursed her mindless stupidity nearly immediately after she had sent the text message. Of course, Emma’s cellphone had been confiscated as evidence and soon Sophia’s private one was ringing.

She promptly broke the thing in half and relocated to another tree with a decent view of the house and settled in for another wait. Since Sophia had ditched her official phone into the nearest truck she could find as soon as she escaped, there would be no more electronic distractions; no way to keep an eye out on the internet and see what news got out about either of them.

At least there was another cat to keep her company in the new tree she had chosen. She did wonder whether it was normal for cats to come this big…

Shadow Stalker was forced to leave Corporal Hungrywhiskers behind when, finally, the car pulled out and she spotted a hooded figure inside of it.

She practically leaped down her tree as soon as she was relatively sure nobody was watching and went in pursuit, carefully avoiding the line of sight with the group of rotating, inconspicuous vans tailing the car.

Her joy of being able to stretch her legs and run around had lasted a whole five minutes until she had caught up with the Heberts who had gotten stuck in traffic, forcing her to slow down to a crawl alongside.

Her disappointment was deepened when they hadn’t come out of the smithy for hours on end without getting a good glimpse of the freak herself. She couldn’t even see what was made there
which only increased the uncertainty and need for further observation.

Frustrated Shadow Stalker had skulked off to get enough food for the following days. She had found out that the inhabitants of the attic she was squatting in apparently were on holidays. Sophia thought it was would be safe enough to set up camp there until she finally got the info she needed.

Another restless night later and she was bored enough to actually start wondering about how her mother would react; what she wanted to do after she taught the fucking degenerate a lesson.

The van that parked in front of Hebert’s place screamed PRT to Sophia. From the way it was painfully plain and average to how it was parked to block the view from the street to the front door. It didn’t do much to block Sophia’s line of sight. The sudden excited movements at the prospect of actually seeing her adversary startled a lounging Lieutenant Longtail from her lap. The dark-furred cat let her displeasure known with a yowl that almost blew Sophia’s cover.

It was only through plunging into the Shadow that she avoided the agent’s alert gaze. Shadow Stalker almost thought she had gotten away with it when the agent relayed information into an invisible microphone.

With a toxic curse, Shadow Stalker started moving towards what she presumed to be the target: the PRT main building. Why wouldn’t the freak want some fellow nuisances to hide behind?

An hour later Sophia realized the errors in her thinking: Taylor was likely in power testing. If that was truly the case, it made her wonder, though. As far as she knew, getting the contracts written did take a day or two and only after they’d bring a new Cape in for testing. Which meant that either the freak had gotten some special treatment or something, or…

She might not even join the Wards.

Sophia couldn’t help to chuckle as she glided to the next building. If she truly didn’t join, it would make Shadow Stalker’s job so much easier. And somehow she got the feeling that the freak didn’t want to join because of her. It would fit the moral righteousness of the cow to refuse the Protectorate’s offer simply because she knew Shadow Stalker’s identity.

To verify what her guts told her, however, she needed to get do something a slightly dangerous. She needed to get near the Rig to see the Hebert bitch disembark. The people escorting her back would tell her something. She hoped.

The one thing that improved Sophia’s mood, the one thing that drove her to take a borderline stupid risk was a simple one. The fact that the freak’s knowledge might prevent her from joining the Wards after they screwed over Shadow Stalker tasted like such sweet irony.

And, if the cow didn’t join the Wards, it would truly make Shadow Stalker’s job of bringing her back down to reality so much easier.

That last thought kept her mood up while she slowly approached the drop-off point of the Rig, carefully watching out for any agents sticking out like sore thumbs before every shadow-clad jump between buildings.

By the time she approached the dock, it even became somewhat difficult thanks to the number of agents patrolling the compound. She was finally doing something she enjoyed after nearly two days of virtual inaction. She could laugh at the dense agents who were supposed to protect the regular
people against the scary, *scary* Capes.

Then another, boring wait started and this time the local cats didn’t feel like snuggling.

It was late in the afternoon when a commotion caught Shadow Stalker. Both Heberts debarked from the boat and made their way into another unmarked van. They drove off with only the driver as an escort.

Shadow Stalker was once more freed from tedium as she started tailing the van through the evening rush hour with a lazy smirk on her face. Normally, they’d let a big shot hero give the new Wards a PRT HQ tour, not some random smug. Sure, she knew that someone might be waiting for them at the building but the route the van had taken wasn’t any official detour to HQ Sophia aware of. She liked her odds.

The Heberts were dropped off at their home without making any stops in between and soon a delivery boy arrived to bring them Chinese takeout.

Sophia was back in one of the trees she had adopted as she watched the boy desperately looking for one more item, happily munching on some take-out she had taken out of the car. She figured it was the boy’s own fault that he didn’t have a better job anyway, getting fired might motivate him to fend for himself. Besides, she had reasons to indulge a little bit.

Two days since discovery and official sign-up for the Wards was already a bit long. Three days and counting with a freakish Cape like the cow? Unheard of. Especially after they went through (presumably) power testing.

Sophia couldn’t prevent a soft chuckle escape her lips in between bites of greasy noodles. Maybe the freak was simply deemed too weak after going through testing to join. And that was telling when they were willing to include someone in borrowed armor in the Protectorate boy scouts.

She would make the bitch pay ever so dearly for making her lose her cool. Shadow Stalker wouldn’t overestimate the cow’s pathetic strength again the next time they met. She had long decided over the days of stalking that the shock of Hebert finding out her Cape identity had simply rattled her too much and caused her to see things.

Taylor wasn’t strong and she was certainly no predator. She was no one to be afraid of. Even after Triggering she’d remain a nobody. Sophia would make sure of that.

Sophia’s sleep was filled dreams of inventive ways to humiliate the Hebert girl.

The next early afternoon, a rested and happy Shadow Stalker was taken by surprise badly enough to nearly launch Private Sharpclaw from her lap.

The freak had finally scrambled together the courage to leave the house without her precious daddy or some PRT agents to protect her.

Eager anticipation filled Shadow Stalker’s steps as she pursued her oblivious prey over the rooftops. It still startled Sophia how few people actually bothered to look up from time to time. She was fairly certain that even if she wasn’t hard to spot in her Breaker state nobody would have noticed her.

The agents that were still stationed around the general area certainly didn’t and as a matter of fact, they only seemed to bother to communicate the freak’s departure instead of actually tailing her.
Which suited Shadow Stalker just fine. She might even get some use out of the crossbow she was carrying if nobody would keep a close eye on the girl.

She might even get to shoot it if the freak didn’t piss her pants when Shadow Stalker aimed at her. If she did have an accident she’d simply be shot twice for being such a wimp.

Watching the hurt wash over the freak’s form after her handshake was so thoroughly rejected by the freaked-out mother was gold, which made the more muted reactions when she entered the store such an anti-climax.

Another kitty sat beside her which kept her from being bored while waiting for the cow to leave the building again. While playing with Captain Browncoat, she quietly wondered where all those large cats suddenly come from. It was a thought quickly squashed when the General demanded ear rubs.

Sophia would have missed her prey leaving the building if a couple of hobos hadn’t started shouting further down the alley.

They came barreling down it, screaming in terror.

It, and how Captain Browncoat had suddenly disappeared, made her look in direction of the store just in time to see her prey flinch at the mouth of the alleyway.

Checking back on the fleeing hobos, she saw the reason for the panic: A single huge, green-feathered raptor was in hot pursuit after the group of losers together with five smaller specimens.

And the freak had frozen up.

In Shadow Stalker’s mind, she could already see her course of action unfold. First, she’d let the big guy catch up and nibble on one of the retards who were too stupid to leg it, while the rest of the idiots would be looking to the useless cow for help. Then, when they’d realize the truth, Shadow Stalker would swoop in to the rescue, shooting the raptors, killing the one eating and driving the others away. Then it would only be a matter of further humiliating the cow and exposing her inept, cowardly nature. Nobody would blame Shadow Stalker if she’d slap some sense into the worthless, cowering monster.

When she prepared to get a good vantage point to glide from, she was unpleasantly surprised when suddenly the freak started charging the overgrown raptors. While irritating, Sophia decided she could still adapt her plans and maybe even “accidentally” shoot the freak while coming to the rescue. That would relieve the stress of having to improvise around the cow and then some.

The laugh that bubbled up in her when she saw her prey realizing she was unarmed and almost got hit for her stupid mistake was silenced when she then effortlessly side-stepped a lunge from behind.

The surprise of earlier turned into a worried concern when she saw the freak being splattered with the blood of the eviscerated raptor unflinchingly and then broke the spine of another with a nauseating crack.

A shiver ran over Sophia’s back as she saw her slash the raptor wide open. The one who had landed a hit that should have incapacitated her. Repeatedly, and after having almost immediately performed some sort of acrobatics after the hit.
Shadow Stalker’s mouth opened in mounting dread as the last smaller raptor was used the swat the leaping larger one straight out of the air with child-like glee by the monster sporting the eager grin.

Cold sweat started to form as Taylor jumped on the back of the desperate feathered beast and simply started digging into its back and then ending it by ramming two fingers through the raptor’s eyes.

As the fight went on, Sophia was forced to see and accept the things she had tried to ignore of the monster’s behavior. Where other people would have panicked, she had simply continued, seemingly only mildly irritated by being completely unprepared to face a pack of prehistoric predators.

Deep down Sophia had to admit she would have run if she had to face these raptors unarmed and without the ability to become intangible. Taylor had improvised and started a barehanded bloody slaughter with a joyful detachment.

*Normal humans don’t just smile when faced with such odds. They don’t start executing and utterly destroying creatures without the slightest hesitation and that same, fucking smile.*

The thoughts ran through Sophia’s head as she realized just what had caused the growing terror inside her.

Sophia had seen and felt the very same detachment of life, the willingness to happily kill and destroy without hesitation, once already. It had been present, just barely hidden beneath the surface and being restrained by something other than her own morality, when the monster had busted her way out of the locker.

It was there when Sophia had attacked her.

If it wasn’t for whatever Taylor tried to achieve, Sophia *knew* she’d be dead by now. She couldn’t imagine how the monster would have circumvented her Breaker state but simply *knew* with a certainty that startled her that Taylor would have found a way.

She whimpered as she thought of how badly she had lied to herself believing that Taylor wasn’t the patient predator but the meekest of prey.

Sophia started to run as Taylor slid down the wall, ignoring the open wounds on her back, and sat with unnatural stillness.

She had to warn people, make them see the truth of what Taylor truly was.

The monster had to be killed and she’d gladly try it but she knew she’d only have one chance. Even if she was successful she refused to get thrown into the Birdcage for doing the right thing. For doing humanity a huge favor.

For she had realized that Taylor was neither predator, not prey.

She wasn’t even what went bump in the night.

No, she was the one who’d hungrily walk to the end of the earth to *hunt* the thing that went bump in the night.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, Umbr4
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 by user custom preference.
Your temporary ban expires on January 14th, 2011.
You have 3 infractions and 1 warnings.

Topic: Wyverian
In: Boards ➤ America ➤ Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)

Bagrat (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Posted on January 5th, 2011:

We knew all new this was coming. The forums have been restless ever since Monday with speculation flowing over from the Brockton Bay Discussion boards to the rest of PHO and people (myself included) noticing a rise in deleted threads and bans.

Just minutes ago the mystery behind the secrecy was revealed to be a public trigger event, surprising very few cape geeks in the process. With the rumors leading up to the reveal I took it upon myself to start this dedicated thread. It’s the one way to make sure it’s done right. It’s how I earned those badges in the first place.

With that out of the way, I’m pleased to introduce Wyverian, go say hi in her announcement thread and tell her I sent you. She wants to provide much-needed support to the heroes of Brockton Bay as an independent, so be nice. Brockton needs all the help they can get. Any question regarding her independent status is already answered in her own thread. This one is not the place for those.

From her own description, she’s a tinker/brute specializing in unorthodox armor and weaponry made through “exotic material manipulation”. She has stated she can make her hammer if given the right materials and she already made a knife since her trigger event. Furthermore, she showcased a “flash bomb” which appeared to be a souped up flash bang with the bang replaced with even more flash.

Wyverian has also triggered as a so-called “case 53” as she admits being stuck in her current form.
Yes, I’m aware of her civilian identity, her trigger event and circumstance made a secret identity pretty much an impossibility.

This thread is to discuss the Cape Wyverian and not the 15-year old girl. Make sure you understand the difference before posting.

I have been in contact with Wyverian and she gave permission to post a single clip of her escaping a locker. Due to the nature of the trigger event and the ongoing investigations this will be the only clip of the event that will be posted without express permission of Wyverian.

I’ll keep updating this post with new clips and photos made during her, hopefully, long and healthy career.

**January 6th, 2011:** Well, that has to be a record. I can't remember the last time I had to update this kind of post only one day after I've made it (and the cape in question announced her presence to the world).

In the early afternoon, a couple of homeless people reportedly heard growls that came from unknown animals. Moments later they realized the animals were GIANT RAPTORS and wisely decided to run. That would have been strange enough. Enter Wyverian. Apparently, she was out getting groceries when she saw the unlucky would-be-snacks barreling through the alleyway and charged to help them. Only problem was she was unarmed. Normal people when faced with a feathered dinosaur the more than a head taller than them would run. Doubly so when they're unarmed. Even if they're brutes of middling power.

Wyverian obviously didn't know that and went on the offensive. I will not even try to describe the resulting slaughter besides saying it was bloody, brutal, and Wyverian only got hit once. I've managed to get my hands on several videos of the battle who curiously, all stop at the same time without Wyverian giving any comment on them. Be warned the clips are graphic and not suitable for the squeemish among you.

**January 7th, 2011:** When I woke up this morning I only wanted to drink my coffee, eat a bagel, and maybe wake up somewhere down the line. I didn't want to blindly stumble 'round my apartment for a couple of minutes because I watched a video Leet had posted on one of my threads without appropriate warnings. A flash bomb is being used. It's as bad as the demonstration and the same precautions have to be made before watching. Consider yourself warned.

But in all seriousness, normally, a someone would lie low after fighting off a pack of "maccao" and getting hurt. Wyverian apparently has no time to do that, pretty much confirming that yes, she is a tinker. How else would it seem a good idea to do a freestyle supply run at three or so in the morning? A run which involves bashing ships with a flame-shooting, overgrown hammer? And then there's the thing with Lung.

Is it me or did she just hit him without holding back? I know it's Lung we're talking about but even he needs some time to ramp up and I do not want to imagine what would have happened to anyone else. Any ideas what they could have talked about in the first place? It has been a while since we've seen him out and about and no one has harmed the ABB in any significant way lately.

Media:
Wyverian Pictures: [1][2][3][4]

Wyverian clip: [1]

Locker escape clip: [1]

“Gun Hammer” pictures: [1][2]

Knife pictures: [1][2][3]

“Flash Bomb” (turn brightness all the way down. IGNORE AT YOUR OWN RISK): [1]

Wyverian vs the raptor pack (warning:GRAPHIC): [1][2][3][4][5]

Wyverian and (vs?) Lung (courtesy of Leet; TURN YOUR BRIGHTNESS DOWN): [1]

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► .neolander (Word Cannoneer)
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
Looks at the vid of the trigger event.......  
0.o  
You know, me and my friends always joked about the whole shoving someone into a locker, but now....... they fall sort of flat in comparison.

Wait they filled it up with WHAT! *gulps*

Good thing she stronger than me......how did she not go outright....... carrie. Seriously

► .lostgamer
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
What sort of sick fuck kept this trigger event open to the public? Now we can ALL see.

► AllSeeingEye
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
How bad can it be I thought when I clicked on the flash bomb link. The monitor has a maximum brightness I believed and Bagrat has to be exaggerating.

I was wrong.

It's been more than five minutes and I'm still seeing mainly spots. Listen to the Guy in the Know and if you find some, wear sunglasses as well.

I was this close to having to change my name because I couldn't see shit after the clip. Tinker bullshit.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
Neolander Don't even fucking joke about that. I was right there when [what part of ongoing investigation wasn't clear. Tin_Mother] shoved her into that locker. You can't imagine how bad that fucking smelled. Anyway, She starts screaming after a couple of minutes and then absolutely silence only for the door to fly off and her stepping out.  

She was absolutely covered in blood and I don't mean just from the locker. Clothes were torn and somehow there was also stuff on her that wasn't human blood.... And the look she gave everybody... I still shudder remembering it. It was as if we were less than human to her... As if she was idly sizing everybody up while thinking the best way to slaughter us. Just without any malice, you know? And she could have easily gotten away with it too. 

The only reason I' still alive is that [Wyverian] has the patience of saint. What hasn't been mentioned anywhere is the locker was just another thing in an 18 month campaign and I've just watched it happen. I was too afraid to become a target as well.  

So please, don't give her the idea of going full on Carrie? She didn't do anything when she busted out of the locker and I nearly shat my pants. I get the feeling that her losing that godly patience will end up bad. For all of us. 

[User got infraction points for not using the cape name and giving information about the investigation. The faces of the people involved are blurred out for a reason. Redacted the relevant passages but this is the one and only warning. Next time I visit for this, I'll bring my banhammer. Tin_Mother]

► Floating_Soul  
Replied on January 5th, 2011:  
...Okay seriously what kinda luck do you gotta have that the girl you've been bullying for months triggers into a brute and DOESN’T immediately mash you into paste? I probably would NOT have managed that level of self-control, let alone the desire to be a hero after that, well fuckin done Wyverian.

► GstringGirl  
Replied on January 5th, 2011:  
So she is a known person and she remembers everything? Strange. She'd be the first Case 53 without amnesia.

► .Sydonai  
Replied on January 5th, 2011:  
She isn't an actual C53 to my knowledge, just a so-called "Monstrous Cape", they have an altered appearance but not the tattoo or amnesia. You know, like that parahuman singer with the feathers in her hair.  

P.S. "Monstrous Cape", who the hell comes up with these names?

► Wyverian (Verified Cape)  
Replied on January 5th, 2011:  
The conversation on my thread has slowed down quite a bit and since people were coming over saying Bagrat send them, I thought I return the favor and say hi back.  

But seriously, I've been at it for less than half an hour and he already managed to set up his own thread with pictures I've never seen. Consider me impressed. 

The thing about the Carrie deal is that I've always wanted to be a hero. No way was I going to throw
away my chance over insignificant, petty bitches that already had way too much power over me the past eighteen months. I wanted to start my career right and after the fucking locker, the rest they came up with in the twenty minutes until the PRT arrived was peanuts. It helped that the rest was nice and quiet.

When one of tormentors attacked me for not going Carrie on them (why would she even want me to do that?) it was a bit difficult to remain calm until she actually started kicking. She's so damn weak it's plain funny. I wonder why I was scared of her in the first place.

Oh, my thread has picked up steam again. Have fun over here. Gotta go.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
@Wyverian You really don't realize why people were so quiet, do you? We were scared fucking shitless and were trying not to make targets out of ourselves. Thanks for not killing us btw.

@.Sydonai I don't get it with capes like Canary (So anxious to see her in concert in Boston, I am her biggest fan), and before Monday I had agreed with you. But now? I have nothing against Wyverian, but she scares me. Now that I've had a couple of days to think this over I still get unnerved by her pictures and it doesn't have anything to do with my experience. I mean, watching the video, she made it clear she didn't want to do us harm. She asked for the PRT to be called and sat down when... one of her tormentors attacked her and the teacher came and broke it up she even sat down and ignored us even more. Didn't cause us to be much louder though.

The pictures don't do her justice. In real life, she's simply... scary without doing anything. If you met her you'd probably agree that monstrous is a good description.

► .Sydonai
Replied on January 5th, 2011:
@XxVoid_CowboyxX Uh, that sounds like it could be a fear-inducement power, probably a subconscious one as well.
She has slit pupils, right? Maybe it's something like the myth of snakes hypnotizing rodents through fear?
That...could cause problems, to say the least.

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► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
I still think that the fear aura would make sense. She has those slitted eyes and I remember now how she didn't blink even once during that entire time. And the rest of the school was scared shitless as well... But if it's unconscious how is Vista so looking forward meeting her "in the field". Shouldn't she be affected as well?

...Unless that power sees fellow Capes as "snakes" instead of rodents. But wait, that wouldn't explain how that bully simply went up and attacked her while everyone else was cowering. Sure there was another one as well but she seemed desperate and afraid and she backed off after a couple of moments and hid. I can't explain that... unless... Wait that could explain it. Hear me out.
Of course, someone triggers in good old Brockton Bay and it gets weird. Because why not. Also, it doesn't surprise me the slightest something like that "prank" was allowed to happen in Winslow. Went there myself before it completely went to shit and even then it wasn't a very nice place. Now? Gang members and signs everywhere. The more I think about it, the more I'm surprised that nothing happened sooner. You guys don't know how glad I am that Wyverian isn't a full-blown omnicidal maniac even though she has a somewhat... questionable apparent skillset. I mean "exotic materials" without wanting to specify it screams "we rather not want to scare the living shit out of everyone" PR speak. It makes you wonder just what those materials are.

But for those doubting it still, she's a Tinker alright. If her "flash bomb" wasn't indication enough you should have heard her describe the knife she built. Grade A tinker BS sharpness and the way she lamented the fact she wasn't allowed to give a demonstration worried me more than just a bit. Apparently she simply "found" the hammer in the locker. Don't ask me where or how. She was very vague when asked in her own thread. I suspect the PRT is stopping her from telling the whole story.

@XxVoid_CowboyxX you just might want to edit that last part buddy. While the reasoning seems sound and Winslow is the right place where that could happen, you really don't want to start cape identity speculating. But maybe the explanation is simply that the wards wear visors or similar. Who knows what filters are built into those. Special filters would explain why the ones in Winslow wearing glasses and lenses were still affected. I mean it couldn't be a simply Fight or Flight (or Flee) reaction or else there'd be a lot more screaming and running. Or it could be something else entirely. I really don't know.

@.fredthebadger If there is, I haven't heard of it. It wouldn't surprise me if there wasn't any since the changes in non-case 53 monstrous capes aren't generally that extreme. A couple of feathers growing out of the head and changed hair color hardly warrants a separate case file. Well, there's Crawler but the less said about him the better. The guy likely has a case file all on his own anyway.

@bothad Holy shit. What did I just watch? did you see how she just eviscerated that one raptor and plunged her fingers right into the brain of the large one. WHAT. THE. FUCK. I'm going to be sick.

And as if BB didn't already have enough problems on its own with the gangs ruling the place. Now dinosaurs as well? Whose are those anyway. A new bio-tinker or what?

I don't even...

Whelp at least now I know what to do: barf until I feel good enough to look for somewhere to life outside of BB. Seriously fuck this place.

@Bestiary (Verified Geek) I feel like I've fallen into a newsletter in a D&D campaign. Nothing against you, Wyverian, but this is pretty surreal. Saurian humanoid fighting off kangaroo-raptors? Not even Brockton Bay can say that has happened before, even those times when Lung and Hookwolf have fought. Anyone able to
get a place origin on those creatures? Please tell me that Dr./Prof. Haywire and/or String Theory aren't doing anything untoward.

Meanwhile, welcome to you, Wyverian (haven't been on PHO in a while). Nice to see a pleasant young lady such as yourself stepping in front of monsters like that.

Hopefully Simurgh/Ziz has no hand in these matters.

► .Sydonai
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
@Brockonite03 That's ....a seriously assholish reaction, and what "questionable skillset"? Ever thought that maybe she can work with tinkertech materials or make mundane materials "exotic". Or the materials could simply be rare. No need to get paranoid.

The fear me aura could just be an Uncanny Valley reaction messing with your lizard brain rather than an actual part of her powers.

Crawler's power continually changes him as a result of his regeneration, rather than him being changed when he got his powers.
And apparently the S9 as a whole has a Case Number, as well as the first few instances of Parahuman Gangs.

Typical Tinker behavior, they always want to show off their new toys and never think of how some people don't want to see a death-ray up close and personal.

@Bestiary Oi, really rude to bring Ziz up in this situation!
It's far more likely that Blasto was involved.

► Bestiary (Verified Geek)
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
@.Sydonai I'm aware it can be seen as rude, but have you heard some of the Madison stories? Granted, I don't know if those were monsters or Case 53s, but still.
I don't think Blasto is the type to over-reach himself by targeting Brockton Bay, either.

► Procto the Unfortunate Tinker (Not a Tinker)
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
@Bestiary They could just be runaways of blasto...

But that brings me to another question. Do we know for certain that these raptors aren't some unlucky humans who met the wrong bio-tinker? It's just that the conversation about Bonesaw and her ilk made me VERY uncomfortable when I saw her tear into those raptors without a hint of hesitation. I know, she wanted to protect the civilians but still. She went straight for the kills. It would just ease my mind if we could get some confirmation that the raptors are blasto runaways or the result of some pocket dimension assholism.

I tried to contact the Brockton PRT but only their emergency line is working. Seriously, what's going on?!

► HankySpanky
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
That fight is all well and dandy but did you lot know that according to herself she has scales literally EVERYWHERE? Should be added as a feat for... research purposes. *waggles eyebrows*

[User got a warning for this post. You're dangerously close to the edge. Stop it. She's fifteen
for crying out loud! Tin_Mother]

► .xaldreca
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
Y’know, I was hoping that there wasn’t a biotinker around. I’m much more comfortable with dimensional shenanigans than a biotinker going around abducting people. With portals, they’re just animals, but if they’re made by a biotinker, it’s terrible to think about what must have been done to the base creatures, human or not. I realize a biotinker is far more likely, but I’d feel safer if this wasn’t the case. No one wants to think that they or those they care about could be abducted and turned into monsters.

► .Neolander (Word Cannoneer)
Replied on January 6th, 2011:
Talking about bio tinkers, what happened to the bodies, she killed like what three of them? And they disappear or what? Why don’t we see more footage of the bodies?

Could Wyverian be targeted? This is really odd for monster like these simply just be there.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 ... 52 , 53, 54

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► Chilldrizzle
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
Imagine having one of those as a guard dog. Would make life in the bay a lot easier.

► .Neolander (Word Cannoneer)
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
You dream too small Chill. Maybe they can make more raptors as K9 units..... I can see it now a PRT agent in full gear with a hand on lead of 80 pounds lean, mean, and brute-tearing machine.

Maybe even the a raptor cavalry with the big ones...

*hopes wistfully*

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied on January 7th 2011:
I've just finished one of my longest and tiring shifts ever since Wyverian triggered and I'm allowed to give some general info regarding the creatures she insists on calling "maccao" with the goal of quelling budding concerns of a rogue bio tinker.

First and most importantly, I'm allowed to share that the corpse we acquired showed no signs of human origin. Neither does it show similarities Blasto's creations as the cell forms were animal in nature.

Second, the isotopes distributions are atypical for earth which leads the scientist to rule out conventional bio tinkers.

That's about all I'm allowed to say on the topic officially.
Personally, as someone who had the pleasure of transporting the carcass, I'd say the smaller one's weight is far closer to 120 pounds than 80. Also, I hate to be the bringer of bad news, but I don't think we'll have a raptor cavalry anytime soon. They're far too willing to let members die and the big one even killed one himself. Taming (never mind domesticating) them would be impossibly difficult. There is a reason why a zebra cavalry isn't a thing either.

But anyway, I'm going to catch some shut-eye before I pass out.

▶ Puck a duck
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
So in other words, they're from another dimension or aliens?

Wait the disregard for other's of their species is kinda like rats, could those things be near the bottom of their food chain? If so :O

▶ L33t (Verified Cape)
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
I know this is fuckin' early o'clock but we thought it might be fun to share something with you lot.

Imagine Über and me trying to get some work done for our next big show near the Boat Graveyard (my lips are sealed, don't want to spoil you) when suddenly we hear some sort of metallic sound. We try to ignore it and it continues. We debate going and it even picks up in intensity. Long story short, I sent the Snitch over in time to see Wyverian literally bash one more metal plate out of the side of a rusty ship with that ridiculous hammer of hers.

Let's just say I know why it's called a gun hammer and it's not just the fact that someone thought it would be great to put an oversized revolver cylinder on a stick. It shoots flames with every strike. The edges of the metal plates were glowing.

That would have been interesting enough to share a video here but then Lung showed up and, well, best just watch the [video]. I've cut out the sound (the quality was atrocious anyway - didn't want to risk the Snitch getting in any crossfire) but that shouldn't distract from the fact that she hit the Dragon of Kyushu (you know who 1v1ed fucking Leviathan) hard enough with the hammer she used to "cut" plates of metal to size for a dragon head to form and THEN got away with it. Seriously, has anyone seen Lung do that before and just what's the matter Wyverian to cause that. That ramp up was insane and somehow he survived the blow on the head.

Also something I've noticed that Wyverian seemed to KNOW the raptors. She seemed to know what attacks would come before they started. Reminds me more than a bit of pro gamers. Sure, she got hit once but it can't have wounded her that badly. I haven't heard of him visiting Panacea and she wouldn't have been able to do that with Lung if she was badly wounded. It might also be some sort of instinct. I really don't know what to think of the whole situation.

▶ .Neolander (Word Cannoneer)
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
A Gun hammer..... Lung......

*thinks on drinking heavily....... then reconsiders*

Whats next Sand Whales, rocket bats, Over sized spiders..... the unholy mix of sniper and scythe.... TALKING CATS.

What has the world come to....
Floating_Soul
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
Neolander, do not tempt murphey. He is a cruel and malevolent god.

Umbr4
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
Why is everyone so accepting of this fucking freak? Have we even watched the same fucking videos?

I've been there when she fought those raptors and let me tell you one thing: There was no shred of fucking hesitation when she threw herself into the fight. The fact that she was unarmed fazed her, a tinker, for only a moment and then she commenced the slaughter.

She was grinning as blood splattered her, smiling like a fucking psychopath. She was enjoying her fucking bloodshed.

I've seen a lot of violent degenerates and only the worst of them show this fucking kind of disregard for life. And believe me, it isn't reserved for just those fucking monsters. Why do you think the ones caught in her tantrum at Winslow are instinctually terrified of her. Do you think she'd have held back if some other fucking cape approached her on the Boat Graveyard? She's dangerous and Lung instincts realized it and ramped up in a hurry never seen before.

Too bad the monster managed to get away from Lung. She fucked up and needs to be put down.

[User got a warning for language and temp ban with extra infraction points for inciting violence against a cape. Tin_Mother]

.xaldreca
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
@umbr4 Ok, what's wrong with you? She was attacked and reponded, what's wrong about her not hesitating. You can't lock her up for defending herself and we have no idea what really happened with Lung, so don't go saying she's a maniac.

.Sydonai
Replied on January 7th, 2011:
@.xaldrecaPathetic cape-bigots trying to hate on parahumans in the only way they can; "Oh look at how violent they are, it's not like we would ever give them a chance to do anything but fight, but they should not fight anyway because I say so!"

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 ... 52 , 53, 54

Private message from Tidy_Alignment:
Tidy_Alignment: Good to see someone else with their eyes opened even if the rest of the world refuses to see it. I fail to understand how those people seem willing to jump to her defense while she terrifying them.

Sorry for the ban, if you feel up to it, pm me. We might be able to work out a way to let others see the truth without another temporary ban of our monster loving overlords.

Maybe we could do more still.

Sophia thumbed through the rest of the pages on the stolen smartphone with a snarl. The only thing she had managed to do with her warning was to get a temporary ban, preventing her from effectively warning others of the Monster that had escaped the locker. The outrage of her post died off only two pages later and was replaced by eager discussions about what tech she used to get away, speculations why she needed the iron, and whether aliens, a Bio Tinker or dimensional travelers would be better. Then there were speculations over what Lung and the Monster could have talked about and the problems of forced enrollment Tinkers faced.

Especially the latter two aggravated Shadow Stalker. She couldn't understand how people were so close to the threat only to simply ignore them. How could the sheep dance around the danger that was patiently waiting to strike?

If it wasn't for the personal message of the mystery person (and the amusingly pathetic attempts to harras her through other PMs), she would have risked a permanent ban and the need to "acquire" a new cellphone by creating a new account. Even if she had hold off answering them just yet. Sophia had hoped someone else in the blinded echo chamber would speak up and thus avoid the suspicious PM. It felt simply too good to be true; it felt like something the Pig might do or something.

But now, after hundreds of messages ignoring the Monster in the room and having had some time to think, Sophia decided it was time for a careful gamble. She'd probe the wannabe ally before deeming them worthy. She thought she had ways to detect foul play and she'd bolt as soon as she suspected it. Sophia detested the thought of having to abandon her attic but it was for a greater good.

Shadow Stalker started writing a reply, fully aware of the relative warmth she might lose on top of the rest Monster had cost her.
Friday started out as an absolute roller coaster after I had escaped Lung. Getting home and back into my bed without being noticed was easy enough. I even had a couple of dreams colored by happy anticipation over the Tinkering I could do for cheaper than Dad would have expected.

It wasn’t the best armor I’d ever make by a long shot, but it was a start. I could simply handwave the sudden influx of extra raw materials to the felynes. Lying to him wouldn’t feel great but, somehow, people not in my immediate area didn’t seem to actually notice the cats as anything more than that, which was a bit strange. I haven’t seen that many house tigers running around in - more or less - organized formations and at the very least equipped with a crude pickaxe. Maybe I simply hadn’t gotten out enough and it had become a trend somehow. I saw more than a few bystanders cooing over the little guys without anyone being alarmed.

Anyhow, even though I didn’t want to start my life as a Cape by keeping even more secrets from Dad, I knew that he would only get scared by what happened. He was finally on the mend. I would lie to keep it that way if necessary. The same if I were to go bankrupt due to my tinkering. It was my problem and it was my responsibility to deal with it.

Cats were a simple explanation that couldn’t be disproven too easily. Well, not unless the cats started talking English.

I dreamt of riding on the back of an angry, thrashing, green dinosaur while stabbing it in the back repeatedly with my knife. It was a good dream.

Sadly, the good mood couldn’t last.

Dad woke me up just as I was about to carve into the severed tail by practically storming in my room.

“Taylor,” He said somewhat strained and. “I have Armsmaster on the line downstairs. He’s asking for you. What has happened? He wouldn’t tell me.”

“whah?” Was all I could manage while carefully disentangling myself from underneath the sheets with only minimal tearing damage.

Why would the Tinker of Brockton Bay want to call me in the morning anyway? Did the Transpurrter cause some sort of mischief or something?

And why would he call on a landline if he could just…

Right, I knew I had forgotten something. Must have forgotten to charge my very first cell phone I had since Wednesday and then it died on me.
Oops.

To be fair, it should have lasted more than barely two days…

“Your hair,” Dad whispered in shock, derailing my ideas of integrating an electro sac into the bloody thing when I could get my hand on one. “Why is your hair burned? Did you sneak out to forge something; but that wouldn’t explain Armsmaster. Taylor, please say something.”

What about my hair wha- Huh?

I gingerly touched my hair and was met by a frizzled strand of hair and traced the irregular ends of my hair around my head. A couple of chunks were apparently burned away and more patches disintegrated under my touch.

*That motherfucker.*

For now, just run with the forge excuse and deal with the rest later. “Yep, I suddenly had a great idea and couldn’t sleep so – “

“You didn’t even warn me nor did you show your latest invention to me?” A vein on his forehead began to throb gently. “Bullshit. You’ve been way too proud of your knife to not show me your next invention and on Tuesday you were just fine handling molten metal near raging fires anyway. What *really* happened?”

It was time for plan B. “Well, the idea was actually for a forge of my own… design… with…” I petered off under the weight of his skeptical gaze.

“You fought someone or something, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted, defeated.

Hurt lanced through Dad. “And considering your reluctance it wasn’t some monster or else you’d be showing me its wishbone or something. Who was it? Who tried to burn you?”

I thought that if I beat around the bushes long enough, I might think of a more palatable explanation than “I fought Lung, but only for a very short time, I swear!”

Why did the bastard have to go make it personal? I was a nobody and a couple of love taps was no reason to burn my hair which led to this situation where I had to either lie convincingly (something I failed at spectacularly) or scare the shit out of him.

… Would anyone miss Lung in the first place? He would provide some pretty nice materials *if* I could deal with him. The latter would be a bit of a problem, though…

I tore myself out of happy thoughts of potential murder and deployed plan BS. “Well, I wanted to collect enough metal to make my armor so I went to the Boat Graveyard – I made sure not to be spotted – and everything went okay at first but – “

Dad blanched, shocking realization clearly written on his face. “It was Lung, wasn’t it? Are you hurt? did you have enough Potion? We can drive to the hospital otherwise and have Panacea fix you up. Just let me – “
“Dad, I’m fine. Really. Please, calm down. He didn’t hit me once. The hair probably happened from a dodge or, hell, I might have messed up getting the iron.”

Dad crossed the distance between the door and me in two steps and tightly hugged my sitting and bewildered form. “Thank goodness. Don’t scare me like that. Not again. Are you really sure you’re all right?”

“Truly,” I replied returning the hug, trying to take away some of the pain I had caused. Again.

“What did he want anyway and what madness came over you that made you fight him?”

“For one reason or another, he wanted me for ABB. I objected. He didn’t take it well.” I tried to shrug. It didn’t work out that great in his embrace that ever so slightly resembled a death grip.

“How did you get away then? Isn’t he the one who fought the entire Brockton Protectorate to a standstill?”

“Well, I knocked him on the head, threw a Dung Bomb in his face, blinded him, and ran away.”

Dad winced. “Is this going to be a problem?”

“No? Maybe. Probably. I better start looking to ally myself with either the Wards or another group for added protection.”

“And you haven’t done so why? What is the matter with the Wards anyway? Why not join them? You seemed to like the ones you’ve met Wednesday well enough.”

“I’ll think about it but, in all likelihood, no. Like I’ve told you before I don’t want to sully the investigation and will have to wait for -”

Dad pushed me away slightly and looked into my eyes becoming cold.

“I get that you’re stubborn, how couldn’t you be with the man who tries to keep the Dockworker’s Union afloat these days, but you aren’t stupid.” His broiling anger made his hands tighten around my shoulders. “One of your tormentors was a Ward, wasn’t she? It’s the only reason I can think of why you’d still be so hesitant about it after facing Lung. Who you only encountered because you needed resources they could easily provide. You dreamt being a hero ever since you first saw Alexandria on TV. You still have that lunch box Annette and I bought you.”

“You know I can’t talk about the details, Dad.” I retorted weakly.

A snarl grew on Dad’s face. “It was Shadow Stalker, wasn’t it? It sure is convenient that she suddenly went rogue around the same time those monsters enacted their sick plan. Did Armsmaster know about this perversion of everything they’re supposed to stand for?”

The vein on his forehead throbbed with barely contained rage. “I don’t think he knew about it, Dad. He seemed far too angry for it to be anything other than an honest reaction.”

“At least that’s something,” Dad grumbled as he began to calm down again.

“And I don’t think the rest are bad or anything, but I just want…need this issue to be resolved before
I’m ever going to feel comfortable joining the Wards.”

“I understand,” Dad said after taking a deep breath and pulling me back into a hug. “Just don’t keep secrets from me anymore, all right?”

“I’ll try,” I felt his gaze bore into me with renewed vigor. “Well, I don’t know when I’ll come across the next bit of classified information. I didn’t feel like making unkeepable promises.”

Not telling him about the full extent of my powers felt bad enough already without it making me even more a liar.

Dad sighed. “Fine. I guess we’ll have to look for other groups. Do you think the New Wave would take you?”

“If Glory Girl is any indication? I’d be in immediately as soon as I asked. I mean, I have the whole ‘public Cape’ thing down already.” I chuckled imagining how much I’d stand out when compared with the light based independent hero group. Spikes of doom wouldn’t really fit the white color motive they rocked, and neither would the vast majority of weapons I could make. Something about accountability, moderation of force, and all that good stuff.

We both remained silent and simply enjoying each other’s embrace. We really had had a deficit of those.

It also gave me a bit time to think about the mysterious phone call from Armsmaster.

I was pretty sure he couldn’t know about the fight.

Besides Lung at the end, very few people should have seen me. Considering the god-forsaken hour and the place, I really doubted that anyone could have put anything online that wouldn’t be dismissed as wild rumors.

People would likely think I was still injured from the tail strike that maccao gave me anyway. It had been too dark for the encounter to be filmed from a distance I wouldn’t notice and I severely doubted that Lung would want any of this online. So he or his flunkies would also be out of the equation.

I mean, getting literal, high-grade shit thrown into your face and then allowing a freshly triggered cape get away wasn’t something a crime lord would want to advertise; respect and everything.

The rest of the potential eyewitness were likely addicts and I didn’t think they’d have easy access to computers. At least not those who were out that god damned early.

I couldn’t help but notice that Dad still hadn’t let me go.

“Uhm, Dad, isn’t Armsmaster still on the line downstairs? Shouldn’t I go talk to him like, ten minutes ago?”

“I’d have been okay, Dad. The felynes would have managed to get me out no matter what. Besides, I’m sturdier than I look.”
“That’s no reason to be reckless. I saw the fight against those raptors. It almost looked like you didn’t care about what could happen to you. Just like you didn’t mind breaking your own damned arm just to make a point. It scares me.

“Fine, I’ll try to be more careful in the future. This armor will be the first thing directly helping me to survive blows and stuff.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Though, just so you know, you’re hereby grounded.” Wait, what?

“Why?” I managed to utter, disentangling myself from the prolonged hug.

“Besides the reckless endangerment behind my back?”

“But…”

“Don’t make me install motion sensors covering all possible escape routes. I know people who’d happily lend them to me and am more than willing to ask them if that’s what it takes to make you stay put.”

Fuck. “Fine.”

“Also did you really believe I’d be stupid enough to not notice whatever amount of steel you harvested? How did you see that workout, by the way?”

“I would have told you the felynes brought some extra,” I admitted in a small voice.

“Also, I’m also retracting your internet privileges until further notice.”

“What? How can I answer questions if they pop up? What if people find out about the whole Lung thing and have questions? I might even miss a recruitment offer!”

“I’ll take care of all of that. Am I clear?”

“Fine. Anything else, Satan?”

He chuckled. “Just one thing, how did you harvest that metal and why would it burn your hair.”

“I, uhm, simply bashed the side of some rusty boat with the gun hammer and there was some molten metal flying around so I thought that…” In hindsight, that really wasn’t the best way to get metal.

Dad agreed with that assessment if his laughter was any indication.

“Yeah, I can imagine that that would burn some stuff. Now go, see what that supposed hero has to tell you.”

I stomped off to the living room, dimly aware that Dad followed me and booted up the computer as if out of spite.

“Taylor,” I spoke moments later after picking up the phone from the table. It was a corded one dad bought after the crappy wireless one we had earlier died on him one too many times during a phone call.
At least that what he told me then. I long since suspected that it simply reminded him too much of a cellphone. Either way, it didn’t matter much. Neither of us really was a pacer and it wasn’t like I received many calls.

Not after Emma.

The rhythmic and explosive exhales accompanied by a faint swooshing sound and muffled, padded hits coming from the other side stopped.

“Why couldn’t we reach your phone, Wyverian?” Armsmaster asked in between breaths. He sounded irritated.

“About that,” I replied hesitantly. “I may have forgotten to charge it. Sorry.”

His disappointment charged the air.

“I’m not used to having one,” I tried to explain. “I’ll fix the problem as soon as I get the chance.”

“What do you mean ‘fix’?” I could almost hear the gear shift happening in the small pause following the question. “You mean you can add one of those sacs? How long would…” He took a deep breath. “That’ll have to wait for later, Wyverian, and will need our approval. There are more pressing matters we have to discuss. Start charging your phone and call me back on it. Now.”

”Can’t we just… right security. On it.”

Now I only had to find the stupid charger.

I spent the better part of ten minutes digging through my room to no avail and forced myself to swallow my dignity and actually ask Dad.

“You’ve left it near the fruit bowl in the kitchen,” He answered, eyes transfixed on the screen before adding. “I think I know why he called you. Leet has filmed the whole thing and uploaded it on your dedicated thread. It has kind of exploded but the general feeling seems to be disbelief – with only a few exceptions.”

“Oh,” I replied as I grabbed the charger that was hiding in plain sight and made my way back upstairs.

It looked like Uber and Leet had suddenly jumped up my very recently created shit-list. Congratulations, their prize was my wholehearted annoyance.

Seriously, if it wasn’t for those jerks, I might have avoided everything that morning. I’d still have my Internet access without the cell phone.

But at least, now I knew why the Tinker hero wanted to talk to me. I think.

As soon as I had enough charge to turn on the bloody thing, I called Armsmaster. He had set himself up under speed dial and somehow I didn’t think he’d appreciate the extra delay that going through Console would cause.

“I can’t help it if Lung suddenly approaches me.” I blurted out as soon as he picked up the phone.
Why did people around me have the urge to sigh?

“What took you so long? Did you have to make another charger? But that’s the other thing I wanted to talk about.” He really sounded tired. “How did you get the corpse in the Rig’s cafeteria without anyone noticing?”

“I asked one of the felynes who specializes in transport to deliver it. Why? Did the transpurrter cause mischief?”

“That’s one way to describe ‘causing a full M/S lockdown until Miss Militia manages to convince everybody that it’s a delivery of a foolish, young Cape and not a Godfather-style statement from a new super villain’. It wouldn’t be my first choice. It took more than half a day before we could get operations up and running again to a sub-optimal degree. We wasted a lot of time and can count ourselves lucky nothing critical happened.”

“oh, uhm.” Shit. “I’m sorry? I only kinda wanted to give you a sample since I thought you’d be interested in that weird place where I ended up after Triggering. Since I already told you about the felynes, I didn’t think much of it.”

“That still doesn’t explain how the…” There was a tiny pause. Armsmaster probably looked up the name in some bullshit, beyond high-tech manner. “… Transpurrter managed to bring the carcass onto the Rig undetected. Do these felynes have some sort of Master/Stranger powers?”

“No!” I began before adding. “Well, I haven’t had any problems spotting the furballs but I’ve realized something, though.”

“Continue.”

“Well, after sleeping on it, I found it kinda strange that my audience – you know the idiots that didn’t run from the maccao? – that they simply played with the felynes as if they were just cats. Even though every single one of them had at least a pickaxe or paw hammer. So I guess some Master/Stranger power would be logical. Explains how they manage to rescue hunters from under the noses of hungry monsters” I shrugged knowing full well nobody was there to see it.

“Do you control them?” Why did I get the feeling that people were getting headaches?

“No, they simply work for me but you could probably hire them if you’d offer something the felynes were interested in. Anyone could, actually.”

“Anyone could?” I heard a strangled sound Armsmaster couldn’t quite suppress. “Are you saying they could be hired as potential assassins?”

“Nah, that’s just silly. I know those cats. They’re far too sweet and playful for that.” The hero didn’t give a grunt to indicating that he’d believe me so I plowed right on through. “It would be bad for business as well. They do rescue missions, remember? Not many people would willingly let them near if they were slitting throats or something.”

“Right. Could you hire them all or stop them from coming in the first place?” Brockton’s mightiest Tinkerer apparently still had his doubts about the clumsy helpers.

“That would be too expensive for me. I think. I don’t know what they’d ask for it but I’m afraid I
wouldn’t have anything left to Tinker with. Also, I’m not making them or summoning them or anything. They just appear without me doing anything.” I chuffed. “If I could control any inter-dimensional travel or whatever I’d be over there gathering resources instead of talking on the phone. No offense.”

“None taken. I have far better things to do as well. I’ll inform the Director about these felynes and a decision regarding them will likely be made then. Now, to the other elephant in the room.” He seemed to be beyond irritated by now if the strain in his voice was any indication.

Oh, joy.

“What the hell were you thinking attacking Lung? Did you even realize how easily he could have killed you? We, the Protectorate, wouldn’t simply attack him without an extremely good reason and even more planning to ensure everyone’s safety.”

“It wouldn’t have been all that bad,” I replied in what I hoped was a calm and reassuring voice. “The felynes would have gotten me out of there.”

“And what then, Wyverian? Lung chasing you through Brockton Bay while most of the Protectorate is still dealing with the aftermath of that other stunt. Do you have any idea how many lives could have been lost in the process after you ramped him up that much?” His voice warped from strained to an angry almost-snarl in those few sentences.

“He didn’t leave me much choice, Sir.”

“Explain.”

“Well, he tried to recruit me and made it pretty clear he wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” I did explain, carefully maintaining a neutral tone of voice and fidgeting with the charger cord. “I kinda noticed that he wanted to fight from the beginning. Dunno, something felt off with his body language. I didn’t want to join his gang so just wanted to make sure I could get away.”

“And so you attacked him with your hammer? Why didn’t you just use the items straight away that allowed you to escape? You wouldn’t have made him angry. What were those anyway?”

I honestly hadn’t thought of that. “I was afraid he might stop me before I could throw the Dung and Flash Bombs.”

Technically it wasn’t lying, right? I didn’t think that admitting to all-out attacks being your first resort was that great when trying to be a hero.

“Dung bomb?” Armsmaster choked. “You threw dung in Lung’s face and then ran away?”

“Yeah, they can be used to scare big monster off so I thought it would be fitting when he didn’t go down after my blows.”

“I’ll need you to send me samples – “

“But I need them myself and you didn’t want to see my Flash bomb while I was at power testing.” Seriously what was the deal?

“ – Like I said I need samples, or in this case multiples of both bombs and we’ll increase security in
your neighborhood as well as escorts if you do need to go out.”

An uncomfortable silence laden with disappointment stretched between us as I really didn’t like the idea of giving away even one of the few bombs I still had and that had actually proven useful to allow me to get out of trouble.

“Look, Wyverian, it's not like we want to obstruct you or force you into joining the Wards – that offer is still open, of course – but we simply don’t want to lose you.” An incredulous sound escaped my throat. “I actually wanted to call you before the corpse appeared. The preliminary tests on your Potions are back. While still some extra tests are needed for long-term effects, they work without problems. As a Tinker myself I don’t believe that problems will appear. We would hate to lose you to either the gangs that defile the city or to your own curiosity. Please keep low until this blows over and make sure you’re protected one way or another. You’re going to make a real difference.”

I sighed in relief. “That’s great.”

“Wyverian, please, don’t do anything stupid and sit tight. I’ll contact you about news regarding the potions or when something’s been decided about the felynes that you should know. I’m expecting the bombs at the latest tomorrow or else you’ll have to contact me. Anything else you need?”

“I won’t, thanks, I’ll hand a few over to the next PRT agent I meet, and I’m fine, thanks again.”

“In that case, I hope the next time we’ll talk will be because of more positive reasons.” And then the beeping tone of him having hung up.

Too bad, Dad then came and created another dip in Friday’s emotional roller coaster by confiscating both the cellphone and charger with a devious smile and a tap on his nose.

I couldn’t even cheat my way onto the internet that way.

My mood worsened still when three unmarked PRT vans pulled over to escort me to Sig later in the evening. I found it wholly unnecessary and I kinda felt bad about hogging so many resources.

Maybe they just wanted to make sure I wouldn’t go anywhere.

I couldn’t stay that mad, though, when I realized those vans could just as easily be used to transport the metal plates I harvested.

Another thing in their favor was that they brought me to the absolute high point of that Friday when we finally visited Sig a second time. Dad had already informed the PRT last night and got Sig to stay longer as well so I could use his forge and didn’t want to call everything off on such a short notice.

It probably helped that I’d be making a set of armor. I started drying the pieces of great maccao hide.

Luckily the, frankly excessive, escort was even forgotten while I tanned the larinoth and regular maccao hides in an Earth Crystal bath.

By the time I was melding the pieces of great maccao rawhide to the framework of larinoth leather and melting their scales to add to the molten, refined iron, I had pretty much forgotten anything else.

Red leather from the regular maccaos was used to make sleeves, quasi-stockings, and cover some other gaps between the metal pieces.
When I finally finished up by fusing the leather cape and skirt to the metal but still somewhat flexible metal cuirass and, it was already past midnight. Dad, Sig, and the agents had wanted to call it a night hours before but apparently weren’t able to snap me out of it. Or I had told them that I couldn’t stop without ruining everything. I didn’t really remember and couldn’t really care if I was completely honest.

I was far too happy with my armor.

It consisted of a short hooded cape made of the leather/rawhide hybrid with green feathers still attached that was fused to the breastplate of the main, steel body. The faulds were encircled by a knee-length, split skirt made of red leather and more, larger feathers on the side and some metal plates on top. Red leather sleeves disappeared into green leather gloves that ended just shy of my elbows. My head was adorned by a snazzy, triangular hat with a single yellow feather on top.

What excited me most, however, were the boots. Sure, they might be green, knee high boots and had a supple red leather extension that reached halfway to my thighs each. Sure, my toes and claws poked through the hole made for them and the folded over edge of the boot looked weird on my digitigrade legs but finally, I had shoes that fit me again. It hadn’t been uncomfortable walking around everywhere barefoot in January but, still, it felt… weird. I’d take somewhat unconventional boots over that any day.

I couldn’t even bring myself to care that much that it was the bare basics in terms of armors I could make nor that even this one hadn’t reached its fullest potential. Though it was annoying that I was simply missing the materials to make that happen.

I was still practically bouncing when we got home and Dad tiredly told me to go to bed and sleep.

Saturday I took the difficult decision to cut my losses and cut out the burned parts of my hair. It was hard to see my hair reach barely past my shoulders. The rest of the morning was spent posing for a couple of photos in my armor which Dad uploaded for me while I expanded the insect box in the basement. He had also taken some pictures of us together to get himself verified on PHO. Much to my surprise, I found the cutest little beetle that must have emerged from his pupae during the night while working on the box. The little rascal imprinted on me and I couldn’t bring myself to put him back in the box while I worked on various traps with him happily sitting on my head for the rest of the day.

Somewhere during the day, Dad descended into the basement to tell me that people seemed to like my armor and asked me whether or not I had some sort of C-formed mark on my body. I told him no but I didn’t really think too much of it as I was cramming nets into spaces they really had no business fitting into.

On Sunday, Dad allowed me outside to tend to the garden and I took that time to install some of the pitfall traps I had made the day before. During that time, the beetle had found the different herbs I had planted and was happily feeding on the nectar that was somehow dripping from them in the winter. I let him. He looked too cute to stop him and I didn’t think he’d destroy anything.

Dinner had almost returned to a normal affair as Dad seemed to believe I had almost suffered enough under his devilish punishment. I could still feel that he was worried about my safety and future but at the same time, he seemed to enjoy tormenting me a bit too much by dangling the internet just in front of my nose. I honestly didn’t mind that much. I had plenty of other things to do, not the least the beetle, and I thought that it was only fair after scaring him so often after I had triggered.
But seriously, I couldn’t wait to geek back out on the PHO forums with the full weight of “verified Cape” backing me up.

He did end up asking me whether it was really necessary for a bug to follow me everywhere. I couldn’t see why he was worried about it. The beetle was very clean and barely spilled any nectar from his little cup while eating.

The Sunday night was a restless one. You’d think that after killing a group of oversized raptors, turning their skin into armor, murdering a demon spider and making a knife out of that one, and escaping Lung, the prospect of returning to school wouldn’t faze me anymore.

Well, it did.

The sleepless hours even managed to dredge up insecurities about my body I hadn’t felt for the rest of the week only to remind myself of what had changed. Of how I lost some of my hair to that bastard Lung and how I would be the freak of Arcadia.

I imagined posters advertising the school freak with entry fees noted in bold letters beside a half obscured picture of me.

Sometimes I really hated my brain. At least my pet beetle didn’t judge.

I really needed to give him a fitting name.

It might help explain why, when I was about to walk to the team of PRT agents that were to be my private bodyguards slash minders that I may or may not reacted a bit too eagerly when I felt a familiar tug just behind my navel.

…Okay I sprinted back inside yelling something like “Havetogetmyhammerandarmornoldon’thavetimetoexplainseeyouinabitbye” while both Dad and the agents ran after me, shouting in confusion.

I grabbed the gun hammer as I flew through the door of my room and hurled myself on the pile containing the rest of my armor.

Moments after I landed on it in a tangled mess, I felt my surroundings shift.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to the user Roffster (on SB and SV) for betaing and proofreading the chapter

This time, I wasn’t transported to some dingy cave by probably the most infuriating part of my powers. Instead of the more solid darkness the cave provided, I was greeted by light filtering through a dense canopy of the forest I lay in. Animal sounds were all around me as I sat up and checked whether every part of my armor made the shift.

Luckily, they actually did.

That meant I was at least lucky in one regard. The second thing I checked for wasn’t. In my hurried sprint for my equipment, I forgot to grab the bag I had prepared the day before just for cases like these. No big deal, if I ignored that it meant I didn’t have any Potion. Nor any Antidote or bombs (the ones I could actually make on Sunday). I couldn’t even try out whether the new goodies I made at the same time actually worked as intended.

The third check I made was actually looking for anything trying to eat and/or simply murder me in not necessarily that order. I could vaguely remember the fact that there were some big, aggressive herbivores who were all territorial for no reason in particular.

It was still weird knowing about stuff I had no business knowing about like animal species that shouldn’t really exist. Or figuring out you understood and were talking an entirely different language. Stupid powers working on a need-to-know basis.

I knew the general shape of the species and I could actually almost feel being launched into the air by one of these, but beyond that? Not much besides a somewhat irrational caution around sand and a sense that not even rocky ground could be safe in certain regions.

The integrated paranoia senses made it even weirder for me that “checking the surrounding for anything that might tear your face off” hadn’t made it higher on my priorities list. But then again, I couldn’t hear anything big and scary stomping around and I hadn’t flinched yet so I should probably be okay.

I mean, I noticed the latter was something of a trend when being spotted by something that wanted me dead.

So, in light of the absence of threats, I stripped down to my underwear so I could actually wear the armor I had abandoned my items for. I just put my hearing in overdrive just to be sure, though I would completely fail to appreciate the irony of getting killed while putting on the very thing that should help me prevent just that.

And it would also mean my ears could actually do something besides being too big and in the way – I still had to decide how I could make helmets that would actually fit.
When I managed to put on the cuirass and attach it to the faulds without getting decapitated by ninja wyverns or something equally bad, I allowed myself to take in the scenery while fiddling with the clasps on both my gloves and boots with built in stockings.

Looking beyond the vine covered, tall trees, I couldn’t help but notice that the underbrush was less dense than one would expect in a primordial forest like this. There might have been a couple of thorny bushes where I wouldn’t want to go through unless truly necessary that blocked off my line of sight interspersed between the trees. Beyond that, though? Mainly low growing, herbs of different kinds, leaves, berries, and mushrooms. The distance between the individual trees was bigger than I’d have expected. The temperature was pleasant as well.

All in all, it made the forest feel less cramped – a feature I could get behind wholly. It wasn’t like I had developed a case of claustrophobia since the locker stunt, but there still was the slight unease whenever I thought about really confined spaces. Well, there was that part of me that still enjoyed her private quarters in my headspace, the one that was quietly transferred into a nice, spacious padded room when I faced the maccaos, that was starting to shout. But then again, I hadn’t truly listened to her ever since I faced down the nerscylla.

The fact that most animals native to this dimension were super-sized would probably explain why I wouldn’t have trouble getting around the place.

With a shrug, I stood up, and since I still wasn’t attacked I took my time to repurpose the hoody I was wearing (one of my last ones I noticed to my dismay) into a makeshift pouch that hung around my waist and I transferred all the possessions in the pocket of my shorts, namely my fancy cellphone and wallet, into a smaller, pre-made pouch that came with the armor.

Dad had returned it to me that morning due to my “exemplary behavior” during the time I was grounded. In truth I thought he just disliked the idea of me, the newly born magnet of all things freaky and violent, potentially running around the Bay without having any means to be contacted.

… Or maybe one of my many babysitters had reminded him that it was technically PRT equipment and kindly requested him to return it to me. I had received it so I could be called in an emergency after all.

Either way, the piece of technology – now fully charged! – wandered right into its pouch when I realized that, no matter how fancy it might be, it still didn’t have trans-dimensional reception. It was a rather sobering and disappointing realization.

At least the knife, snuggly fitted in its sheath on my back, would still do its job effortlessly. I knew it would, after all, I made it myself.

Weird hissing tore me out of my reverie and looking down, I faced a posturing altaroth. A glimpse back revealed that I was apparently blocking its way to a bunch of mushrooms. It might have actually looked adorable in some kind of ridiculous way with its claws raised at me menacingly if I didn’t have to dodge a projectile of foul, acidic smelling spit.

I squashed it with my hammer for its impudence.
The charred, flatten remains attracted the attention its mates immediately which I took as my sign to start moving after collecting the blue mushrooms partially out of spite.

It wasn’t like I wouldn’t be able to deal with them but more that it would be a far greater annoyance than it was worth. I didn’t really feel like having to dodge a couple of corrosive balls of spit just to make a statement nobody would be able to remember. It would just unnecessarily dirty my brand spanking new armor in a way I was fairly certain would weaken it. And they wouldn’t even have had the courtesy to leave something useful behind in their demise. At least for now.

I could much better use the limited space of my impromptu pouch for far more useful things like the Herbs I decided to look for since nothing big had attacked me yet. It was not every day I was given the chance to collect the stuff I needed without some furriends trying to swindle me out of other materials.

Still, where was the monster I had to murder - erh, hunt? Kill. I might as well do a sightseeing tour through a fascinating forest while I was at it.

Half an hour later, my mounting annoyance had evolved into full-blown irritation.

My hoody with aspirations of being a bag was already filled with a variety of herbs, berries, whetstones, and mushrooms. I even collected the tusks and largest still intact bones of the bullfango that made me faceplant while I was busy looking through shrubberies for useful berries.

I ate some thorns, my ass hurt from the impact, and I had found out that at least their meat tasted pretty good even if it was prepared with repeated burst of fire and copious amounts of blunt force trauma.

It might have been partially due to my Tinker “memories” surfacing but I already absolutely despised the fuckers.

And that was completely ignoring the bnahabras, the house cat-sized flying insects with stingers the size of my forearm that buzzed around with the keen intent to sting me and only me. On top of the more sensibly sized insects. And they too simply disintegrated when I hit them with the hammer without leaving anything useful behind.

The only reason I even knew that it was half an hour later without any indication of something that actually wanted to kill me was because I whipped out my cellphone and started to take photographs of the surrounding. It looked outlandish enough and thus would likely be of interest of Armsmaster and – if I was allowed to actually to post it – at least some of my new-found fans.

I mean, the sight of enormous vertebrae and ribs showing through the occasional holes in the canopy wasn’t something you’d see every day. Not even in our post-Scion world of ours.

But that didn’t mean that I wasn’t getting actively angry at the forces to be for not dumping me right in front of whatever monster they thought needed a good smiting. It was almost insulting if precisely that was too much to ask after having been trans-dimensional transport. How hard could a few extra yards or miles be anyway, after such a feat?

At least, I thought that was what I was supposed to hunt something. After all, it was
what had triggered my return journey the first time it happened the week before.

I just had to find the damned thing.

Luckily, my wish for impending slaughter was granted when I took another picture of a grazing deer-like creature.

Again, I flinched and messed up the photo in the process but I didn’t really mind.

Said mind was in an entirely different place as I felt something breathing down my neck. I carefully turned to face whatever had managed to sneak up on me and was greeted by two large, yellow eyes.

Well, actually, they were markings on orange, spiked ears which hid a set of smaller, yellow eyes and a trunk which were visible briefly as the upside down monkey tilted its… her head in cautious curiosity.

The long, bi-clawed limbs hung at her sides, prepared to lash out in case something happened, while hanging on a low-hanging vine with a spike on her tail.

Membranes running down her arms and side twitched slightly as I slowly brought up my cellphone and backed off.

I took a picture.

I forgot the flash was still on and the kecha wacha tumbled to the ground in shock while I hastily stored the phone back into its pouch to free up both my hands and actually wield my hammer.

The lemur monkey pushed herself back on its feet, balancing on her wrist and thus partially hiding the long, wicked talons that made up her hand. She towered over me by a five or so feet.

Her ears started to undulate and she roared a shrill roar that was loud enough to force me into blocking my ears from the sudden pain spike.

The monkey jumped at me before I had completely recovered; before the pain had faded completely, and swiped at me with one large claw, her reach longer than expected.

Sparks lighted up the dim forest as the blow glanced off my cuirass and launched me backward. I rolled to control the landing of my involuntary fight, dug in my own talons into the ground, and charged the beast with the gun hammer raised behind my back.

I felt my core musculature tense and compact while energy was stored and the hammerhead began to spin.

I brought the hammer down with a mighty crack only to discover that the kecha wacha had jumped backward with a flip and looked at me menacingly. The hammer stuck in the ground and I needed a moment to pull it out again.

A moment the monkey didn’t give me from her quasi-gliding position, flapping its arms ineffectively to stay aloft. She spat at me using her trunk to give the projectile more speed.

The sight on its own might have been funny – hilariously so even – but I wasn’t really
in the mood to agree with that.

I saw the ball of spit the size of my torso fly towards me with too little time to dodge out of the way.

The slimy watery substance hit me with a force that forced the air out of my lungs. Mucous clung to the armor weighing me down. I tried to take a breath only to fill my mouth with the stuff.

I rolled sideways as the kecha wacha glided towards me and slammed both arms down on the position I was previously at. My lungs burned while I stopped myself from falling over after the roll and scrambled – stumbled – towards the nearest tree.

The mucous still blocked my mouth and nose, oozing inside both.

Out of the monkey’s line of sight, digging through the hoody-turned-bag around my hips to find something – anything that would allow me to breathe. That would allow me to get the air needed to prepare my next strike.

Leaning against the tree trunk I brought a blue berry to my mouth with shaking hands while keeping a watchful eye out for the attacker that hadn’t realized just yet what was supposed to happen in these encounters. What was going to happen as soon as I could breathe.

The mucous that covered the Nullberry blocked its bitter taste even as the sliminess made me want to retch all the same.

A couple of heartbeats later I felt my body beginning to warm up and sweat.

Whatever kept the slime… slimy was destroyed by my sweat and water streamed from my body.

I breathed and delicious air stilled the fire in my lungs.

Moments later, they protested as I had to dive away once more because the kecha wacha dropped down from the canopy with outstretched arms, spinning like a demented blender.

I scrambled back up and swung my hammer towards the incoming claws with a quick motion.

With a crack, one of the four deadly appendages broke off and the monkey cried out in pained outrage.

I brought the hammer down on the squirming form on the ground only to have to jump back to avoid the raking hands trying to slice open my feet. I missed.

The monkey stood up with murder in her eyes and almost caught me by surprise by throwing an honest to goodness tantrum.

Not heeding the pain she had to be feeling, she started to smash the ground in blind rage. Hopping slightly with every maddened strike, rotating on her own axis.

I might have been in trouble if I was laying somewhere on the ground at her feet or if she had stunned me beforehand.
As it was, it only served to present her back to me. I took the opportunity and charged once more with my hammer held up high behind my back.

This time, the strike connected on the beast’s lower back and fire bathed its legs while rattling my hands.

What worried me was that I didn’t feel any cracks indicating I’d broke something. I was really lucky with the strike that managed to break off its claw.

That didn’t mean it hadn’t hurt her. She looked back at me in a way that instinctively made me hop backward.

It was probably what saved my feet from being detached from my body by the hate-filled swipe of her healthy left arm.

The ears folded over her head to form a helmet; to make her resemble a predator baring its teeth. I pressed my hands against my ears, cursing the fact that had nothing to attach the hammer to my person.

She cried again, rage and pain bleeding into the roar that left me unable to do much besides trying to block it out.

The kecha wacha jumped back up into the canopy when she saw I was too far away for a quick swipe. Too far away and ready to retaliate.

I was already moving as it stuck it’s head out of the dense foliage and loosened a salvo of three spit projectiles.

The first one went flying past behind me. The second one went wide as I suddenly changed direction.

The third one almost hit me and forced me to stop in my tracks completely as it impacted on the ground right at my feet.

Which left me wide open as the monkey came gliding down at me with a terrible speed and arms outstretched.

I rolled out of the way, but still, when I stood back up I noticed that it hadn’t been enough. A claw got stuck in the corner of my lips and almost tore away my jaw in the process. It remained attached but it managed to tear away most of my left cheek.

*It hurt like a motherfucker.*

I forced the pain into the same room as the incoherently babbling me that normally occupied my mind, I ignored the blood seeping down my throat and into my cuirass.

I didn’t pay heed to the wind that dried up my gums and chilled my exposed teeth as I began running at the tumbling creature who dared to inflict those very same wounds.

I brought the full weight of my hammer and then some down on the head of the offending monkey with a snarl.

A snarl that grew louder as a mad grin appeared on the still working side of my face. A motion that only brought more pain that was exiled to the same place as the rest of it.
I felt a brief moment of resistance as the hammer made contact with the hardened ear before that gave way with a satisfying crack. The leftover force was more than enough to pop and broil one of her eyes at the same time.

The kecha wacha howled in pain, stumbling and trying to stand up while it blindly and drunkenly thrashed on the ground. Since it was apparent she tried to protect her head with her flailing, I went for a softer target.

Three quick steps brought me to her ass and tail. I brought my hammer down on the general area.

This time, the first strike did break something now that her pelvis was in contact with the ground and she couldn’t feather the blow with her legs. The second blow slid off the compacted pelvis and the hot edge bit deep into the tail. The third and final blow was aimed upwards and with a firm grip of the ground and a rotation I punted the suffering monster a yard away. Each strike bathed the lower half of the monster in searing flames.

The acrid smell of burned hair intermingled with that of burned meat and shit.

The kecha wacha pushed herself upright once again, her ruined hind legs buckling but somehow still bearing the load of the nearly thirty feet long monster.

I shielded my ears once more as she loosened a terrified and pain-filled cry.

Too late, I realized why she started flapping her arms.

With a snarled curse, I dropped my hammer and leaped towards the monkey that was about to take off. I managed to grab its tail in midair and…

…and the thing tore off and dropped me onto the forest floor, burying my face into the ground wound-first.

This time, the monkey managed to stay airborne, somehow, and with a curse, I had to witness it climbing away through the overgrown canopy.

I stood up, draping the severed tail around my neck like some demented scarf. I picked the twigs and dirt out of the gaping hole where my cheek used to be with one hand while the other was busy grabbing and transferring Herbs from my bag into my mouth. My eyes never wavered from the direction the kecha wacha fled in.

I felt the way the edges of my ragged wound twitched and pulsed, forming raw, fleshy tendrils searching for the other end of the wound as I chewed on the same Herb I used in my Potion.

By the time my right hand clasped around the handle of my gun hammer, I felt how the left side of my jaw was pulled towards my skull as the tendrils had found the right place and contracted.

When I put the broken off claw into my bag, my left cheek itched as the tendrils started to fuse with one another and the looming dizziness I hadn’t really noticed faded.

I was jogging towards my severely wounded prey when the outright itch was replaced by a sore irritation.

Despite the frustration I felt when the kecha wacha fled and how my injury hadn’t
healed completely, I had a bit of a joyful hop in my long strides. I knew the beast couldn’t go on for much longer and I had strong reasons to believe its death would be my ticket back home.

Back home where I could start making new toys with the material harvested from the silly, orange monkey.

Soon, I stumbled across the first signs of her passing in the form of a trail of blood that no doubt came from her tail stump. It then made way for a trail of trampled foliage where she pulled her near useless lower body through.

The trail led me to a small cliff at its feet the kecha wacha lay sleeping. Maybe the creature had hoped I wouldn’t be able to scale down the sheer rocky wall. Maybe, she hadn’t been able to go any further.

The reasons didn’t really matter. I could see that the stump had stopped bleeding and the entire pelvis area somehow looked less… wrong.

The bitch had run away to get a chance to heal, no doubt wanting to come back and take revenge afterward.

I showed my teeth to no one in particular.

It really didn’t matter. Not the cliff, nor the fact she was slowly able to heal.

I knew I would survive a jump from this height and more and this would be the perfect opportunity to test out the… feature of this armor set.

I leaped off the cliff and started charging up one final attack. I wanted to finish this with one last hit.

Two things happened in the air. I suddenly started accelerating downward at a ridiculously unnatural speed and I got a slight sensation that I could grab the air with my feet at any moment, consolidating it to make a brief platform just to launch the attack.

I did just that less than a foot above the ground and the kecha wacha’s head exploded by the strike that left a crater in the ground even after that.

Not moments after the blow landed, I started to feel the familiar tug behind my navel beginning to build. I dropped my hammer to get out my knife while kicking over the headless, spasm racked corpse of my target.

With a quick motion, I severed the nearest arm, the left one with which she tore open my face, at the shoulder and slung it around my neck on top of her tail. With the arm secured, I went on to flay the hide off her stomach with quick, practiced motions, slung the hide over my shoulder and started digging in her abdominal cavity.

I barely managed to remove three of her six Aqua Sacks, grasping them under my arm, before the feeling started to reach its peak.

I got a hold of my hammer seconds before my surrounding shifted again.

I was dumped on one of several panicking PRT agents searching the room, likely for clues on where I suddenly disappeared to.
They yelped, with the exception of the man I landed on. He groaned in pain as he became very close friends with the floor of my room.

I stood up under the wide-eyed stares from everyone (sans the one clasping his head) and heard someone thundering up the stairs.

Dad appeared in the doorway, pushing aside one agent and a look of relief flickered briefly to anger before squarely landing on the same shocked one the others wore.

I gave him an awkward wave which dropped one of the sacks on the floor with a wet squelch.

“Uhm, hi?”
Multiple things happened after my awkward greeting. The agent who served as my cushion was pushing himself up again when a squirt of the dropped Aqua Sac hit his hand, knocking it out from under him. It slid away over the newly wet floor and the dazed agent strengthened his friendship with the floor.

Meanwhile, the initial shock of my sudden reappearance had apparently worn off and hands moved away from a variety of weapons and the stance of the gathered agents relaxed just a tiny bit. It seemed that I still wasn’t considered an innate threat. Lucky me.

That made the third and final thing that I saw happening all the more obvious. It started with Dad, his shocked expression slowly mixing with one of disgust. The agents, their adrenaline levels probably higher thanks to their training, followed suit soon after in the awkward, relative silence.

It was only after I tried to pick up the Aqua Sac I had dropped in an attempt to distract the nasty thoughts that had started in my mind that I realized where their revulsion might have come from.

I had almost forgotten that the kecha wacha’s head had exploded like an over ripe melon with my last attack and, well, it showed that I had been in the primary splatter zone. My speedy dissection hadn’t helped either. I was covered with blood and brain fluid while chunks of furry flesh and fragments of her skull were stuck in the nooks and crannies of my armor. Reaching for my neck on the side of my still tender cheek revealed that it didn’t look too good either if the red, gooey liquid on my hand was any indication.

That movement caused the room to erupt in a flurry of sound and movement.

Dad came closer to check on me and while the agents vacated my room, calling someone over their earpieces. Apparently, he first thought that I wanted to skip my first day in school when I suddenly ran off shouting incoherently. Of course, he went after me, only to find absolutely nothing when the trail of gouges in the floorboards suddenly came to a stop. What didn’t help at putting his mind at ease was the fact that my armor was missing while my bag of goodies lay forgotten on my desk.

It was around that time that the squad leader of our merry band of troopers had the bright idea that I could have been kidnapped by Lung or one of the other Gangs. He happily ignored the obvious lack of ashes found which would rule out Oni Lee’s involvement. The house still stood unburned so that should have been a good hint that the big man hadn’t come to visit either.

While I could imagine that our resident gang of supernatural Nazis would have gotten a good chuckle out of my video featuring Lung – I knew for a fact that at least Rune did so thanks to a confused recounting by Dad of what happened during my forced hiatus –I couldn’t really see them acting on that if I was completely honest. There were surprisingly little complaints in the white community about them – considering the fact that they were as close to being literal Nazis as one
could get in modern times. They liked it that way, enough to avoid trouble in our neighborhood. It was a different story in minority communities but that was as surprising as water being wet. Bottom line was, they wouldn’t have just kidnapped me without me doing something… drastic first. I would have remembered if I had managed to piss them off as well. I think. Probably.

… Besides, I doubted that they’d wanted to recruit me either. I wasn’t exactly the Aryan ideal before anything happened and now I wasn’t even the same species anymore. I couldn’t see the mooks who actually believed in their ideology react positively on the notion of having a “lesser race” join. Especially in a more literal case.

I didn’t even need to consider the Merchants. The ideas that the drug heads could have pulled something off this stealthily was simply too funny. Even with Squealer’s monstrosities having the ability to cloak (if the rumors on the PHO were to be believed), they’d still be far too big to get anywhere without collateral damage.

In short, I had no clue why they could have thought that I was kidnapped after having told Armsmaster about my fight against the nerscylla.

It only caused Dad to seemingly age half a decade in the apparent ten minutes I was gone. The bastards.

Weirdly enough, he didn’t go for a hug after I had told them the summary of my little adventure that conveniently forgot the near-jaw-removal bit. Luckily, the stump of the monkey’s tail ended on the same side as said wound that totally didn’t happen so that was “explained” as well.

After having sliced off a single vertebra worth of the spiked kecha wacha tail material, I simply threw the tail into my box alongside with the rest of my hard-earned loot.

Then came the phone call and I had to recount once more what had just happen. At least Assault could see the fun of the situation. According to him, the whole thing was “pretty metal” and he even thanked me for making console duty somewhat bearable. Apparently, seeing flustered and/or panicking PRT troopers reminded him of the “good old times”. Beyond that, he didn’t expect much in the way of consequences beyond being asked to wear some dimensional anomaly detection device or something.

He would personally even ask for some kind of wearable camera. Assault’s reasoning was that a video recording would give more information on my pocket dimension than the pictures I had taken and sent.

I suspected he just wanted to see the actual fight. I kinda liked his relaxed way of doing things.

I mean, it wasn’t as if I could control it, so what use was getting riled up about it? Better use that time to prepare and enjoy myself.

With that out of the way, it was time to wash the gore out of the armor and collect the runoff in a bucket. Dad wouldn’t let me go anywhere without my equipment after realizing my little adventures could simply happen at any time. I thought it was a nice, low-impact way of giving the PRT scientists more samples to play with on top of that. It would also to dispel any speculations that it was anything else than a brightly colored monkey with a trunk that caused the chunky salsa before those even began.

The armor pieces were dried by spinning them around really fast. Improved strength and flexibility
can be very handy in unexpected areas, it seemed. The angrily glowing spare plate of metal I spun
the pieces of equipment over helped as well.

Dad reluctantly left for work soon after he was sure I was all right. He had convinced me to actually
still go to Arcadia for the remainder of the morning. All it took was mentioning that no smithy would
be open on such a short notice and that I had to find a way to spend my time somehow. Why then,
not start with trying to make new friends?

Well, that and the fact that he had apparently been in contact with New Wave over the weekend and
they wanted to meet up with me or something. Dad thought that going despite my little adventure
would earn me some brownie points with both Brandish and Photon Mom. Especially the former,
who seemed to insist on academic diligence in face of heroic activities if Glory Girl’s occasional rant
was to be believed. Doubly so considering she was already attending some college classes. There did
seem to be a push for general excellence in New Wave.

All of that wasn’t the true deciding factor, though. It was the pained conviction he had when he told
me they needed him at the Union and he’d go no matter how little he liked it. Apparently, the
Merchants had redoubled their activities and they were losing desperate dockworkers to both illicit
activities and as new recruits. Dad couldn’t allow half-assed work being done on the few jobs they
still had – not while he was still trying to get the ferry reinstated. People were counting on him.

So, even though he was still hurting, afraid, and feeling useless due to my sudden disappearance,
he’d go now that he knew I was okay. What kind of daughter would I be if I stayed at home while
feeling perfectly fine just because of silly teen drama I simply assumed might happen?

It would also give me some time away from the stern-faced PRT agents that were still hovering
around. They’d be returning to a less visible kind of surveillance if nothing happened in the
meantime, but until then they’d be around.

Dad drove away with his van of agents trailing behind minutes before my armor was secured in a
bag and in the van I’d be traveling in and we set off as well. I was absentmindedly chewing on some
maccao jerky as the vehicle accelerated smoothly.

The fact that people suddenly cared enough for me to organize this kind of protection was all kinds
of jarring. On one hand, it was nice to see people seemingly caring about my safety. On the other,
it… irritated me that it took me Triggering and getting to the point where I wouldn’t need them
anymore to actually get there. If people would just have paid attention before, all of this wouldn’t
have been needed.

But then they wouldn’t have potential access to the Potions, a small, traitorous, paranoid voice told
me, are you sure they’d have any interest in preventing shit like that from happening?

I banished that particular thought with a shake of my head which confused my silently solemn escort.
At least my general annoyance over the situation almost made the guilt over causing so much wasted
resources and extra overwork go away. Almost, but not entirely.

It would have helped if the agents had shown any initiative to get to know us but apparently they
wanted it to be business only; rotating agents, obvious aliases and the whole deal. I doubt so many
agents would have the surname “smith”. They were just doing their doing their job, but I knew even
now, with their reflecting, concealing helmets on, that they thought it a waste of their time.

We arrived at the closed gates of Arcadia High a full hour after classes had started and the guards
weren’t that happy to see us. Not that their feelings mattered all that much if the PRT wants to get through. The agents escorting me took responsibility over me and my knife (the futuristic looking grenades they carried helped with that). The guards and the squad leader then had a little chat regarding where I could deposit my hammer and the rest of my armor in case of an emergency.

Soon, I was walking to the entrance flanked by two agents. One of them was carrying the bag with the rest of my armor while the other almost managed to hide his disappointment. He offered to carry my hammer but soon found out that it would have likely involved pulling a hernia and a couple of shifted vertebrae. I don’t think it helped when I walked off holding the hammer in one hand.

Said walk was long enough to make me realize how ridiculous we – I had to look. I had attached the linen bag heavy with Potion and similar items to my belt and its bulk peeked out from under my hoody. Said hoody was faded dark green whose arms had already become a bit too small before the changes. It clashed with the blue sports shorts I had been forced to wear ever since my legs stopped being compatible with regular pants. Never mind the leather stockings that came with the fancy, high boots with toe-holes of my armor. Then there was the hammer in my right hand I hadn’t cleaned quite as well as I hoped if the singed bit of yellow fur I spotted was any indication. On my left marched a PRT trooper with the seriousness the helmet tried to convey gravely diminished by the bulky blue Ikea bag he was carrying. The one on my right walked slumped over ever so slightly.

The thing that truly pushed it over the edge would probably be the cheap backpack I had to buy after the Trio had destroyed. It was an ugly, formless, brown thing that would have looked ridiculous on anyone. The effect it had combined with the rest of my outfit had to be… spectacular.

And that wasn’t even touching on my home-made haircut and the frizzled state of my hair.

Or my look in general.

At least the hoody I had ruined in my little expedition had fit.

… And I had to enter one of the nicest schools in the city that was visited by some of the richest kids like that.

It took more than a just bit of effort to keep my chin up in defiance as the four-story building started to loom over me and keep placing one foot in front of the other.

I really wished some kind of monster would burst out of the ground and start trouble. At least that would be a decent excuse to not enter the building, right? I knew that there were plenty of monsters that could swim through solid rock and if the felyne and maccao could make it to this place, why not one of them too? Maybe if I concentrated hard enough on one of them…

… The doors slammed shut behind me with a resolute slam without any incident that could have delayed the inevitable. Damn.

Then I had to drop off the blue bag containing my armor, my gun hammer, and the sulking agent off at the janitor’s office near the entrance. They’d be easily accessible in case something happened, but out of sight. The agent even told me he’d bring me my equipment if the need arose and for that, he needed to stay behind. I didn’t have it in me to break his heart so I left him enjoying his fantasies.

The clicks of my claws on the stone floor echoed through the empty hallways whose silence was only broken by the soft murmur coming from the classrooms.
By the time we reached the floor of the vice principal's office, I was nervous enough to not notice the obvious, yellow sign warning about the wet floor. I slipped and you know the piercing screech nails make when dragged over a blackboard? The claws of my foot made a similar sound as they dug into the stone floor in a desperate attempt to keep the only slightly flailing me from falling on my ass. Only about a thousand time louder and more penetrating. Neither my clumsiness nor the fact that I was reminded once more that I could still blush helped my situation.

The last agent was left to guard the door and I entered vice-principal Howell’s office after being invited to do so.

“There you are,” the woman with bleached hair and colorful accessories greeted me. “I’m glad you were still able to make it despite that incident.”

She stood up and offered her hand and I gently took it, careful to avoid making contact with the tips of my claws. “Vice-principal Howell.”


“Nice to meet you too. This is Mr. Sullivan,” She continued, gesturing to a man sitting in on my side of the desk. “He’s a lawyer from our legal team and is here to clarify any questions you might have.”

I repeated my careful handshake with the now standing and smiling man before steering my focus back to the vice-principal. It wasn’t that hard a thing to do since, if I had to describe Mr. Sullivan in one word it would be “gray”. He was averagely build but well groomed, with an inoffensive haircut and neat suit. He did seem pleasant enough, though.

“With that out of the way, take a seat,” Howell began, gently smiling waiting while I settled in the chair she pointed at. “Let’s jump straight to business; The next class will start soon and I’m sure you don’t want to have to sneak in halfway.”

I shuffled a bit. “Yeah, sure. Let’s”

“All right. I think it would be best if we started with the most recent problem, namely your sudden disappearance. Do you know whether this will happen more often? Will it follow some sort of time table?”

“Well… probably?” I hazarded. “I mean, the same thing happened when I… Triggered and that was on a Monday as well. But that happened a bit later in the morning, so I don’t really want to assume it’s something really regular.” I weakly smiled while she took some notes. “I mean, it has only happened twice and it isn’t like I have found a way to control it yet.”

My train of thought almost derailed as I realized something. “How do you know about my disappearance this morning and that it has happened more than once anyway?”

Howell and Sullivan exchanged a look and the latter gave a small nod. “Because of our close ties to the Wards and the PRT, we have access to some non-disclosed information for the sake of risk assessment and to better accommodate the Wards while protecting their civilian identities. We received a call from the PRT, informing us about today’s incident after you got back. Of course, we’re strictly bound to secrecy on any matter regarding the Wards. Is this all right with you?”

I nodded. It made enough sense to me. They had to prepare for potential emergencies for the Wards as well know the most important, potentially hidden dangers for their students. That generally took
some amount of communication.

“For any other question, feel free to ask Mr. Sullivan,” Howell continued, lightly tapping her pen on the paper. “I’ll start looking into restructuring your Monday morning just in case. What about the creatures that appeared on Thursday? The PRT has informed us that they likely came from the same place you go to. Will they be a danger?”

Her voice had grown considerably colder with that last question.

I shrank back a little. “I don’t know. I did know them but, again, I’m not sure why they appeared and I didn’t feel anything when it actually happened. It might have been a one-off event.” I shrugged.

Howell sighed. “And what if it wasn’t? Did you know that the PRT have yet to find an entry point? Until you – we – know what caused them to appear I have to work under the assumption that they might somehow appear on the school grounds. What would you do if that happened and why should we risk our students?”

I felt my mouth open and close a couple of times in shocked indignation as I tried to find the right words. “I would fight whatever appeared, of course! I should at the very least be able to hold out until help arrived. Besides, everybody knows the Wards go to school here and then there’s Glory Girl and Panacea as well. I’d say this would probably be the safest place for both me and the people around me. The only way I see them potentially preventing any danger would be by throwing me in some isolated prison or something. For something I have no control over, I don’t want like this, and might not even flipping happen again! Yeah, that seems fair.” Acid virtually dripped from those last words as the memories and emotions from Winslow threatened to break out of their dedicated mental room.

I stared right into her eyes. She met my gaze unflinchingly. “And don’t I deserve a chance for education after all the shit I’ve been through while people who were supposed to protect me just watched it happen? After I’ve been turned into… this by the bitches who have tormented me for one and a half year without any repercussions?”

It wasn’t like I necessarily loved school but it had been so fucking frustrating to never have gotten chance to find out what interested me in high school. To never have the chance to lose myself in a topic without fearing another cruel prank. To know that no matter how well I did in exams, I’d still earn barely passing grades in the end and more often than not, the barely hidden scoffing disappointment of the teachers thanks to the homework and assignments that went “missing”.

I liked history – both the normal and paranormal kind – but Gladly might just have ruined that as well for me. Only computer class wasn’t somehow tainted by the Trio’s actions.

I wasn’t even sure anymore what subjects I liked in middle school. The memories simply hurt too much by Emma’s betrayal to be sure.

I deflated as the memories I had stowed away washed over me and I desperately tried to put them back where they came from.

I flinched a little when I felt Sullivan’s hand giving mine a reassuring squeeze, empathy clearly visible on his face. It helped. Seeing a stranger care.

“So, of course, you deserve at least that much,” vice-principal Howell answered as I calmed down. “I just have to look at the bigger picture. I know you’re probably in desperate need to find some friends
as well. It’s one of the reasons why we agreed when the PRT approached us about the matter. Granted, that was before those raptors appeared but we truly still want to give you a chance. I only wanted to present you with the biggest of my problems to see how you reacted to get a better picture of you.”

She took a breath before continuing. “However, you do have to keep in mind that we might have to find alternative ways to provide you your education if the problem turns out to be bigger than expected. It might involve looking into something more high-tech, but as long as you don’t do anything illegal, we’re willing to find a solution.”

I sullenly nodded. “If it helps, I have noticed that the maccao focused on me as soon as they spotted me. Anything else might behave the same… I also want to carry Potions – a healing item I can make – at all times just in case something did go wrong.”

“Both would indeed help. Especially the latter. Why haven’t we heard of those ‘potions’ yet? They sound potentially life-saving.” Howell actually slightly cocked her head in curiosity.

“They’re still in the process of being tested for their safety,” I replied with some regained vigor. “I was advised to keep it a secret to the public until that was done. Both to avoid getting people’s hope up too early and to avoid making a bigger target of myself.”

She flashed me a small smile. “I see but that does bring me to my second point. Your knife.” I opened my mouth to protest. “I know, why you’re carrying it. I’ve seen the video of that battle and realize that you could have better protected everyone if you had a weapon at the time. You perhaps wouldn’t have been wounded. While I might want to argue that you wouldn’t need it with your equipment stored near the entrance and thus making it obsolete, I’m under no delusions. I know, you’d be just as capable to harm and kill normal humans without it.”

This time I nearly jumped out of the chair in protest. “Please, let me finish. I didn’t mean to accuse you of anything. I’m simply stating the uncomfortable truth of most parahumans people desperately want to forget. Just like they simply don’t want to imagine what forces are at play when someone who could potentially use busses as baseball bats decides to punch someone without holding back. Still, we let Victoria attend classes without constantly foaming her or something.

“Considering that, I don’t see why we should deny you access to your knife – especially if that decision might hamper your abilities to protect your fellow students in case something went wrong. I’ll just have you sign a statement that you won’t use it maliciously to smooth out the legal side of things.”

“Ehm, shouldn’t someone of the PRT be around for these kinds of discussions?” I asked, thinking of the Squad leader I left at the door.

“Most of what’s discussed today has already been prepared in collaboration with the PRT,” Sullivan spoke up. “We’ll be discussing the security implications of this meeting with the good officer standing outside after we’re done.” He gave a lopsided smirk. “While the statement has been drafted in together with the PRT, it doesn’t change the fact that this is more an in-house issue in the first place. On an individual basis, we would like to retain some independence.”

“Fine by me.” I’d be fucked anyway if I attacked a fellow student. Period. “Would I still be allowed to show it and maybe give small demonstrations?”

“Let me check…” Sullivan opened his briefcase and retrieved a single sheet of paper and scanned its
“You would be allowed to show it, but it can’t ever leave your hand.”

“I also have to ask you whether there’d be a possibility for more harmless looking weapons,” Howell added while Sullivan handed me the document.

I went through a mental list of the materials I gathered from the kecha wacha. “I could make a weapon that looks just like a staff if that’s better.”

“Would that staff have any hidden or visible blades or spikes?” I shook my head. “Yes, that would indeed be better.”

It looked like I’d be spending plenty more time raising and training my cute little Atlas.

“Next, I just want to quickly address your grades. I realize that much of it has to do with the bullying you had to deal with as well as direct sabotage but we still fear you’re behind. We have decided to have your teachers observe you the coming weeks to determine where you stand. If they find areas where you’re lacking, we’ll arrange for some extra lessons so you can catch up.”

I groaned.

“It’ll only be something temporary and the more effort you’ll put in, the sooner you’ll be rid of it.” I didn’t like her mischievous grin that flickered across her face.

She had me and she knew it. Getting more time to Tinker would be enough motivation to give my all and I had the feeling she knew.

“Fine,” I hesitantly agreed.

“Then,” Sullivan spoke, handing me a pen. “All that is left is for you to sign the declaration of non-malicious intent and I’ll send the document to your dad so he can sign as well. Or fight it if he has complaints. He should have plenty of experience with these kinds of things. Take your time reading it through and don’t be afraid asking if you aren’t sure about something.”

I read through and realized it really looked like another legal attempt to cover their collective asses and that it only mentioned weapons I carried on my person. I signed it at the correct spot with date and place.

“Before I forget,” Howell began as I handed back both paper and pen to the lawyer. “I’m sure you’re glad to hear that we do not tolerate gang behavior and bullying. I can’t promise anything would be done right away since we would have to start an internal investigation, but such reports will be taken seriously. So, don’t hesitate if – however unlikely the chance might be – if something like that happens to contact a teacher or me directly.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

I had my doubts whether it would work, of course, but at least they pretended to care.

Howell typed something on her computer. “All right, I see your next class is Biology. In room B42. It’s in the other building on the left two floor down if you take the corridor connecting the two. You should be able to find it and otherwise, you can simply ask someone.”

I nodded and the three of us rose at the nearly same time. “It has been nice meeting you, Taylor.”
Once again, I shook the outreached hand – this time with a bit more confidence. “The same, vice-
principal Howell.”

“I’m looking forward learning what you have in store for us,” Sullivan said as we shook hands. “Just 
try to avoid giving me too much work, all right?”

“I’ll try, Mr. Sullivan,” I replied with a small chuckle and made my way to the door.

“Would you send in the PRT agent in when you pass him?” Howell asked before I reached it.

“Sure,” I replied as I placed my hand on the door handle.

A short conversation with the agent in question later, I was on my way to the classroom in question. I 
reached it with five minutes to spare after only getting lost a tiny bit.

That meant I had enough time to be spotted by the teacher and thus got introduced to Mr. Spears.

The dreaded introduction to the class was less of a fuss than I expected. It mostly involved a lot of 
awkward silence as they tried not to stare at me and utterly failed at it.

It was pretty much a similar reaction to the students I met during my little adventure of finding the 
room. I hadn’t been able to figure out whether they were simply afraid to hurt my feelings because 
they knew what had happened, were too shy or were straight up afraid of me.

The lesson on the contents of human cells went off without much of a hitch. I had to ask Kristie, my 
closest neighbor a couple of times for definitions when Winslow’s lacking education made itself 
apparent, but other than that I was able to keep up. It helped that, apparently, my Tinker/Thinker 
ability apparently gave me some innate understanding of biology that extended to the cellular level. I 
would still have to learn the names but the rest should come pretty easily.

The take-home message of that lesson was that the mitochondria were indeed the powerhouses of the 
cells. I knew there was more than just that.

That and that the chairs with their attached “desk” weren’t made for my slightly off proportions and 
thus annoyingly uncomfortable

There were some attempts at small-talk during the break but most of them had the same sudden case 
of shyness which meant that I had to carry the conversation. Sadly, that was one skill the Trio 
managed to exorcise out of me during their reign of terror.

The result was awkwardness that threatened to spiral out of control if Jimmy hadn’t intervened.

Jimmy was a member of the Arcadia’s cape fan club. He had become frustrated by everybody’s 
inaction and decided to take matters into his own hands. At least he managed to ask how my back 
was first before he started his rapid-fire questions regarding my powers.

By the time Mr. Spears had to break our little group up, I was showing him my knife and was telling 
him how I made the thing. Well, I tried to. If his confused expression was any indication, I wasn’t 
that successful.

But either way, Jimmy was pleasant enough to talk to that I let myself be convinced to join him over
lunch. While I didn’t have any lessons that afternoon (long life “vocational” activities), I apparently still had to meet up with someone of New Wave if I interpreted Dad’s hints correctly and I was hungry anyway. Besides, it was nice to talk to someone without being judged or fearing to become the butt of a cruel joke. I hadn’t known how much I missed that.

I was in the middle of telling him my impressions of Armsmaster when he simply stopped walking.

“Oh Chris!” he shouted down the hallway. “Look who’s in my Biology class.”

I turned to look for the Chris in question when…

High technology. Modularity with sub-specialization of energy manipulation and anti-gravity. Fuse neural cortex with that of “Armsmaster” with radiant mucus. Ring of silver rathalos scales and nova crystal setting.

It took a second before I realized that Kid Win was approaching me. It took two more before the implications of my “scan” truly hit me.

It wasn’t just that I could use fellow capes as raw materials. No, I could actually combine their powers and make them stronger than they’d be on their own. I could make them whole. I felt like they wanted to. It was even a bit easier to make than something made purely out of one of them.

And I was staring. Hard.

“What’s the matter, Taylor? You’re zoning out on me.” Jimmy had noticed as well.

Fuck.
I decided that blinking was a far better alternative to actually, physically, slapping myself in the face to get my act together again.

After all, everything was just fine. I definitely didn’t feel any urges to cut up a boy my age and make a fancy earring out of him, or hunt down a childhood hero and do the same to him. Even if I was feeling these things, I’d be utterly disgusted by these thoughts.

… Maybe sometime in the future, I would manage to convince myself.

It was weird in a way, how it reminded me of staring down a bridge and a small voice telling you to just jump to see what would happen. An irrational urge fighting against a myriad of rational arguments without much place for emotions at that moment.

Except I couldn’t convince myself that the urge was completely irrational. I was absolutely certain that I could make something that would basically allow anyone to gain the improved powers of both Armsmaster and Kid Win.

It would help to improve my own powers.

The main thing that held me back, the thing I was vaguely amused and slightly bemused by, was that it would cause too much of a hassle for me. That, and the fact that both heroes did fine enough even without my intervention. That said, I did wonder why Kid Win hadn’t shown that modularity my messed-up powers had identified.

I could force the urge to dismantle and repurpose down. For now. I doubted that I could do the same when confronted with an utter waste of space and talent or a body. Even now, it seemed such a waste of potential.

As it was, neither of my distractions really worked as I hoped.

“Ah, you’re back,” Jimmy commented, wide-eyed and with a grin I didn’t quite like. “But holy shit, that looked creepy.”

“What did?” I already had a good idea but I’d take any opportunity to steer the discussion away from the other far more uncomfortable one.

“The way your inner eyelids moved. I mean, you’ve already me told they do, but man, it didn’t really prepare me for actually seeing it.” Yay, success.

He took a deep breath, immediately shattering my hopes with his shit-eating grin. “Buuut, you already knew that. I haven’t seen you blink before and know it’s something you do actively,
meaning you used it as a distraction.” He tapped his nose knowingly. “So, why did you zone out? I know it wasn’t to decide on your favorite hero. I’ve read your post on PHO and know it’s Alexandria so that means…”

He made a show looking back and forth between Kid – Chris and I. Shit.

“Oh no,” He started just as I was about to formulate an excuse. “That isn’t possible…”

*People were staring!* “You totally have the hots for Chris, don’t you?”

What?

There I was, formulating excuses and very reasonable explanations (with back-ups) why I would be staring in a non-predatory manner at someone and hopefully steer away from the discussion from a potentially disruptive topic.

Those thoughts came to a halt Jimmy presented me that world-shattering idea of his. The only “genuine” interest I had encountered in Winslow was a one-sided one from Greg. And it was more a need for some weird kind of sharing misery than something romantic. The smallest and saddest little misery club of Brockton Bay. It wasn’t like he ever even tried to defend me whenever one of the girls “pranked” me in front of his eyes. Him being a bit of a creep certainly didn’t help either.

Then there was Todd at the beginning of my second semester in hell. Charming beefcake who seemed to actually care for me. I was desperate enough to swallow the act wholesale. Enough to overlook the ridiculous amount of gym-groomed muscle he carried around. Of course, it was another one of Emma and Madison’s ploys and the latter had Todd wound up all around her elegant little finger.

Long story short, he managed to convince naïve idiot me to go to the movies with him, argued he knew a shortcut through some alley and turned around with a camera in hand and a cruel smile of relief on his face. He filmed while the stupider goons of the trio belted me with dirty, cold sludge that ruined my best clothes – clothes I hadn’t dared to wear because I feared something like this would happen – all the while making fun of my stupidity and stick figure together with the harpies.

They left me curled up on the ground, cold, wet and dirty and I had the delightful task of walking home on a windy January afternoon and practice my story of how I slipped and fell into freshly melted sludge.

Three days later, after I had somewhat recovered from the cold, the real teasing started. The only thing that made it a bit more tolerable was that Todd and Madison broke up in less than a week. I wasn’t the only one who got played.

I hadn’t really paid any attention afterward. No one made any further advances, and I wasn’t foolish enough to ignore my paranoia.

So, the fact that Jimmy was teasing me over something like that without any malice… Well, it nearly broke my damned mind. Especially after what had happened to me recently.

The fact that the onlookers just moved along with a giggle instead of the point, laugh, and add insult to injury routine I was, didn’t help to reboot my damned brain either.

He laughed at my confusingly conflicted misery and turned to the approaching Chris. “Hey, where’s
Dennis? Shouldn’t he be dragging you along to find the greasiest burger in a mile-wide radius?”

Kid…Chris, damn it. Chris gave a sad smile. “He couldn’t make it. Something happened and he had to leave early.”

“You mean?” A significantly sobered up Jimmy asked. Chris nodded.

“Is something wrong?” I gave him a confused look.

“It’s his dad,” Chris provided. “He’s… let’s just say he’s not feeling well. If you want, you could try asking him, but…”

“It’s a sensitive issue,” I answered, feeling a bit guilty over how glad I was for this derailment. “I get it. I won’t pry when I meet him.”

“Thanks.” Chris sagged a bit as tension left his body and tried to move past us towards the exit.

Jimmy wouldn’t just let that happen and grabbed his arm. “Why not join us then?”

“I can’t be late for work and I wouldn’t want to im-“

“Nonsense. If you had time for your ongoing grease-hunt, you have time to join the peasants in the cafeteria. Besides, you don’t want to miss the latest juiciest details straight from the lizard’s mouth, now do you?”

“Hey!” I shouted, lightly tapping him on the shoulder with my fist.

Chris chuckled. “Fine. I’ll just blame you if I do come late.”

It was about that time that my stomach, even after feeding it maccao jerky snacks regularly, let its displeasure known with a loud rumble.

“With that out of the way shall we finally go then?” I suggested as the laughter had died down and boldly stepped towards where I thought the cafeteria was.

The people I encountered got out of my way with not quite fear but… nervous respect? Anyway, I made good progress down my chosen corridor before heard Chris’ shout.

“Taylor! You, uhm, you’re going the wrong way!”

By the time I returned I was fairly certain that those traitorous scales on my face had turned red again.

“You see, Chris? That wasn’t that hard,” Jimmy said as he patted the Tinker on the back. “Now, follow me before I starve in the corridors of Arcadia High. I wouldn’t want to be as rude as to inconvenience the good staff in such an impolite matter.”

I simply smiled, concentrating so that my teeth didn’t show. I wouldn’t want to scare people off and Dad did mention that showing my teeth might put people on edge.

It would be nice to have friends again. Nice to be able to relax around people again.
As if on cue, Jimmy slowed his step to allow me to catch up on the two casually bickering boys.

“By the way,” He stage-whispered as I arrived. “Does Glory Girl know you think of cheating on her with Chris over here?”

I stopped right in my track even as I heard Chris groan.

“You didn’t even know?” my current tormentor noted even as he conjured up his phone, flicked through it and showed it to me.

Someone had photographed me while giving the same stare to an arriving Glory Girl as I apparently gave Chris.

“There is more,” Jimmy suggested in a conspiratory tone.

I had to be careful not to accidentally destroy his phone while swiping through the gallery filled with easily misinterpreted pictures of Glory Girl and me.

The worst one was probably one taken just after we flew off. I had to hold on tight to my groceries on my belly with both hands while I was simply talking with Glory Girl. Nothing wrong there. Just practicality meeting healthy small talk with a local super hero and likely future colleague. Nothing wrong at all.

Sadly, my bag wasn’t visible from the angle the picture was taken from. That meant that my slightly hunched over, protective posture looked outright shy and demure.

Shy and demure as I was being carried off by the radiant Glory Girl in a bridal carry while she looked at me with a pleasant smile.

“Where did you get this from?” I asked with a slightly shaky voice.

“Where…” He slapped his forehead. “That’s right, you weren’t allowed on the internet after your stunt with Lung – you still have to tell me about that by the way – so let me fill you in. It’s basically all over the Bay discussion board and even a bit beyond. The mods may try to stop us but it’s pretty unsinkable by now.”

“And by unsinkable you mean?” I asked with mounting dread. I knew what he meant. I was a regular of those very boards – I knew what happened on them. But still, I hoped it was just an unfortunate choice of words.

A girl could hope, couldn’t she.

“Let’s just say that more than one Wyverian v Gallant discussion has popped up.” The bastard actually mimed pulling the chain of an old airhorn. “So imagine my surprise when I saw that same look aimed towards dear old Chris over here.”

“He just reminded me of someone,” I answered perhaps a bit too quickly. “Besides, I’m hungry and he was one of the few who didn’t look away when he noticed me looking.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take your secret to my grave.” He zipped up his lips.

Chris and I practiced our synchronized groaning.
I was starting to think of finding other friends.

Lunch was a lively affair with me answering Jimmy and Chris’ questions.

Yes, I did basically throw dung in Lung’s face. No, I’m not allowed to give a demonstration. Definitely can’t show off my Flash Bomb either. Sure, I’ll cut the plate in half if you pay for the damages.

Basic questions.

All the while, I got introduced to more and more of Jimmy and Chris’ mutual friends who had joined us while we ate the foodstuff that surprisingly managed to taste like food. A bit bland for my taste but it was far better than the greasy protein substitute they served at Winslow.

Chris excused himself as soon as he finished his meal. None of the other Wards just “happened” to wander by and take his place even though did spot Aegis wander through the crowd. At least he had the courtesy to not suggest multiple cape fusion gear. Yet.

All that came to an end when I heard a familiar voice over the crowd. “There you are, Taylor!”

The platinum blonde landed beside me with a graceful and obviously flight-powered hop. “I was looking for you!”

“Wha?” I managed to utter with a mouth full of my second refill.

Instead of answering straight away she gave me a once over with an increasingly skeptical look. “I thought you would be easier to spot, but what are you wearing exactly? I mean, I thought you had taste after showing off that armor of yours, but this? This cannot stand. You’ve to be careful about your image, you know?”

I just shot her an inquisitive glance while chewing my food and pondering whether my potions would work against asphyxiation as well.

Jimmy was struggling not to burst into laughter and I was pretty sure his lips started to go blue.

“Oh right,” Glory Girl – Vicky spoke after a while, grinning sheepishly. “Carol told me your dad would keep it a surprise. You’re going to meet the rest of the family today to see whether we could get along. I mean he did kinda let imply you wanted to join us but for that, we first need to hang out together, no?”

I opened my mouth and tried to interject. Jimmy’s lips really started to look blue by now even while the rest of our table showed at least mixture of awe and bemusement.

“But I thought, why not try to find her a bit earlier than planned?” I didn’t stand a chance. “And am I lucky I did. Before we go I need to get you some decent clothes. I’ll pay, so get up and let’s go shopping!”

That proved too much for poor Jimmy and he had to hold on to the table to prevent him from rolling over the floor.

“What’s wrong with him?” Not helping Victoria.
“Nothing,” I answered after finishing a final bite and working up the courage to face the inevitable. “It’s probably just something we talked about earlier, pay no mind. I take it the PRT knows of this?”

“Yeah, why?” She had taken my word for it and was ignoring the wheezing Jimmy.

“It’s just that they are a bit jumpy after I Lung disrupted my material acquisition. They’ll probably want to know of the change of plans as well.”

“So call them while we’re on the way they won’t mind as long as I’m around. Besides, it’s broad daylight. People don’t start trouble just after lunch.”

I did my best to convey my skepticism through body language alone. “I still have to get my gear as well, so let me just call them while we’re getting it and we can be off.”

It wasn’t like I had any chance to convince her otherwise. Especially if she couldn’t completely control her aura and her enthusiasm began to leak.

“You haven’t checked your phone while in here, have you? No reception. You can do that outside and then I’ll fly you.”

I groaned as Jimmy found enough breath to redouble his wheezing. “Fine, but do we have to fly?”

She looked at me in open confusion. “Well, yeah. Otherwise, we’d be too late to meet up with my folks. Didn’t say you liked it last time? You don’t have to worry about it looking weird – I’m flying with Amy all the time. People are used to seeing me carry people.”

It was that moment that I realized that she didn’t have a clue what was happening on the internet. Sure, she might use PHO as well but somehow I doubted she had strayed too far from the general news sections and the more heavily moderated discussions. She didn’t know what horrors lurked beneath. She had yet to be confronted by a story from Rose.

Some things simply can’t be unseen.

“Let’s go then,” I finally suggested with a shaky voice and stood up.

“Have fun you two,” Jimmy called out after us, somehow having found enough air.

Looking back, I noticed the bastard actually wagging his eyebrows.

We redoubled our pace to the Janitor’s office. Then I had to ask Victoria where it really was, retrace some of our steps and convince the poor agent that I needed my gear and that I’d be leaving.

Glory Girl managed to truly help with the convincing bit.

A quick phone call later, this time dispatching me to Armsmaster, and I had the all clear for takeoff.

And so, I soared through the skies in the arms of Glory Girl once more; a big blue bag with my armor in one hand, my gun hammer in the other, and feeling severely shabbily dressed now that I could study her clothes from up close. I didn’t want to repeat the pose Jimmy had shown me so I chose not to look at her directly. She was way too energetic to care.
Flying was still nice even with the consequences from last time.

The looks we – I got when we landed smack in the middle of the street were quickly abated when people realized who my transport was.

The next hour was a blur of shops – boutiques without prices under their clothes – and an avalanche of dresses.

I don’t know how she managed to convince me, but I somehow I ended up with three brightly colored dresses, three short vests, a pair of biker shorts (that way I’d be ready to kick ass at any time), and, most baffling, a bunch of panties that covered far less than I was used to.

The last item she managed to sneak in somewhere between a frenzied fitting session and the checkout. She was quite insistent that I took them.

Something about her paying anyway and things her grandma would wear.

Thus, by the time we landed in front of the Pelham house, I might be forgiven for the forgetting the fact that I was about to enter a building with Capes with very similar powers. Powers that might very well complement each other if the insight I had gained from Kid Win as anything to go by.

I only had moments to prepare myself before the impressive front door opened and an impatient Victoria entered, beckoning me to follow.

I gulped as I took my first step into what might turn out to be my personal hell.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to the user Roffster (on SB and SV) for betaing and proofreading the chapter

The Pelham’s home was more than a mere house. Situated on the fancier outskirts of Brockton Bay, with a nice garden and wall surrounding it, it looked more like a mansion than a mere house.

The doors of the two-story building opened on to a grand entrance bordered by glass stairs to the second floor. Whites and brushed chrome dominated the otherwise minimalistic space. The only color came from the two paintings depicting the symbols of both families in muted colors on either wall.

I wasn’t sure how much my humble beginnings were to blame, but the end result was impressive.

…Which was probably the whole idea behind it. The building might be the home of the Pelhams, but at the same time, it pulled double duty as a place where Photon M - Lady Photon conducted business, dealt with government officials, sponsors, and donors. I mean, there was the whole accountability aspect they represented and I somehow doubted that the loot from the occasional E88 or ABB raid on top of however much the adult hero part-timers earned would be enough to afford this mansion and the Dallon’s home as well – on top of giving Victoria a credit card. without an apparent hard limit if her taste was anything to go by.

It wasn’t like they were the most active groups around and every single one of them going out together was generally thought to be a sign that things could get real ugly, real soon.

I was hoping to go to some sort of office or meeting room to do an official meet and greet of sorts if I was completely honest with myself. It would explain why Victoria thought my previous outfit so unacceptable. First impressions would be important for an official first impression after all, and it would explain why I stood in the entrance, looking and feeling somewhat uncomfortable in the red knee-length dress. I didn’t feel cold in the mild Brockton winter ever since the change – not that surprising actually, considering I could handle molten metal just fine – and I didn’t think Victoria could remember the last time she had to take temperature into consideration after Triggering. My makeshift bag of gear looked ridiculous paired with the dress.

Why red? Victoria had reckoned it looked good on me and the color was in. I wouldn't know much since I hadn't looked at anything more revealing than the hoodies and jeans I had gotten used to wearing. Stuff that wouldn't expose my stick-like limbs and invite people to add to the comments; give them an easy target.

The muscle gnome had taken care of that problem.

But either way, meeting them in a home office would give my wardrobe change a perfectly logical and innocuous reason that wouldn't be misunderstood on the various forums.

... Who was I kidding? I knew for a fact Jimmy would likely tell me that the ship just got its coal-fed
boiler upgraded to a nuclear reactor or something. People had seen me and it wasn't like I could do anything about it. Denying anything would just be considered as not being true to my true feelings.

Just look what happened to the SS Mousermaster.

At the very least Victoria hadn't brought me to her house. Even she would have probably noticed the fallout of that.

By then I realized that I had come to a complete stop, taking in the scenery while Glory Girl was long out of sight. This, in turn, left me standing alone with two wildly different bags and my monstrous hammer in hands.

In a dress.

Seriously, how did that happen?

"There you are!" the excitable teen shouted from the balcony overlooking the entrance. "Come on up! We're waiting for you"

I mouthed a wordless apology before ascending to the madness that was to come.

At least I knew that her reasons for updating my wardrobe hadn't been out of pure pity; if her mindless grin was any indication it was probably another hook to convince me to join as well to make the first meet and greet with the family better.

Image was kinda important after all. Especially if you can't escape the scrutiny of the public eye in your civilian identity. Somehow, I had the feeling that I had been doing a subpar job ever since the second day of my newfound Capedom.

The clicking of my claws on the stairs – ones I desperately tried to avoid scratching – carried through the room with an odd kind of finality.

If Kid Win was any indication, things would get a bit rough in just a few moments. I mean, if his and Armsmaster's powers already combined in such a fashion, what would happen when I met a family of Capes who had famously similar Powers.

When Glory Girl had taken the bag of regular clothes from me and almost started pushing me to a door with a warm glow coming through it, I still hadn't been able to convince myself that I shouldn't want to find out. That I should feel disturbed seeing plans on how to dismember heroes and freak out when imagining how much easier it would be to make gear out of all of them.

I wasn't.

I was looking forward to finding out – excited even.

I was just going to prevent myself from staring. I knew what happened now and that people noticed. I could prevent it if I could prepare for it.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as we reached a half-closed door.

"Found her!" Glory Girl shouted as she flitted into what looked like a living room with a fireplace just before I entered myself. "She was just taking in the scenery, but well, I kinda maybe abandoned
Shields, beams, flight. Fuse with “Glory Girl” neural controller and molten pure scale –

Hard light weaponry, light condensation. Fused with “Glory Girl” and “Lady Photon” for –

Shields, harder beams, flight. Fuse with “Glory Girl” –

Short range electromagnetism, body augmentation, and discharges. Fuse with –

Better shields, beams, flight. Fuse –

Bouncing orbs of light and force, controlled explosions, all parameters can be controlled. Fuse with “Glory Girl”…

Information rushed into my head. All of it important. All of it getting analyzed in parallel with cross-references being made to each other – projecting how any of the subsets of Powers would interact with each other. How they’d strengthen each other and combine the different powers for stronger, more varied effects.

Things like bouncing orbs of light that would shred when they exploded and electrified barriers of hard light and so much more – layers upon layers.

Each time I noticed how the costs would be lowered. How other, more human components replaced the exotic ones coming from monsters that were all too keen to kill me.

If I were to combine them all I only needed a few mizutsune scales, one or two Thunderbugs, a single Light Crystal, and Moofah fur. Also bones, nerves and tissue of the entirety of New Wave but that wouldn’t be a problem at that point. All I needed to do was kill them and harvest their neural controllers from their brains and the rest would be a matter of days.

It was laughably cheap and in the back of my mind, I knew I could get the materials right now through some clever bartering with the felynes.

And the murder of almost the entirety of New Wave.

"- hey Wyverian!" my future tiara exclaimed as I managed to snap out of it. "I thought that stare was solely reserved for the glorious me."

"What the… Did this happen before, Glory Girl? Why hadn’t you told us about this?" one part of my strengthened coat – Brandish asked her daughter, her voice strained and the white of her eyes seemed awfully big. Her breathing was increased.

"I thought it wasn’t that big a deal. Yeah, I’ve seen it happen when I got to her on Thursday. Was really weird but thought, hey, it’s probably the fatigue and blood loss messing with her." Lady Photon tore away her concerned gaze from Brandish to give Victoria a pointed look. “It wasn’t my aura messing with her, Auntie. Turned it down to its minimum because I didn’t want to make things worse by agitating her. It already looked bad enough with her covered in blood.”

My plan of not staring like an idiot had failed spectacularly. Worse, it had somehow startled both the nominal leader of the New Wave and her sister.
“Sorry.” I started with a weak smile, my voice drawing the attention of six heroes in full costume and Victoria. “It just really hit me that this was really happening to me. You know seeing all of you dressed up wanting to talk to me and everything.”

It wasn’t as if I was truly lying saying that. New Wave looked all kinds of impressive together like that, even without Panacea and if the things I’ve read online were anything to go by, she probably was too busy saving lives. Too busy to meet a nobody.

Lady Photon looked at me with just a tiny amount of pity while Flashbang’s face and posture spoke of some amount of understanding. Brandish wasn’t moved; her eyes became cold instead.

“No, that wasn’t what happened. What did you truly think?” Brandish asked, hostility coloring her voice. “You’ve already met with Armsmaster and Miss Militia on top of almost all the Wards. What’s different this time and why would that cause you to stare at us like that. I’ve seen admirers and none who I’d care for did it with such intensity.”

“My Powers were always the focus then. I just happened to have them. I had other stuff to think about when Armsmaster appeared so that kinda softened that blow as well. And well, uhm… Seeing you guys like that made me feel a bit underdressed considering I have my armor and costume for the foreseeable future right here.” I kicked the blue bag for emphasis.

“And that’s all there is to it, right?” Brandish was pacing. “Sure, you aren’t hiding anything. Why would you choose us instead of the Wards program anyway? Especially with the those supposed ‘potions’ Glory Girl told us about. Those that conveniently forgot to mention when announcing your presence to the world. What aren’t yo – “

“Carol, please calm down.” Lady Photon interrupted. “I know how it looked like but – “

“Then why aren’t you freaked out?! She had the same look in her eyes as him.” Flashbang tried to lay his hand on Brandish’ shoulder for comfort only for her to slap it away.

“I am reserving judgment until I’ve gotten a better feel of her. You and I – everyone in this room – knows what happened to Wyverian. Just how she triggered and why she might take a closer look. She probably had to learn to look out for people that might hurt her. We still do that to this day.”

Lady Photon’s tone of voice reminded me somehow of Mom just before she’d give me a scolding for being irrationally silly and wouldn’t stop even after repeated warnings.

Emma was often my partner in crime those days.

Lady Photon really shouldn’t be surprised by her nickname if this is how she generally carries herself.

“It isn’t the same and you know it. I would never forget that look he had just as he was about to m –“

“I would be more worried if she hadn’t stared,” Manpower jovially interjected with a rumbling laugh. “It’s not every day you see a seven foot Adonis up close. It’s basically irresistible for girls. Well, unless they’re….“

“Dad!” Laserdream yelled out in embarrassment before burying her head in her hands.

“Don’t you dare jo –“ Brandish was grasping for words, seething at the interruption.
“What? I’m just saying that she has a good taste.” His grin was smacked away by a slap against the back of his head by Lady Photon.

It looked well practiced.

“Carol,” Flashbang started, having succeeded in laying his hand on Brandish shoulders and giving a squeeze. She recoiled. “If it makes any difference, I believe her.” He gave a weak, pained smile. “Why not give her the space to explain her reasoning before you judge her. Victoria trusts her after all, and I’m sure Amy would like to meet her as well to talk about her Potions alone. She has all the reasons to be paranoid for those things alone. You go easier on known criminals telling their side of the story than you are with a freshly Triggered fifteen-year-old cape who last week had a run in with one of the scariest villains in the Bay.”

Brandish deflated a bit but didn’t stop glaring at me with fear and anger, urging me wordlessly to explain myself before she deemed me a threat to her and her family.

“So you wanted to know why I wasn’t joining the Wards?” I asked.

“I just find it suspicious that you’d waive both the salary and trust the PRT has probably been trying to lure you in with ever since you triggered,” she replied with a strained voice. “That’s forgetting the many Tinker programs you could participate in as well as you being a Tinker. I know you know the odds for independent Tinkers. I’ve participated in their study on Tinker death and gang recruitment rate. I know their policy is to make the result of said study painfully clear to Tinkers. So yes, do elaborate on this grand plan of yours. Why you thought that going solo would be a great idea and then proceeded to anger Lung.”

“Carol!” Flashbang admonished.

“I couldn’t do anything about Lung!” Brandish scoffed. I really wished I could have just killed that bastard for all the trouble he brought.

“I…” I stammered. “I just don’t feel like having another big government body hanging over me after school caused… this.” I vaguely gestured at all of me. “I know they’re not directly responsible but it feels wrong, somehow. Maybe later or something but it’s still too fresh. Besides, I don’t want the armors I make, the thing my Powers are good for, be screwed over and made non-functional by a faceless group of PR people.

Was it wrong that I was wishing once again that I was out there trying to kill a beast of nightmares before it could chomp me to death? Why did remembering the last eighteen months – Emma’s betrayal – hurt more than getting my jaw nearly ripped off?

At least Lady Photon and the rest of her family looked sympathetic enough when they weren’t keeping a nervous eye out on Brandish. Flashbang seemed a little lost in his own, dark thoughts while Glory Girl openly glared daggers at her mother.

She meanwhile was still looking at me as if I was some kind of monster ready to lash out.

Maybe I was.

Stupid Powers. Damned scan. Instead of getting the Alexandria package, swoop in and fight crime – be a hero – I had to avoid letting people know that my Powers – I – didn’t differentiate between monster and Cape. That I couldn’t bring myself to feel horrified over wanting to kill them and that
the self-pity over the fact was far stronger. That it was getting frustrating not to be able to use that part of my power, to soothe the itch it caused.

If I had the typical Alexandria Package, I wouldn’t have been here, having to cut deeper into a wound that was still hurting and bleeding.

“It also seems like too much drama.” I gave a weak smile, carefully avoiding to reveal my pointed teeth. “A group of teenagers. Rivalries and meet-ups between different branches with adults being more a mentor than anything else… I simply can’t. At least not now. New wave is smaller. Already now, seeing you here, it feels more like family. Glory Girl has been nice as well. I would like having a friend again.”

I looked Brandish in her eyes. “I want to be a hero and I realized I can’t do it alone. Not without risking people that don’t deserve it… And not just someone going through the motions to earn a paycheck. New Wave seemed right for that.” I chuckled lightly. “Besides, it isn’t like unmasking would be a problem for me.”

The awkward silence that followed my explanation showed me that an attempt for some levity might have been too much. It didn’t seem enough to convince Brandish.

The Pelhams were silently discussing something – probably me – when Glory Girl had enough. “So, enough about that stuff. I know you’re awesome already so why not show the rest what you can do, Taylor?”

Victoria’s voice had a slightly forced quality; it was a bit too shrill and desperate to project her happiness. I couldn’t help to notice her aura flare up as she tried to break the silent, pensive mood.

“No.” Lady Photon stopped that notion cold before I could get excited over the way out of the tense situation it would be. “I know what you’re trying to do, Victoria, but we’re not here for that. We know what she can do and both you and Panacea have told us about her ‘potions’. I know she would be a valuable ally, but now simply isn’t the time.”

“But!” Glory Girl started

“I think it’s time that you and Shielder go wait outside with Wyverian for Panacea. I’m going to have a talk with your mother.” Lady Photon leveled a stare at Brandish who was clenching and unclenching her hand. “Laserdream can choose whether she wants to stay or join you.”

“I’ll stay,” the heroine in white and crimson replied. “Please, Vicky, listen to Mom. I’ll make sure no decision is made behind your back.”

The people in the room were torn between anticipating my reaction and the one of the boisterous blonde.

I knew I wouldn’t gain any favors if I showed my rebellious streak. I was even glad to be given a way out of the depressingly awkward situation and away from Brandish’ open hostility. She wasn’t aiming it at me for a moment instead choosing to redirect some of that unexplainable and helpless rage and fear to the one who had taken control of the situation. I saw a light tremble go through her as she incredulously looked at her sister.

“I could certainly use someone to talk with,” I offered with a defeated smile.
Otherwise, I’d have too much time conjuring up scenarios for myself. Like how fast Brandish would kill me when she knew the truth – no matter how much she went off the personal responsibility angle.

Luckily that still didn’t seem to be the case.

She, or Shielder, might be able to come up with alternatives if… when joining New Wave turned out to be a bust.

“…fine,” she finally spoke before floating to the door.

Shielder followed suit, his face pensive behind the blue visor.

The last thing I saw from Lady Photon was her mouthing a thanks before I closed the door to the living room behind me.

“I can’t believe Mom just did that,” Vicky sneered, barely keeping her voice down.

It was probably something she picked up from her mom as at the same moment Brandish’ voice was heard from the other side of the door as well.

I did my best to block the words out.

“You know how she is sometimes,” Shielder replied with a hopeless shrug. “She tends to see the worst in people she arbitrarily doesn’t like and will hold on to that first impression until the end of times.”

“But it isn’t fair,” Victoria complained. “It isn’t like she ever gave Taylor a chance. Hell, Dean had a better time getting on her good side and… Anyway, normally she at least tries to listen to me. I’m so sorry Taylor.”

“It sucks,” I conceded. “But she can’t forbid you from ‘accidentally’ running into me during patrols, can she?”

“Nope,” she declared

It sucked. It truly sucked. Who would have thought that I wouldn’t have to fear the judgment of my classmates due to how weird I looked but that it would be an adult, a lawyer superhero, that judged my appearance the harshest?

“But,” I began to try and divert any discussion on a less depressing course. “Shielder, how do you color your hair blue as part of your costume. Is it some sort of Tinker paint that magically comes out when you call it a day or is it some part of your actual Power? It makes no sense. Dyeing every time would take so much time.”

Shielder gave a good-hearted chuckle that very much reminded me of his dad. “You can make an armor that screws with gravity out of raptors, but my hair color is the one thing that confuses you?”

I gave him a confused look. “Vicky isn’t the only one on PHO. The armor looks good on you by the way;”

I notice my cheeks warm up.
He laughed again, louder, while Vicky showed an easy smile as well. She probably knew all too well what her teammate did before every mission.

“When you can make barriers it’s pretty quick and easy to do it without making a giant mess. Just prepare the mixture, form the barrier, pour in the dye, and – “

The front door opened. “Sorry I’m late. Gangers thought it would be a good idea to start a shootout at the end of my shift. Idiots didn’t even hit each other and I had to clean up their mess.”

*Touch based induced biokinesis. Armor made from chaotic gore magala and nakarkos materials…*

I managed to give the mad scientist part of me a pen and notebook and hurry her along to a private corner of my mind all of her own. Just in time to see Panacea looking up at me muttering, “What the fuck is her problem?”

I think only my elven ears heard it.

“Hey Ames!” Vicky shouted down, “Look who’s here! The Tinker who makes the Potion the PRT had you examine.”

Panacea’s face lit up slightly while I noticed that Shielder had just accepted the inevitable fact that he wouldn’t be finishing his story anytime soon.

I was too busy realizing that she could help out getting my farm started. That I could start really helping people and prove Brandish and other like her wrong. I could prove that I wasn’t more trouble than I was worth.

“Ah,” the healer spoke up. “I wanted to meet you to say that everything looks fine. I don’t know how – well I do know what happens exactly but not how you get that in a liquid. Can’t wait for you to start producing more. Wouldn’t have to deal with those idiots and their victims then.”

She looked so tired.

“Great,” I blurted, practically hopping on the spot. “Do you want to help mature the Herbs and Blue mushrooms needed so I can start mass producing it?”

“What?”
The realization of what I just said set in with all the subtlety of a falling anvil. One, I was wishing would happen to land on me to spare me the trouble that lay ahead. A souped-up T-rex would also have been fine – more than fine – if it meant avoiding the coming moments.

I guessed that most people only knew her as the healer. As a matter of fact, I’ve only ever read about her as a healer whose only weakness was not being able to do brains. There were a few rumors that she was more than met the eye. However, since most of these rumors came from criminals who had all rights to feel bitter about New Wave, not much credit was given to them. Wrongfully so. Guess PR really paid out in dividends – especially if people had never seen the exhausted side of Panacea.

And here I was with my big mouth excitedly blabbing out what might be a secret on par with the way I found out about it in the first place. Maybe even bigger if the slightly pensive looks on the other two were any indication.

The cogs behind Panacea’s eyes started to turn, mentally checking who knew what and in which category I belonged to. It was almost fascinating to see the full meaning of my words hit home and develop into a full-blown panic which was sufficiently masked with righteous anger. At least if you didn’t see the entire range of facial expressions develop before your very eyes.

What certainly helped to identify the minutiae of her expression was that I could imagine all too well how it would be to have someone just spill your deepest held secrets. It gave a lot of empathy that it was something that prominently featured in my nightmares. Hell, she was still taking it much better than I would have. I think there might be more smashing to freedom involved if people ever found out the full extent on how I viewed my fellow capes and basically everyone else. If I was lucky. I didn’t quite trust myself enough to not take other, more permanent solutions. It was hard enough not to act on my instincts as it was. I didn’t want to find out how it would be if I was put under serious pressure.

I made a mental note to look deeper into the practical applications of Exiteshrooms, even if they seemed a bit far-fetched. A teleporting thingy right now would have been a life-saver.

Maybe Panacea would be more open to working with those if she had some time to sleep on it and I wasn’t reduced to a vegetable beforehand.

“How do you know about that?” Brockton Bay’s greatest healer hissed at me.

I think I overestimated her capacity for calm and rational thought. It was probably the stress and fatigue; both factors had probably large parts to play in my own performance as well. Stupid school jitters and having to meet new people.

“What just? Amy? Taylor?” Vicky’s eyes flickered from her sister to me and back again. “It’s that
stare of yours, isn’t it?”

I felt a stomach constrict slightly as Alexandria Jr. let control over her aura slip ever so slightly in her pensive mood.

“That doesn’t really matter right now, Vicky. I want to know how the fuck she thinks that I’m able to do what she says. I only do humans.” Amy moved a little closer and I forced myself to stand my ground while concentrating on finding a better excuse than my last attempt.

It wasn’t going that great. A mousy healer who looked tired enough to keel over at any moment could be surprisingly scary if she could realistically turn you into a literal vegetable.

“Hold your horses,” Vicky shot me look that almost seemed hurt while Shielder looked like he was desperately trying to find ways to defuse a situation he didn’t quite understand. “Hear me out Ames. This is the third time I’ve seen my suspiciously silent friend freeze up like this.”

Crap. She was the only one who had seen me like that repeatedly without the background to just rationalize it away for something else like Armsmaster.

“Still not following, Vicky.” The angry healer took another step and I became acutely aware that my hands started to itch to use my hammer against the threat closing in.

I would need to dump the bags I had been lugging around the entire time before I would be able to swing my hammer. And even then, this pretty dress wasn’t designed for big movements.

“Point is that I’ve only seen it happen with other Capes.” Panacea was getting really close right now. “Ames, Stop.”

Vicky didn’t shout. She didn’t need to as trepidation pulsed from her in a fashion that made it clear it was done on purpose. By someone who was starting to lose their patience and could shatter concrete by all too practiced looking landings. It did inspire Shielder to jump into action and erect one of his barriers between me and the scarily-determined healer.

I could full well imagine what I would do with her Powers if I wanted to make sure someone wouldn’t talk. She didn’t even have to go as theatrical as I first feared.

If it was a matter of finding out where someone learned my deepest held secrets I’d make sure I learned of that source and would make sure they couldn’t source again. And everything could be hidden, forgotten, and actions could unfold days later. Disguised as an unfortunate aneurysm that’ll be known as a peculiarity in the statistics.

Not doing brains? Utter bullshit.

“Amy,” Shielder added, finally finding his voice. “I think Vicky may have a point. Mom would have never invited her if we found any signs of stalker behavior. ‘Sides, I think I know what Vicky’s talking, about seeing it as an observer. Kinda see why auntie suddenly reacted so badly.”

Panacea stopped to look at her cousin in slight bewilderment. The barrier shimmered out of existence and I was glad that I was being ignored. A remarkable accomplishment, given the context and my looks.

“She did?”
“Mom’s initial reaction when I brought Dean –“

“Vicky!" Shielder objected. Probably due to how she revealed what was likely Gallant’s name.

“It’ll be fine, cous. Don’t worry about it.” Shielder closed his mouth in grumbling resignation when he realized he wouldn’t get another word in until Vicky was finished. “Anyway, remember when I brought him home the first time she feared literal emotion manipulation due to how it’s possible? Her behavior then was outright welcoming compared to earlier.”

Vicky chuckled dryly. “Should have known it. At the very least he didn’t have a video of ripping dinosaurs to shreds and running into Lung a couple of hours later. I mean, Mom agreed that the raptors thing couldn’t have been avoided without endangering the civvies considering the circumstances and that Lung would likely be looking to recruit her before meeting Taylor in person. Well. You know how protective mom can be…”

“Of you, yeah.” I barely made out Panacea’s mumbled comment before she spoke up. “Still not quite seeing how that should result in her knowing more than the public.”

On the one hand, I was glad getting more time to perhaps come up with any decent excuse but on the other, it was getting kinda annoying to have people talk around me. Still, I felt that drawing attention onto yours truly and interrupting their conversation wouldn’t work out in my favor.

“Ah, that.” She rotated towards me with a cocky grin. “I don’t think you’re the only one here who is hiding something, sis. A certain Ward started an interesting conversation in our little junior heroes’ chat before I picked up Taylor over here. Got a bit distracted by the state she was in when I picked her up but I do remember. I’m sure you know who I’m talking about, don’t you my unnerving friend?”

I had a very good clue who might want to share his experience with his colleagues. Damned uppity earring.

“That and having seen her during the introduction made me think. You see, I saw her move during her debut fight. It almost seemed as if she knew what those raptor thingies were capable of by looking at them. I’d stop and look in confusion if a giant feathered reptile suddenly started balancing on its tail. Maybe try to remember whether there had been a Blasto outbreak as of late. But nope. Just the same freeze and stare at the beginning, charge in head-first, and not even flinch when it does its party trick.”

Ah, yes I did kinda stop moving before dealing with the Maccao pack. Shit.

“It almost seemed as if she was able to analyze these weird raptors. Knew what to expect afterwards. I’m pretty sure she had never seen them either.” I shook my head in resignation when she gave me an expecting look. Damage control was the best I could hope for, I realized.

“That made me wonder, what if learning how creatures tick was part of her grab bag? I mean it would explain how she was able to survive a battle with a giant spider she apparently had moments after she was put through hell.” Shielder shuddered slightly when Vicky referenced the nerseylla. I really wished I had a camera with me at the time. I would have loved seeing the reactions of people seeing that particular bundle of hatred and malice if their imagination already caused these reactions.

I had the impression that normal brains had trouble comprehending the concept of spiders more than
three times taller than yourself.

“So, what you’re telling me,” Panacea began without letting her eyes off me. “Is that you think that she can see powers or something?”

“Well, that or some kind of danger sense. It’s not unheard of. The freezing sure doesn’t look voluntary to me.” She flexed her arm with a soft grin. “Capes can be dangerous enough and if Taylor’s rambling on her thread is anything to go by, there’s some weird crap in her pocket dimension thingy that needs identifying as well. Flame sacs are the things called that make your hammer spew fire, right.”

Yay, I could talk and maybe divert. “Yes. I also met a big monkey before school today. I now have bladders that just produce water even detached from the body.”

At least that revelation was enough for Panacea’s face to scrunch up in confused incredulity. “So, Vicky’s right about you seeing powers?”

They were staring in anticipation which was only fair. I guess.

I sighed.

“Yeah, I see threats,” I admitted with as much false confidence as I could muster, clinging to the excuse Vicky had provided.

No sense in trying to categorically deny that anymore. I didn’t have the strength to see the disappointment lingering behind Vicky’s cheery façade materialize fully. Not after she was genuinely friendly to me and even gave me the benefit of the doubt and spoke out for me after I brought her sister into a vulnerable position. I didn’t want to see her decide she had to protect her sister from me.

It was nice to have someone around with whom I could forget myself.

Still, I couldn’t let them know the full extent. That I saw them as materials for me to play with; that I was able to deal with the monsters thrown at me by inferring movement patterns from knowing how they fit together.

It would really suck if I ever had to tell anyone about that.

“And,” I continued as Panacea opened her mouth to ask the obvious follow-up question. “Seeing the powers of Capes is something that happens automatically. I can’t control it. I tried after someone pointed out how intense I looked when it happened.” I gave a rueful chuckle and nodded to the second floor. “As you have probably noticed by now, it didn’t work out.”

My voice didn’t waver at the end, no matter what Vicky may tell you.

“How much do you see exactly?” Shielder asked, head cocked to the side and thoughtfully stroking his imaginary beard. Guess clear body language was something heroes wanted to train.

“I think, it’s mainly stuff that would matter if I were to fight them.” I lied with a straight face, determined on riding this out to its logical end and banking on my changed form to hide the obvious tells.

“So basically everything,” summarized the blanched “healer”.

“As far as I can tell?” I shuffled nervously and forced my grip on the hammer to relax. “I haven’t talked about it with anyone and it isn’t like people would actually willingly share and compare notes. Wait – it doesn’t always tell me the precise extent of the powers.”

“Or else you wouldn’t have hit Lung?” Vicky concluded with hints of shrillness in her voice. “Still, I’m a bit hurt that you didn’t tell me. Why keep it a secret to us anyway? I mean, you wanted to join and it’s not like we’d tell others.”

I shot her a skeptical look in tandem with her family.

“OK, I might accidentally tell Dean and then the protectorate would know but that shouldn’t matter, right? Same team and everything.”

“I was afraid that they’d just use me to hunt villains who have crossed the line like some tool. It isn’t as if they cared about me as a person before so why would they start now? I’m already scary looking, I didn’t want the people I’d like to work with to be scared of me because of something I can’t control. I don’t want people second guessing my every action thinking I was moments away from snapping with a plan to kill everyone.

“And what do I want to do with it anyway? Paint an even bigger target on my back by announcing that I can see who are Capes with a single glance on top of being a Tinker?”

“I’m guessing you haven’t met Gallant yet?” The floating heroine asked with previous tenderness returned.

“No, I haven’t,” I admitted while Panacea was struggling to calm her nerves after my revelation.

I really didn’t blame her. She was take-the-biggest-ranged-weapon-I-can-get-my-claws-on-and-shoot-her scary.

“What do you know about his power?”

“I think it’s power armor that produces these weird blasts or something,” I replied after a moment of thought, fully expecting to be wrong with the way she asked it.

“That’s just what the PRT wants you to think,” his girlfriend announced triumphantly to the silent aggravation of Shielder. “The armor is actually made by Kid Win and the blasts he fires are his own and cause certain emotions – emotions he can also see. It’s not that strong in direct combat but mighty useful outside of it. Hence the PRT doing their best to keep it a secret to outsiders.”

Somehow, I felt the need to point out I was one of those outsiders.

“Doesn’t matter if I tell you,” she interrupted my observation before I could voice it. “You’re probably only one meeting away from learning it anyway, so I thought, what the heck. All things considered, I trust you know how to keep a secret, right?” I nodded. “Besides, there are plenty of others who can figure out who’s a cape and who’s not, and they get by just fine without being exploited – unwritten rules, secret identities, escalation, and everything. You know those Capes whose power is basically being super smart in one form or the other. The most I see them ask of you as a Ward would be to figure out dangerous flaws of teammates or run primary threat assessment for those guys if it isn’t too dangerous for you.
“Not that keeping you out of danger is all that possible, miss hammer time.” Her eyes glinted mischievously. “Just out of curiosity, how would you deal with me?”

“I saw that your strength and defense comes from some sort of forcefield around you and that it can break with sufficient force which would make you vulnerable for a while.”

Vicky gave my hammer a pointed look. “That might be enough to break it but I’d be too slow for the follow-up. I would just deploy the same tactic as with Lung.”

Glory Girl’s pride was short-lived when she realized what that entailed. “So, blinding me and…”

“And throw super dung in your face before running away.”

I let the three relatives have that mental image and left out the option that I could make bombs fairly easily. And aerosol tranquilizers as well as sleeping agents. I also avoided mentioning that I could time the explosion and the hammer strike to happen in quick succession. It should be more than enough to do the trick.

“I trust you won’t just tell third parties about people’s powers and keep tighter lips than my cousin?” Shielder asked to the vehement outcry of Vicky.

“Like I said, don’t want to make a bigger target out of myself. I don’t want to endanger Dad or my friends when I get them. Hell, I would have preferred nobody even knowing about that part. Don’t worry.”

“Why did you ask me things you shouldn’t know then?” Panacea asked with some of the previous angry paranoia back in her voice and body language.

“I couldn’t help myself, really,” I admitted with a tone that was hopefully both apologetic and soothing enough to avoid escalation.

“What!?” I guess it only worked partially.

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Have you ever seen or heard stories about Armsgmaster or Kid Win getting weirdly focused when they get inspired? I saw the possibility of getting the foundation of the mass production of Potions I planned and kinda, sorta, forgot what I should know.”

“It won’t happen again, is what you’re saying?”

“It wouldn’t have happened in the first place if I didn’t want to start making them so badly. It’s one of the few ways I know I can make a real impact but even with the land the PRT might provide with an affiliate program, it would still take so damn long. I don’t want people to think of me as some mindless brute like when they would after seeing the videos with the maccaos. I don’t want to be isolated anymore even if it would be out of fear instead of disgust this time.”

Panacea looked pensive for a moment before noticing Glory Girl expectantly floating closer.

“Fine,” she finally relented as Vicky was a mere foot away with her best puppy impression. “Just don’t mess up again.”

The “or else” was left unspoken.
“You’ll think about my request though?” I carefully tried. “You wouldn’t have to deal with gunshot wounds anymore if I could produce more Potions.”

“Sure she will,” Vicky answered for her sister, her patience clearly having reached the breaking point. “Let’s go upstairs and give them an update on this new revelation before they decide on something rash.”

The constraint Vicky showed in letting me walk up the stairs almost made a stop in astonishment if it wasn’t for the pulse of adoration coming from the top floor and Shielder’s head shaking. She was definitely planning something.

It did mean that the lowly ground dwellers had to come in close proximity as we climbed the sweeping stairs to join the fun.

“Will you leave me alone if I do this thing for me?” Panacea whispered when she very deliberately stepped into touching range.

Sure, it might have everything to do with the stairs business but there was still a hint of malice behind the resignation she was positively radiating. I don’t think that Vicky knew just how much her opinion mattered to her sister.

“I would like to do more,” I admitted after two steps. “But I won’t force you. I only ever wanted to make a non-binding proposal anyway when I noticed an overlap of interest and forgot myself directly after.”

Panacea slowed down on her next step, pondering. “Do you truly want to join us? The Cape life is far less glorious than you think. You’ll be expected to lead by example no matter how tired you may be. Smile and wave and if you're lucky people will be less likely to pounce if you fuck up. We have no team that cleans up after mistakes.”

“It’s what I wanted. Among other things, I’m tired of the cloak and dagger crap that pops up with larger groups. I don’t want faceless men telling me what I should do, say, think.” I smiled which caused Panacea to freeze for a moment. “I want to try my best and if that isn’t enough, I’ll own up to my mistakes.”

Best to let people know that I did my best to become a hero of my own accord than giving them reasons to start believing in even more conspiracy theories.

“ Weirdo,” she muttered to herself. “Suit yourself then. Have you a sample on you? Before we decide anything, I want to know whether I could actually do anything with your stuff.”

I reached into my mismatched bag of limited holding and pulled out the Herb that was the basis of my Potions and offered it to the healer.

I knew she could do what I asked of her but it wasn’t as if I couldn’t get more eventually. Just going along and feeding her curiosity would probably be an investment and getting stingy would only lead to mistrust anyway.

Her breath hitched for a fraction of the second and I continued without looking. It would probably take far longer until she forgave me, let alone trust me, but at least I had her attention. It was a start.

Besides I had the feeling that she would vote in my favor if it came to a vote. Not out of comradery,
but out of pragmatism. If I read the room right, she hadn’t disclosed the full extent of her power to her family either.

It would be a matter of keeping your friends close and potential enemies even closer. Where better to keep an eye out on me than from the same team?

Arriving on the top floor, I was treated to the sight of Glory Girl hovering at an angle to better peep through the lock of a door shushing Shielder with an outstretched hand.

“Ah, there’s the main party,” Vicky said as she noticed the clicking of my claws. “Didn’t feel like hurrying? I understand that. Not that it matters anyway since we have to hit them during a lull in the conversation and –“ The bad feeling I had suddenly spiked. “There it is. Ready for round two, Taylor?”

I nodded since I didn’t trust my traitorous mouth and to my slight surprise Vicky answered by politely knocking and carefully opening the door instead of slamming it open.

“You need something?” Lady Photon asked while Brandish did her best to say nothing.

“Just wanted to tell that Amy’s here and I think Wyverian over here has something she likes to share as well.”

The room shifted their focus from a distracted Panacea who had just come around the corner to me.

“Something that couldn’t wait until we’re done?” Lady Photon observed with a softly rebuking tone. “It has to be important then. So, Wyverian?”

She really shouldn’t complain about being called Photon Mom. She had weaponized introspected shame to a degree that Vicky felt visibly self-conscious about the interruption. If it wasn’t also aimed at me, I would have thought it beautiful.

Too bad it was.

“I may have forgotten to share one part of my power out of fear.” I half-mumbled in equal measures of breath.

“And what would that be?” She luckily didn’t comment on how uncomfortable I had to look and sound.

Carol, however, perked up visibly when I mentioned leaving things out. I couldn’t fuck this up if I wanted even the slightest chance of getting in a team that wasn’t the Wards - of getting a way of securing my back and building my reputation without people who have never met me deciding what I could and couldn’t do.

I took a deep breath this time to calm myself and concentrate on what I had to do no matter how much I disliked it. Vicky had given me a decent excuse and I only had one chance to truly capitalize on it.

“I’m sure you remember how I froze when I walked into the room?” I saw various nods and a grin that was too wide plastered on Manpower’s face. “I’m told that it can be unnerving or even frightening. I hoped I could just downplay it and have it attributed to my changed body.”
I had Brandish’ undivided attention. She had probably witnessed enough impromptu corrections to statements after her clients had been put under pressure. She was waiting for me to confirm her suspicions and dig my own metaphorical grave.

I couldn’t let that happen.

“For a short while it worked,” I continued. “But there were always circumstances that made it less obvious. Either there weren’t many or there were people nearby who could explain periods of extreme concentration away thanks to personal experience.”

“Hang on a sec. Do you mean to tell us that you see us or something?” Manpower asked after I let the statement hang in the silent room. “I’ve heard Assault complain about his boss’ Tinker periods. He had to cancel a poker night during a particularly bad one during which the Beard was particularly strict recently. That was last week after you showed him your tech, wasn’t it?”

“It probably was, yes. I can identify how creatures I encounter can become dangerous in battle,” I replied while my stomach was suspended in free fall. “When encountering parahumans, I see what power could be used against me and hypothetical plans how to get around them.”

Silence threatened to smother the room as the gathered heroes digested the revelation.

“I was and still am afraid that people would abuse this or start being afraid of me for something I can’t change anything about. It would just make me a bigger target.” I felt one corner of my mouth move upwards in a self-pitying smile. “That’s why I didn’t want to tell anyone and just play it off as weirdness that came with my new and improved body.”

Bitterness totally wasn’t dripping from my every word at the end.

“Too bad it won’t let me decide even that part after taking away my civilian identity. Vicky was able to make the link after seeing my ‘scan’ happen twice in person and comparing that with the footage taken with the maccao. How long would it take for others to figure it out?”

“Why tell it now, then?” There was still the suspicion that heavily influenced her body language but from her tone, it seemed like Brandish was willing to give me a second chance now that some of my behavior could be explained by my power.

“I saw Panacea enter.” The healer’s terrified expression pleaded not to say too much. “I was unprepared and let something slip served as the final piece of proof for Vicky to confirm her theory. We talked and now I’m here, hoping this doesn’t ruin it more than my first impression did.”

Panacea relaxed when it became obvious that I wouldn’t tell her particular secret. They would have to work that out themselves. I wasn’t going to stir that particular beehive of highly optimized African Bees. No way. Vicky seemed a bit bothered by being reminded to the implications as well.

“Saw her do her thing with Amy and it clicked,” the master detective supplied. “If it makes any difference, I don’t think Taylor fully realizes how creepy she can look. Heck, I’ve only seen her blink when apparently remembering to do so manually. That wasn’t any better either.

“Either way, I kinda convinced her to share after pointing out that it was hardly that unique a skill – and not one people would likely to want to abuse with how it’d create more problems for us than solve.”
“Do you believe her claims, then?” Brandish asked her daughter.

“What she told about Amy wasn’t something she should have known. She also knew about my forcefield, Mom.” Vicky’s mom opened her mouth to vocalize what were no doubt fears for her daughter’s safety.

"Don’t worry about it,” She hastily added to pacify her. “She said she wouldn’t be fast enough to do anything about it. I’ll be fine.”

Brandish didn’t share her daughter’s optimism. I was going to wait for a couple of months until I openly started to make bombs. Just in case.

“Besides, why would I ever want to harm the first friend I had in years?” I weakly added. “At least I hope Vicky considers me a friend.”

“Sure I do, you rock!” I didn’t know that shit-eating grins were transmittable. It was either that or Manpower had taught Glory Girl well.

It felt nice. All that was missing was a way to hug her without it seeming weird in context. Only after Dad started it again did I notice how good those felt if done sincerely.

“How did you keep that a secret?” Photon Mom asked when it became clear that only Brandish would speak up. “A power like that would be tested for if the PRT had any suspicion you had it.”

“I’ve also heard rumors that the Beardmaster was tinkering with a lie detector.” Lady Photon shot her husband a damning look. “What? Assault may or may not have let slip how it made his life a bit more difficult.”

“I think they were too afraid to hurt my feelings, I guess,” I replied, quietly noticing her subtle stressing of the fact that it was part of my grab bag. “Armsmaster also mentioned his lie detector when we first met and got the opportunity to test it. I thought it might have problems with my inhumane features and movements. I prepared a bunch of half-truths when I went to the Rig and hoped for the best. I really didn’t want strangers to know about that part of my powers without getting to know them. I can’t trust them to not judge me over something I don’t even want.”

“Why do you think that admitting to lying to the PRT makes you seem any more trustworthy to us?” Brandish pointed out the obvious. A ripple of aggression pulsed from Vicky.

I sighed. “That was another reason why I didn’t want to disclose it yet even if I do honestly want to team up with New Wave and try to my best to become an established hero first. I knew how bad it’d looked. Lying through omission is the best I can manage, though, and even that needs more preparation than what’s usable in normal situations.” Unless I had someone to inspire me. “My previous stammered explanation is the best I can manage otherwise.”

“You are an Elf!” Laserdream helpfully supplied.

I wasn’t the only one who had to suppress a groan. The others’ weren’t from frustrated fear materialized though.

“I mean not being able to lie and those ears and…” Laserdream continued, petering out and becoming less audible with each word as she read the room.
I could really do without the awkward silences that seemed common in the Pelham house.

“Are there any other things we ought to know and you forgot to mention?” There was still a hint of suspicion in Brandish’s voice but at least the outright hostility was gone.

Probably some pieces clicked together in her mind that made her think she had a good handle on me now. I’d take it if it meant one less obstacle.

“I have been in contact with another sentient species of my pocket dimension or whatever I have limited access to.” Several eyebrows rose in the room. “They’re called felynes and as the name implies they look like cats. They act as traders as well as offer other services.”

“This is the part where you tell us there is no new cat-based Cape in Brockton, right?” Laserdream asked, overcoming the shame that clung to her after her last attempt at humor that backfired.

At least she had more courage than I did to ask questions which could potentially make her look bad. Even in social situations that were already plenty uncomfortable to begin with. Especially in an awkward social situation. Mucho cred.

“Sorry.” Something broke inside the heroine. “Those cats are part of the recovery and transport operation I have hired. Beyond their contract, they’re independent.”

“How are you paying them?” Lady Photon asked. ”Are they dangerous?”

“They take a sizeable percentage of the monsters I hunt and I can do limited trading for other materials I might need. Also, no. They’re just fluffy cats with an ego turned to eleven and wouldn’t harm people. Even if they could, it would be bad for business. Just don’t tell them that if you want good deals. They like to think otherwise.” I snapped my finger as I remembered something, startling Flashbang. “That said, I suspect they have some power of their own. People seemed to react to them as if they were just plain old cats that somehow demanded the entirety of their attention. It certainly helped the recovery of the maccao along.

“I have also enlisted them to ensure the safety of the people around me and set up the possibility of more in the case of catastrophes.”

“Would you be willing to take responsibility for them?” inquired the de-facto leader of New Wave. “It’s part of our philosophy after all and they seem to be intrinsically connected to you if what you say is correct.”

“Of course.” I’d have to make it painfully clear to Cocoa that there’d be sanctions if they were caught with long fingers in a manner that implicated me.

I wasn’t foolish enough to try and forbid those furballs to act upon their nature. I had better chances telling an Endbringer that they should stop killing. At least I spoke speak a language they understood.

And, hey, maybe they would “find” something interesting while “visiting” a villain that I could use. No point in straining our working business relationship over it.

“Why would you need outside help if you can get your resources through them?” Flashbang asked.

“Their prices are pretty steep and I’d like to become self-sufficient and start scaling up the potion
production as soon as possible. For that, I need things that they can’t provide.” At least not legally. “Land or a decently sized greenhouse. If I want to sell my stuff I also have to deal with regulations. All of that would be easier with some human backup.”

Brandish and Lady Photon engaged in some strained non-verbal communication until the former spoke up with some lingering strain in her voice. “While I ethically disapprove of you trying to keep a part of our Powers secret even to us and things would have gone a lot smoother if you hadn’t, I’d still feel the need to apologize for my earlier behavior. You reminded me of a horrendous period of my life and I overreacted accordingly.

“When you came in, we were about to come to a conclusion. This new information will need further conversing to work out the implications, but I believe it won’t change the final decision on you joining us.”

My heart sunk a little and Vicky was fidgeting with increasing intensity.

“Just a couple of final points before we continue. We at New Wave expect to be examples for others to follow. To this end, I demand a minimum amount of scholastic valor – one you’re lacking at this point. It is understandable when considering your previous situation but I would like some reassurance that you plan to improve this.”

“Now that I don’t have to fear retribution for doing well or that my projects get stolen, I’ll probably start enjoying learning again. I might take a little for me to catch up in subjects other than Biology but I’ll try my best to do it as fast as possible.”

Amy cocked her head a little in confusion. “I seem to have gained some innate knowledge of biology together with my Tinker power. Or maybe my scan.”

Lady Photon nodded in agreement. “That seems adequate enough, we might be able to arrange some additional tutoring to aid this process.

“The next point we’d like to address is that we will ask you to do PR and do stage play training to lessen the impact your newly gained instinct have on unsuspecting people. It might help to mask your scans when they happen as well.”

That sounded like something I wouldn’t enjoy at all but at least I could see how that might help. I simply hoped nobody decided I had to go the Mouse Protector route to distract from unfortunate implications. It might be able to do just that but… No, I couldn’t see myself posing and spouting cheesy one-liners.

… And no, I wasn’t posing after my Potion had repaired my arm in Armsmaster’s lab. That was just to better show the healing process.

I nodded to indicate her to continue. “Then all that’s left is to ask Amy and Eric for their opinion and we can wrap this up.”

“She seems nice enough and her Powers are probably very useful,” the blue haired hero took the initiative. ”From what she has shown and told us, Wyverian also seems to be genuine in her desire to be a hero and that freaky scan might very well save lives if used appropriately.”

“She seems alright,” Panacea added after a short pause during which she grabbed something in her pocket. “I don’t mind her joining.”
She seemed to glare at me a little but at least I was back from the keeping-your-enemy-closer territory. Hopefully. Panacea was scary when she was angry.

I really needed to prioritize making something ranged.

“What about me?” Glory Girl demanded having noticed she wasn’t on Photon Mom’s list. “Don’t I get anything to say?”

“We all know you’re in favor, Vicky,” Laserdream helpfully supplied. “It wasn’t as clear for the others.”

“Still, there is a procedure to be followed here and who knows? Maybe I had a change of mind.”

“Did you?”

“No, I still want her on the team but it’s the thought that counts.”

Lady Photon sighed. “Thank you for your valuable input.” Vicky had at least the grace of looking a tiny bit chastised behind the façade of petulance. “Anyone else gathered here has something to say or ask?”

“While I am disappointed that it wasn’t my sculpted body that captured your attention,” Manpower took the opportunity before anyone could stop them. “I could always use a sparring partner that isn’t just flying around me in circles while blasting me. Hell, like my Eric said, your eyes could be very useful to prevent nasty surprises when facing outsiders.”

“Why did you attack Lung if you knew what he could do?” Flashbang asked after it became obvious that his brother in law was done talking.

I suppressed a groan that I began to associate with the wannabe rage lizard. “I don’t get to know precise numbers – only gut feelings. I knew that it would be dangerous if the battle was allowed to continue for any time and since I needed a diversion I attacked and hoped for the best. He was tougher than I expected and I had to fall back on plan B. Talking didn’t help any so bobbing his head seemed a decent plan A.”

Another silence spread over the group as they digested this bit of information.

“That seems to coincide with what we know about Lung,” Lady Photon finally broke the silence. “All things considered, you did well enough and you did manage to get away without Lung becoming too dangerous.” She looked around the group for more input. “If there is nothing more, I’d like to give your joining my blessing as well and give the final word to Brandish.”

“While I’d have to wait to fully form my opinion of you after the unfortunate first impression, I’m willing to give you a chance as a member on the condition of your increased efforts on removing the dangerous edge you seem to possess.”

“Beyond these scales, I’m just a girl like the next,” I replied softly. “It would be great if others could see me like that as well when I’m not going around as Wyverian.”

“In that case,” Lady Photon took over from her sister. “Welcome to New Wave. You can call me Sarah.”
The few members that had headwear that obscured their face removed them. Vicky gleefully tackled me in a way that made me glad I took her advice and wore the biker shorts underneath my dress. I smiled.
Cocoa leaned on his dragon tooth pickaxe, surveying the initial contact between the patron of his glaring and the malfestio who had found his way to Hepurrt in her home dimension.

He signaled his enforcers to set up the perimeter to keep out the idiotic hairless monkeys that stubbornly refused to use their vestigial excuses for a brain and run away by themselves instead of gawking.

It was cheaper than diverting the cart teams from their current assignments. It would also save on cleaning off the blood and drool afterward.

‘Sides, his enforcers deserved a good belly rub every now and then.

Over on their side, the sentient races knew better than to let themselves be distracted by them. Maybe these specimens would learn at some point as well.

It wasn’t as if they connected the stolen wallets with the “cute fluffy kitties” yet and wouldn’t if their previously displayed survival instinct was any indication.

The captain shook his head.

It would truly take a while for these primates to learn if three decades of super powered members hadn’t done the trick by now. Weak.

“Pawlie,” Cocoa summoned his reconnaissance team leader. “Any news about further anomalies?”

“Nothing new on this side,” the felyne in question answered. “Our trackers don’t report no dissapurred monster either.”

Cocoa gave him a level stare. “Sorry boss, hard not to after getting used to it.”

The brown cat stared at his gray counterpart for a bit longer until he relented and looked away. It wouldn’t do Cocoa any good if the kit pointed out the previous error of his own.

“So, how long wouldcha wager the owl last?” he asked, watching their supplier begin earning their Zennies with a manic glint in her eyes.

“Dunno, boss.” Pawly scratched his ear. “With her performance against khezu, an owl ain’t that big a deal. Five minutes. Tops.”

“That one was done when the leech took the bite out ofta golden one. It woulda taken longer without dat. Six”
While seeing the electric eel’s head and neck exploding from the inside, it had been bothersome to scrape off the walls. Cocoa had considered it excessive even after working with a hunter who had a… deep and devout love for explosions.

“Pawlease, meow Zennies are on the confusion adding a couple more minutes on top of ya estimate, boss,” the purple-colored newcomer who tried to sneak up on her boss challenged Pawlie. “And yes, that even includes the time Hepurrrt took purrtures of Goldilocks halfway up khezu’s maw.”

Cocoa shot the grey tabby a sharp look before he could object to the leniency he showed Rhupurr. The kittens had to learn how to trick people into their cutesy ways as soon as possible. Their lives might very well depend on it someday.

Even if it wouldn’t, it was a tradition. Sentient races who didn’t outright dismiss them as mere cats expected the wordplays. The customer was king in the end.

Besides, seeing the hunters do their best to hide their internal suffering and remain serious at the face of their puns always brightened up his day which was reason enough to continue their age-old tradition.

“Any news from the Guild?” the leader addressed the purple felyne while watching his pack herd the panicking people towards safety and away from the screaming malfestio.

“That last jump of huntin’ grounds was too big, nya.” Rhupurr scratched her ear to offload some of her nervousness. “They started to demeowned to see Hepurr beclaws her behafurr deviates too much from a hermit loon defending herself.”

Their boss launched her kinsect, Atlas, Cocoa was sure to have remembered correctly, and while Goldilocks… convinced the stragglers that there were better places to film from.

“They’re, also suspicious about how we purrcure so much extra stuff and the tech the melynx glaring have shown to the others, nya.”

Cocoa felt his hair rise slightly remembering that incident before forcing them down again. The… creative acquisition team was a rowdy bunch whose success largely depended on not even beginning to know what deference could mean.

The leader had regularly heard stories about black cats who had something to prove trying to pick-pocket stuff out of the bags of hunters. While they were fighting their targets.

Cocoa had seen some of the loot being proudly shown after they got into a facility under the city their boss lived in. Even after he had told them to keep a low profile. The newly acquired squeezy bottle truly earned its keep that night. A cut of their felvine rations concordantly to stricter catnip regulation should prevent that episode to be repeated anytime soon. Hopefully.

The grizzled veteran yearned for the days when he was a little kitten and naively wondered why the chiefs desperately tried to find a palico spot with the first hunter who would take them. Getting an entire clowder to listen was a nightmare at the best of times. When they were excited he felt the years of this life getting shaved off by the day.

Still, he would be remembered as the one who led the initial mapping of an entire realm.
He couldn’t wait to rub that under the nose of the other chieftains. For that alone, the trouble was worth it.

“Pawlie, Kevin,” Cocoa ordered his captains when he noticed an itching tang reach his nose. “Stop playing cards, split up, and secure the road at either end. The owl is getting mad and those naked monkeys won’t notice their disorientation until it’s too late.”

With a wobbly salute, the felynes in question jumped off the roof to the streets below, taking with them their teams.

It wasn’t as if Cocoa could personally care about whether the idiots were hurt simply because they had the bright idea to stick around and watch. The boss simply wouldn’t like it as was apparent by the auxiliary rescue services she had bargained for. They would need to cart anyone of the simpletons that got wounded which would mean either less profit for the clan or a disgruntled subordinate. Neither was a good option.

Cocoa quietly shook his head while moving to keep up with the fight himself. He had seen how the distraction team had trouble convincing the blockheads that being anywhere near a flying, enraged monster that was larger than them was a good idea.

If he had known that some of the inhabitants of the lunatic asylum were jaded and bored enough that anything without explosions would draw them out of the woodworks, Cocoa would’ve never agreed to that seemingly harmless clause.

Even back home the worst of the hunters he had the pleasure of robbing blind had some means to defend themselves and they got paid for every single time they needed help – if through some miracle they were successful they even got a cut from that. It was so easy to assume that in a city that, according to his scouts, was plenty dangerous enough people would know how to keep their heads down when their superiors had a disagreement. It had been easy to rationalize that they wouldn’t be needed all that often in bizarro-world since monkey-business wasn’t covered by their contract beyond bailing their boss’s ass out occasionally.

Instead, they got more than weekly short-lived visitors to deal with on top of a person of interest to shadow.

Cocoa felt a smile creep on his face. He had to admit that being convinced of getting that clause included for a minor gain of resources had been a good hustle on his expense. From her all too innocent reactions she had known something like that would happen. The foreign wyverian had warned him that people liked to read about dangerous experiences. It was his fault that he hadn’t put in enough research into it that the monkeys here had the technology to capture moving images and that it was everywhere. Or the length some idiots would go to get known by doing this.

Her dad had taught her well.

“Glory Girl,” their supplier suddenly shouted which made Cocoa stop in his tracks. “Dodge!”

“Ya think she realizes she speaks purrfect felyne right nyaw?” the purple cat beside him asked.

“You won’t be able to block it!” the hunter followed up while missing by a wide margin the blue owl who had unleashed a cone of blue light.
He sighed. “No Rhupurr, she didn’t notice the effects of the malfestio scales.”

With resignation, Cocoa watched the chances of earning a little extra disappear as Goldilocks was hit by the hypnosis beam of the insidious owl. Their boss also seemed to get aware of the effects after wandering off in the opposite direction as her fallen teammate and letting out a string of yowling curses so vile he put his paws over the wide-eyed youngster beside him.

He only let go when the boss dodged to take a leaping jump onto the prone form. The kit’s face radiated with mirth as the wyverian charged her enemy with renewed vigor and fire in her eyes – though not before taking the time for three therapeutic stomps on Goldilocks’s face.

Cocoa knew it was just to an attempt to wake up the flying wrecking ball, probably, but it was the first time his companion had seen this standard operation procedure. Normally the hunters would be gentler but the brown-haired cat had long since learned that his boss favored a certain measure of enthusiasm in all she did.

She was rolling on the floor, unsuccessfully attempting to form words in between the yelping giggles.

The leader stared a moment longer at the incapacitated form beside him and focused on the escalating fight with a growing smirk.

He had first feared that the streets their patron had chosen were too narrow to effectively dodge the enraged bird. It was so natural to assume that non-felynes would make those mistakes occasionally.

That fear had been uncharacteristically unfounded for once.

The malfestio swooped down towards the hunter, wings outstretched and the ear-like clusters of feathers on his head raised to show the red undersides out of anger over the last exchange of blows. Hepurrt used her staff to vault onto an overhanging ladder, letting the low-flying owl pass right below her. The prey corrected her flight to follow only to clip her wing on the building their boss’s handhold was attached to.

To the bird’s credit, it corrected and stabilized herself immediately. It was just her bad luck that her hunter took that small moment to launch herself downwards at her, striking at the creature’s head with a vicious blow and grappling the neck with her taloned feet.

Blood spurted where the apparently wooden pole connected and in the tumble to the ground, Cocoa saw how she managed to stab the creature four times before she had to let go. Her Kinsect flew to his master a moment later, his claws bloody.

“Are all meownster hunters like this?” the calmed-down youngling asked wide-eyed.

Following her gaze, Cocoa understood what she meant. Their boss had just eaten the residue her kinsect had produced and stared at the recovering malfestio with a manic gleam in her eyes.

“Most are a bit more reserved,” replied the leader, clamping down on the shudder he nearly felt as he saw their boss’s smile.

She launched herself towards the owl, spinning through the air head over end, shutting up the malfestio’s cry before it could be unleashed with a crack even the hairless
monkeys would have heard.

“Her pursuer would be furreaking out if she saw this,” the purple cat stated with a smile that wasn’t too dissimilar to that of the hunter who used her prey as a springboard to both dodge a confusion-inducing wing swipe and gave her another visceral blow.

“Where is she?” Cocoa queried.

The other empowered monkey that had been following their provider everywhere had been a headache but since she was easily monitored no active steps had been made. The powers the costumed stalker had displayed would mean increased costs if they had to deal with her and she hadn’t shown signs that she would move into action. Besides her ear scratching did improve the morale among the clowder.

Barring drastic changes, the safety of their boss was considered safe until a contract negotiation. Cocoa really hoped he didn’t have to deploy the shock traps he had some of her watchers carry.

“Hungrywhiskers repurrrts that she’s hanging out around a big fancy house the entire day, nya,” Rhupurr answered easily before she focused on the still form of the boss’s friend. “Hey, baws? Don’t we hafta purrhaps get Goldilocks to safety?”

“If Hepurr’s stomps can’t inconvenience her, the malfestio can’t without focusing.” As if to show this point, the monster in question landed on women in a cloud of confusion-inducing flakes. “It’d be a waste of resources. ‘Sides the battle is over any moment now.”

As of on command, a black cat moved from the chimney he was leaning against. A flash illuminated the street and their boss put away her communication device while the malfestio was flailing in blinded panic.

“Charlie,” Cocoa addressed the newcomer. “Prepare your crew and tell Pawlie and Kevin to prepare a tight purrimeter.”

The rest of the battle was a mere waiting for the inevitable to play out. The owl launched her cloud of flakes into the wrong direction entirely while Hepurrt’s kinsect scored more and more red lines on it.

After that, a crack of a well-timed strike of her weapon caused one wing to break. The sudden pain and impulse of force toppled the monster over for a second time.

The battle was over as their boss rammed her knife into the neck.

Cocoa smiled at their hunter. In the end, she did come through and won some time.

“Crap,” the purple cat uttered upon coming to the same realization. “How much do I owe ya?”

Their boss poked the sleeping form of her friend a couple more times before shrugging and started to take her killing right picks.

“We’ll talk about it later;” Cocoa stated as Charlie and his crew arrived at the body. “First I have something more important to do. Check up on Hungrywhiskers and rotate with him.”
Rhupurr gave a wobbly salute and hopped off the roof.

Knowing full well that his clowder would be able to handle the rest, the browncoat turned towards the small pocket where he felt the space twist and strain.

The Guild wouldn’t be happy about him acting as a representative for their provider. They would have to deal with his utter magnificence until the time their hunter found a reliable way to use the ways between their realms.

Cocoa decided that the delay would be for the best anyway. Now he had the time to prepare them for what would await them if they were to meet Hepurrt.

Moving his hands to grab the edges of the metaphysical hole his brilliant mind searched for an explanation as to why the jumps between hunting grounds were so big without losing the self-defense claws.

The shrewd felyne felt a smile form as his claws began to dig into the roof.

Telling them that their boss had found a fancy in flying remobras whenever she caught one alive should do the trick. After all, they wouldn’t land alive while carrying a hunter and thus Repurrt would need to catch a new one every time.

The smile transformed into a full grin as Cocoa realized that she would likely actually do just that if she got her claws on one of those pesky flying snakes.

The brown cat jumped into the turbulences separating worlds with a joy that accompanied him ever since meeting their bundle of insanity.

He would make leaps in building the foundation of his legacy in the hunter world.
4.1

Chapter Notes

Thanks to 6thfloormadness (SB) for betaing and proofreading the chapter.

A howl reverberated off the walls of the valley leading to the coast.

I stopped trying to salvage the stomachs and fluids from the big insects that were hanging out around the mushrooms by the shore.

With a curse, I dodged the strike of one of the annoyed bugs and began running towards the origin of the sound. The elusive monster I had been searching for before getting… distracted by the local hyper-aggressive insect life.

It wasn’t because I had been wandering around for more than half an hour looking for my designated prey without any luck. Neither was the detour caused by me getting angry at the altaroths that were mocking my efforts and decided they needed to be taken down a notch.

No. It had been a strictly controlled collecting outing due to the usefulness of the materials. That most of the insects had been smashed into unsalvageable paste by the slab of iron I was calling a sword was purely coincidental. I was completely calm and collected.

Similar to how that fluid collection wasn’t a failure, the way my claws dug deep into the wet mud wasn’t caused by the intense desire to retreat from the place before I got further spit upon.

It was pure, sheer single-minded drive to accomplish the mission my Power had picked for me now that I had a heading. Nothing else.

The forest environment flew past me as I enjoyed the extra spring in my step that my scaly ninja outfit was giving me. I easily dodged out of the way of a couple of charging boars with the armor Carol had deemed “too revealing” for patrol.

Of course, it didn’t cover me in layers and layers of heavy armor. The whole goal behind it was to allow me to move like the ninja wyvern I had to kill to make it. And it wasn’t as if people would be looking at me more than usual. That boat had long since sailed after I became the crazy lizard lady who also loved cats. I had even used fishnet to cover the otherwise uncovered areas all by myself but doing more would simply mess up the effects. If I could deal with the uncomfortable stares for the sake of pragmatism, someone unaffected by it certainly should as well.

Sure, the pride I felt at completing the armor and how great it felt moving around with it did help me forget most embarrassment. That and hanging out with Vicky and her fashion sense. Either way, it shouldn’t matter anyway if it allowed me to patrol better.

Another series of reverberating howls forced me to redouble my effort to get to the monster making them. A shiver went down my spine and informed me that I shouldn’t allow whatever my prey was doing to keep doing it for much longer. My intuition finally caught up and started to provide snippets of information about what I was about to fight. It came to the same conclusion as my spine and guts. This, in turn, caused the part of my mind who preferred to scream at me during a fight instead of
helping out to radiate smugness from her private room of my headspace.

If there was one thing I was increasingly sure of, it had to be that I shouldn’t allow the azure draconic wolf to finish his howling charge.

I had to suppress a shudder when the zinogre’s cold eyes focused in on my running form.

My body tingled thanks to the electricity the wolf was gathering on him. The glowing bugs on his back danced with power when I disengaged the magnets that kept my oversized sword on my back and dug my talons into the rocky soil. I rotated my upper body away from the monster to stretch my muscles taut, preparing for one mighty strike.

The goal was to hit the head that was a foot over mine square in the face through the medium of a moderately fast moving slab of iron. This would then have stopped him from amassing further charge. I didn’t need my Powers to tell me that the way electricity arced between the now upright spikes on his back was a bad thing for me.

What happened instead was that the electro bugs had reached a critical mass as my sword was moving through the air.

Lightning rained down upon the zinogre bathing him in it. Hitting me in the process in a far less harmless manner. Electricity caused my muscles to spasm, launching me backward into a heap of soreness, liquid flames coursing through my skin, and sheer pain to radiate throughout my body.

I had trouble focusing my eyes on the beast that was leisurely walking towards me. At least I thought he was strutting because the golden-blue, crackling blur did get bigger.

My teeth hurt. It felt like someone had set my nerves on fire. Ozone and smoke stung my nose while I tried to regain control over my body. I had to get up before the giant wolf could get to me. I really didn’t like how the beast was sizing me up.

The spasms continued even after I got my feet back under me.

I shouldn’t have bothered.

The zinogre shoulder checked me with sheer disdain and since my hands were still in a death grip around the handle of my sword, all I could do to just take the blow. The only reason I kept standing was due to my talons once again tightly grabbing the floor.

I blame my general dazed state of mind for this poor decision.

Holding my position opened me up for his follow-up attack.

The last thing I registered of that encounter before a combination of blunt force trauma, the shock, and rending tear robbed me of my consciousness were the brown-golden ridges and the tail they were attached to barreling towards my face.

The next thing I remember is the gagging stench of smelling salts and Cocoa’s smug face hovering above mine.

“Ya messed up, boss,” the felyne stated the obvious.

I groaned in reply and decided that lying on my back for a moment longer was the right course of action. I had to run a mental check to see what the damages were anyway.
“Got greedy,” I replied while my hand explored the deep gash in my face. “Is he still in the same clearing?”

“He pursued the cart until the distraction team lured him to the other valley.” At least the monster hadn’t completely carved out my nose. Amy would have been annoyed if something needed regrowing. Again.

“Thanks for helping me out there,” I said after confirming that my gear wasn’t too damaged.

“No pawplem,” the mafioso cat purred as I forced myself upright. “It’s what ya pay us furr.”

I groaned softly at the reminder that I just lost about a third of my share just because the beast decided to cheat.

The Greatsword felt too impersonal after what happened. Especially when I had a toy I wouldn’t be able to use otherwise and that was almost tailored to take him down.

I reached down and grabbed my Bag of Holding from its place on my belt.

My entire arm disappeared into the small pouch of stretchy khezu leather as I looked for better weapons for the job. The weapons I needed were somewhere near the bottom of it to make sure I could easily grab the Potions and other tools even when in a hurry.

The first time Vista saw me go all Mary Poppins probably gave her an even greater headache than the little crafting session that preceded it. One she could luckily share with Kid Win who had the joy of experiencing my flavor of crafting up close and personal for the first time. It was his condition for donating one of his antigrav pads. The self-doubt that hung over him like a dark cloud afterward made classes together uncomfortably awkward the following week. Especially since he was still hoping he could find his own specialization soon and all by himself. There was so frustratingly little I could do to help him other than straight up telling him.

I sighed, pushing back the dark core of irrational guilt. I had to focus.

My hands, guided by both the memory of where I put them and the chilling cold one of one of the two swords emanated, firmly grasped the weapons that would be the end of the zinogre.

I was only vaguely aware that once again both arms had disappeared up to the shoulder into the bag while I was caught up in the moment. With a muttered curse I pulled them out, glad that this time there weren’t people watching me do it. The Mary Poppins comparison had spread like wildfire and Vista had only been too glad to pour oil on that fire by sharing tales of my testing session.

While the fad was unfortunate and slightly embarrassing, the jokes was still on them. After all, I was the one with a magic bag that could hold spare weapons on top of rendering them nearly weightless.

Still, seeing the opening of the pouch stretch to accommodate the overgrown sword on steroids while putting it back, I did decide that I should wait a bit longer before I made the Bowgun that looked like a parasol.

Besides, something as harmlessly looking as a parasol would be a good bargaining chip if Carol got onto my case again about looking too dangerous. It wasn't like she'd understand anytime soon that I can't force the forms of my weapons or armor without losing much of their efficiency. It was unfair that she called me out on weapons looking like they could hurt someone.

Just like she had when I was done making the pair I lovingly and creatively called Snow Venom. It might have had something to do with how the two swords looked like raptor talons on steroids and...
acid. Or it how one was made of everlasting ice capable of freezing flesh in a single stroke while the other emitted the sharp acrid stench of the congealed venom it was made of whenever I swung them. Whatever it was in the end, Carol had forbidden showing them off to the general public. Soon after I got an email with the same “suggestion” from the PRT’s PR department along with the usual one from Armsy where he kindly asked for permission to study it.

I refused to let my hard work go to waste, though. It would have meant I had frozen my ass off fighting the unexpected giadrome pack and braved the mires in search of the iodrome for nothing. It was one of the reasons I looked forward to being spirited away every week. Nobody could tell me I was going overboard - at least not until Halbeard reviewed the footage. I didn’t have to limit myself to the friendlier looking weapons.

The blue and purple claws snapped to the magnets embedded in the armor after returning my precious bag to its rightful place.

I rolled my shoulders and felt a smile creep on my face. It was time for round two.

“Ya going out again?” Cocoa stated more than asked after I took a gulp of Potion.

My nose tingled as the edges of the gaping wound grew together and fused with one another. It made me sneeze.

“I’m no quitter,” I replied checking the fastening mechanism of my weapons just to be sure. “Especially not after he made it personal.”

“The Zimeowgre’s thunder is known to stun even expurrienced hunters,” the felyne s offered with a mischievous twitch in his tail. “We generally make a purpose of avoiding it.”

The draw of my two swords was effortless when I shot the wiseassing cat a dangerous look. He reveled in it without the slightest hint of shame.

“I wasn’t planning on getting hit by it.” Cocoa’s eyebrow rose in distilled doubt. “Not anymore at least. You still have the tabs on it?”

“He hasn’t moved much, nya. Just go down and take the next valley on the left” He chuckled softly. “Just use ya nose and ya find him soon enough. He still stinks of shit.”

With a nod of thanks, I ran out of the small cave they dumped me in. Ground was covered even quicker than my first beeline towards the monster now that I didn’t have a slab of iron on my back.

I practically flew past a pack of screeching jaggi when I began my ascent into the second valley and closer to the unmistakable stench of wyvern excrement. A frustrated howl was heard while I made my way up the gentle brook. I could sympathize with the overly aggressive dog. Somewhere in the process of making these Dung Bombs something happened that made the smell that much more repugnant and revolting – rumor had it that Lung still hadn’t forgiven me for my creative escape from his… recruitment attempt about one and a half months ago.

The trees gave way to a waterfall which flooded a rocky basin that fed small brook I followed to get there.

In the middle of the stone floodplain, the zinogre was pacing back and forth in frustration in front of the waterfall. It looked like he wanted to get rid of the awful stench, but knew that it would also wash away much of the bugs that supercharged him by the time he even got close to that.

Which fit me just fine.
I drew my swords when I was almost on top of him back and focused on what I wanted to do. My heartbeat thundered in my ears as I visualized the carnage I was about to unleash, my heart flooding my limbs with precious blood.

The sound of falling water was more than enough to mask my excited and heavy breathing. The fact that I was downwind was only a matter of formality thanks to the overpowering stench of dung he himself emanated. Red started to creep in along the edges of my vision.

The zinogre let out a startled yowl that pitched up in pure rage when I slung myself into his left hind leg, rotating while using the slick stones underneath to lose none of the forward momentum.

Ice bit into the scaled hide near the tendon only for a congealed venom to infect the wound as the follow-up strike, opening it in the process. Once more did the frosty sword score a line on the beast body before I had to duck to avoid his saw-like tail when he swung around to face me.

His maneuver carried him a dozen yard away from me and the waterfall that could potentially wipe away an important advantage. The same lightning that arced between the raised spikes on his back seemed to make his eyes glow an icy blue as he started to slowly circle around me, sizing me up with startling intelligence.

I forced myself to wait a moment despite the panting breaths I was taking to maintain the heightened physical prowess. This was the monster that managed to knock me out in a brief series of attacks mere minutes ago. I couldn’t get sloppy – no matter how much I needed to break through the forcefully induced aggression before my body simply stopped cooperating.

My patience was rewarded when the zinogre suddenly charged with a speed that might’ve startled some of the lower end speedsters. My nerves allowed me to notice that the beast was counting on me to retreat and gave me all the freedom I needed to act upon that insight.

Instead of dodging out of the way of the charging beast the size of a big van, I returned the favor with my swords at the ready.

I slammed both blades into his massive front paw and slashed with all the might my burning lungs allowed for. They screeched as I raked them over the thick armored scales but didn’t do much to actually harm the beast barreling down upon me – let alone stop him.

What my attack did manage to do was to forcefully slide me over the slick floor after hopping over the wicked claw that almost stood perpendicular to the rest of the murderous instruments. There was enough power in the strike to push me towards its back. It carried me far enough to jump over the monster’s flat tail instead of his arching back as he gave a vicious hip check that would’ve otherwise send me flying into the cave wall with terminal velocity – likely eviscerating parts of my armor in the process.

The zinogre roared as both ice and venom struck the back of his tail deeply while I rolled over the dangerous appendage.

I barely noticed the sheer wall of sound the bellow of frustrated anger the zinogre made before the beast had reoriented himself to face me once again. During the last attack, I had felt something slide into place. The red in my vision was still there but where there was first labored anger, it was replaced by a tranquil purpose. I knew how and where to move to avoid getting impaired by the enormous sound.

He brought down his left leg wreathing in static energy. I twirled and dodged to his big barrel of a chest to avoid all of the claws. Lightning struck the spot I was previously standing in together with
his meaty paw and my feet tingled.

The zinogre snapped at my head even while he prepared to bring down the other paw upon me but he was too late. I used my own claws to reverse my rotation and escaped through the gap between his left leg and body. Both my blades slashed his left armpit on my way to relative safety.

A grin spread across my face as the zinogre was forced to tear open the ice that had spread into the wound by simply moving, tearing a bigger hole in the process.

Another hip check forced me to use his already wounded hind leg as a jumping board. Once again, I punished him with a pair of swallow slashes to clear the bulk of his body, breaking three erect and charged spikes in the process.

I got lucky then when my first successful strike paid out right then and there. The iodrome poison contained in the maliciously purple blade had begun its work weakening the surrounding tissue and numbing the nerves. The zinogre left hind leg slid out from under him when he tried to halt his enormous momentum. This caused the fresh wound in his armpit to rip open even further as he tried to compensate the imbalance.

The resulting hitch in his movement, the smallest pause it created as the monster still powered through the motions, allowed me to throw myself to the ground. I dodged the tail that came at my face like a demented buzz saw while the overgrown wolfdog used his healthy paw as an axle for a murderous pirouette. Drops of hot blood splattered onto my icy blade with an angry hiss and served as a stark reminder that I wasn’t out of trouble just yet.

He had barely landed, staring at me with murder in his eyes, when he dashed away only to flip over again. The big tail was brought down upon me like a sledgehammer. My paranoia was the only reason why I wasn’t pancaked. He had shown already that he had a far bigger range than was reasonable. I was already moving before he even landed.

I suddenly switched directions when I felt another spike in static electricity. Once again, a leg came down upon where I was supposed to be like Mjolnir itself. That I decided to slide under him both saved me and allowed me to rake his belly while he twirled once more.

This time, however, he wasn’t happy with just showing off his acrobatics. Instead, he decided that he needed to become completely airborne and have me meet his electrified spikes up close and personal. My claws gauged the smooth stone as I forced myself to stand and launched myself forward and out of the way of the zinogre coming down upon my back-first and overflowing with electricity and the intent to impale me.

He crashed with an angry sizzling thump that made the ground shake. I charged into the vaporous cloud it created the moment I got my feet underneath me. I ignored the burning of my still-raw nerves as the residual electricity of the blast flowed through the water around the beast. The sting of ozone was almost enough to mask the coppery taste of blood in my scalded mouth as I plunged in both blades to their hilt into the awkwardly writhing form.

I got in half a dozen of blows before the zinogre managed to get back on his feet. The bugs that got scattered with his latest attack coalesced back to him.

He let out another undulating howl and I felt my hair start to rise together with the redoubling of the acrid, stinging stench ozone.

I half-threw my two blades towards my back in the desperate attempt to free my hands, trusting the magnets I built into both the armor and the weapons to firmly attach them to my back. I simply didn’t
have the time to do more than hope for the best while frantically scrambling towards the nearest cliff wall.

I didn’t want a repeat of the last time – especially not when I was standing in the water and I could already barely feel my feet due to the electricity that flowed through it moments ago. That had been surplus charge simply flowing out - not an outright attack by itself.

The numbness of my feet helped mask the impact as I forced my talons into the smooth rock of the cliff with a disturbing crunch. Lightning was arcing out of the zinogre as I pushed through the pain and climbed up higher and hopefully out of the way of being fried. Thunderous cracks came closer to me and my nerves felt like they were on fire. It was even worse than when he hit me in our previous encounter.

The zinogre only gave me time to get up about two stories before he unleashed the entirety of his pent-up electricity with a piercing roar of hate. Even at that height, there was enough juice in that single attack to make my muscles tense up and force me to bang into the wall. Thunder bugs landed on my clenched-up form to add to the teeth-shattering agony.

It was only after the canine wyvern started to recall them that I was able to move once again.

At least the things had done me one questionable favor: The pain they caused was more than enough to prevent me from feeling the damage I had done to myself. They even added fuel to my inner fire that got fed into the trance-like state I had fallen into at the start of the battle.

Anger and pain made a lot of things seem reasonable.

Things like launching yourself from your relatively safe perch towards a monster that was about twice as tall as you. With likely broken feet.

Still, it was what I ended up doing with a snarl when I saw the zinogre strut towards me in annoyed disbelief.

My swords seemed to simply appear in my hands mid-leap and I started to rotate.

The icy blade bit into the beast’s head just behind his right horn with a crack and I used it to push off, rotating my body like a deranged roller to get the venomous brother pierce the hide behind the head.

I accelerated down the zinogre’s back, ignoring the shocks and gashes his spikes and bugs inflicted on me. It was more than worth it.

My opponent sagged a bit while the venom entered his bloodstream in concentrations that were starting to get dangerous for him. Spikes broke off where I struck them, and I felt more than I saw the thunder bugs fleeing their previous safe-haven.

The finishing touch was added when I reached the claw-like tip of his tail and jerked myself sideways using my venomous blade to swivel me around. The ice blade joined the wound and violently pulled the two swords apart, using the leftover momentum to tear through the scales and tissue.

I landed on my feet only have my legs buckle underneath me. I slid under the pounding waterfall with a grin on my cut-up face.

I wasn’t the only one who had lost their footing and my landing spot allowed for an excellent view of the beast collapsing with a pitiful yelp. The sudden jerk he toppled with whipped his tail around and caused the tip of his tail to tear off with a wet ripping sound that managed to be heard over the
thunderous rumble of the waterfall.

While we both had inflicted terrible wounds on each other, I had one key advantage. I could cheat.

The zinogre’s legs were refusing, buckling out from underneath him every time he tried to get back up while my claw found the squeeze bottle with Potion and the other pushed me upright. I saw my toes twist back into their proper places and orientation even while my prey was losing dangerous amounts of blood from his tail stump and numerous wounds on his back. Not even folding what remained of his spikes back did much in the way of stopping the flow from the torn-open gashes.

He was about to die and the cold, blue eyes that peered at me from underneath one snapped-off horn told me he knew it – and wasn’t about to let it happen without a fight. His bugs were gathering one last time.

I leaped up as soon as my bottle had disappeared back into my bag of holding and charged at the zinogre with both swords out.

In a surprising display of tenacity, his feet finally found purchase and he jumped and flipped over while he launched half his remaining bugs at me. I barely managed to evade the curving ball of electricity and biting insects that came my way and the next ball only missed because his abused left side threw off his timing.

Still, I had to dive at him to get out of the way of his final attack.

Both blades found the soft flesh underneath his jaw as the last of his strength left him and he collapsed upon landing. His mouth snapped shut where my head had been moments earlier and then he fell still.

The venom and blood loss had claimed his life.

I started collecting the broken off scales and spikes as soon as I felt the familiar tug behind my bellybutton that indicated he was truly dead.

The severed horn wandered into my bag as well as the tip of his tail and I had just enough time to separate his left front leg from his body before the world twisted and changed in a flash of white.

Reality twisted, folded, and inverted for a moment and suddenly I was back in our basement. I dropped the leg on the tarp we had learned to prepare for my little trips and gently rested my blades against the wall to be cleaned.

The door opened moments later to reveal Dad who gave me a once-over. Concern melted away when he saw that I was still in one piece and seemingly healthy.

“You had a good one?” he asked with faked nonchalance.

He didn’t like that I disappeared more than once a week – especially not when it became clear how dangerous basically everything was on the other side. Still, Dad was forced to admit that he couldn’t do anything to prevent it or to help directly in that manner. He simply missed the strength needed and I hadn’t been able to construct a bowgun that I deemed good enough.

“It was a productive hunt,” I answered while taking the fresh towel he brought. “Took a bit longer than I liked but other than that, it was great.”

I decided to omit how close the zinogre had gotten making me his next meal. I couldn’t bring myself to cause Dad to worry even more. I didn’t want to have him think he was doing too little for his only
daughter. I would've gone mad in bureaucratic hell without his constant help. He was willing to drive me to the farm every day on top of having his own job.

“So, the dent in your helmet and the scratches on the armor weren’t caused by anything dangerous?” he asked while taking the camera I handed him.

“The monster got in a glancing blow or two,” I replied while wiping off most of the blood and cursing his newly-rekindled observing nature. “The felyne distracted him for long enough to prevent it from becoming a problem. It’s what I pay them for.”

Dad didn’t quite buy my cheeriness or my smile but decided not to put his doubts into words.

“In that case,” he said instead. “Get cleaned up. There'll be pancakes when you're done.”

I moved to hug the saintly slayer of rumbling stomachs but was prevented by his outstretched hand on my breastplate. “Thank me after you take a shower. If I went to work covered in blood people might think I finally snapped and became another serial killer. And I haven't spoken to Jack in years!”

With a chuckle, he left me pouting and hurriedly getting off the grime that might drip on the floor.

He had to send the footage to the world's second-best Tinker and feed a ravenous beast. I had to secure my spoils against thieving cats and prepare for a brand-new day of nervous glances people thought they could hide. And Jimmy.

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