Fault
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11804583.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Worm - Wildbow, Parahumans Series - Wildbow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Original Characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Fault</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fault
by keira_irl, Xaiya_L

Summary
Denver. "Mile High City", or whatever you wanna call it. People from Endbringer-ravaged cities and those seeking a place with slightly less crazy capes keep piling in, driving up the traffic and rent. Villains and heroes maintain a balance for now, but tensions broil, waiting for whatever or whoever ignites the powder keg.

Three young girls, each burdened—one struggles with hopelessness, one plays villain to help those she loves, and the last strives for vengeance.

Mirrors: SB · SV

We've got a lot of characters and setting stuff, feel free to peruse our spoiler-free cast page.
Note: Fault touches on heavy stuff, in ways that would be considered spoilers. With this in mind, feel free to rot13 the following text to receive a trigger warning blurb.

Bar bs gur znva punenpgref vf n ivpgvz bs encr naq uhzna genssvpxvat, naq ure qmyvat jvgu gur cflpubybtvpny rssrgf vf bar bs gur gurzrf bs gur fgbel. Vg'f nyy va gur cnfg, naq abguvat vf fubja ba-fperra. Abgr, ubjrire, gung fur qbrf unir eha-vaf jvgu bar bs ure encvfgf (abguvat unccraf, ohg vg trgf njshyyl pybfr. Fxvc g jb. guerr vs guvf vf gbb zhpu sbe lbh.)

Va nqqvgvba, gurer'f n snve nzbhag bs gur ivbyrapr vaurerag va gur Jbezirefr. Ba-fperra zheqref unccra, sebz gur cbi bs gur zheqre (fxvc bar. avar naq g jb.bar vs guvf vf na vffhr)

Svanyyyl, gurer ner gurzrf bs enzcnag qeht nohfr vaphqvat Yvgrenyyyl Gvaxregpnu Qngr-encr Qehtf. Guvf xvaqn fubj hc nyy bire, emyyyl

Again, this contains hella spoilers; don’t complain if it ruins stuff :v
Tank Buster

I didn't like school.

I wasn't saying that to be edgy, or anything. I didn't have the problems typically associated with someone who doesn't like school. I wasn't bullied. I passed my academics well enough. It's not even that I was bored, though no teenager could truthfully say that they've never been bored at school.

No. I didn't like school because people couldn't shut the fuck up about the Wards.

“Hey, Jess. Did you hear? Eimyrja surrounded herself and some thug in a ring of fire. She said ‘You're so toast’!”

That was absolutely not something Lindsay would ever say. I could imagine her twitching if she overheard that.

“Hah! That's badass. Word is Flashstep teleported himself above another thug and just sat on him!”

I couldn't imagine Jordan sitting on a small child, let alone a grown adult. He was way too small for that. More likely, he threw a token over a thug and just mistimed his jump.

“Oh yeah? I was walking around the other day, and I spotted Red Light on patrol. He winked at me!”

While I doubted that might have actually happened, that at least sounded like something Thomas would do.

Still, I wondered why I ever talked to Jessica and Aidyn. Those girls had nothing in their lives lately except for gossip about the Wards. Frustrated, I finally stood up.

“Naomi? Is there something wrong?” Aidyn asked with genuine concern. I felt a little bad, but I really did not want to hear more.

“No, sorry. I just wanted to check something in the library before lunch ended,” I replied.

“Oh, at least hear the best part!” Jessica said excitedly. “There were these five big thugs. And I mean big! All of these guys against Tank Buster out of his mech. He said ‘bring it on’ and beat them all with only four punches!”

I suppressed a groan.

“But how did he beat five guys with four punches?” Aidyn asked.

“He's just that good! Gosh, I wanna know what he looks like under that armor. He's always so badass.”

I finally turned around and walked away. I was so done with listening to that crap. And, they were so wrong on so many levels. I did not say that, and I only fought four thugs two nights ago. I was half tempted to just tell them that I was Tank Buster, just to see the looks on their faces after they were gushing about “him”, but they'd just see that as a joke. After all, to the world, Tank Buster was the boy leader of the Denver Wards for the past year and a half. It would be nice to be done with the
whole charade.

Rather than walk to the library, I instead headed towards one of the back exits of the school. Today was only a half day for me, so I walked over to the RTD bus stop near the school. Conveniently, the 28 made its stop just as I reached it.

My name is Naomi Mitchell, also known to the public as Tank Buster. I'm a cape, specifically a Tinker cape, which means I build things. In particular, my biggest projects involve my mechsuits, though so far I've only deployed one. I am also definitely not a boy.

The bus stopped at Union Station, taking me out of my thoughts. The sky above was suddenly overcast, when just half an hour ago it was entirely sunny. Shaking my head to stop zoning out, I made my way through the aboveground part of the station and walked through the doors leading down into the lower section. Every line for the RTD light rail could be accessed below, but I ignored all of that in favor of a side door.

The Denver PRT headquarters was only a block north from Union Station. Few knew, but it was actually connected underground to Union Station. While the passage was mostly intended for evacuation purposes, given Union Station had Denver's largest shelter underneath, it was available for Protectorate and Ward members who felt they needed to be more cautious about their identity. Though really, I just preferred the side entrance to squeezing past the annoying tourists.

This entrance was as boring as it possibly could be, drab gray concrete walls with flickering fluorescent lights casting the whole thing in a dim light. It was even allowed to be a little dirty looking, within reason. I couldn't even see the cameras that I knew were watching. After punching in the key code by one of the doors at the far end, I stepped through.

It was still fairly nondescript on the other side, given it wasn't intended to have frequent foot traffic, but for a parking garage it was kept awkwardly clean.

I headed for one of the elevators, stepping inside and pressing the number for the sixth floor. I always wondered who built the PRT elevators, given they all seemed very much Tinker-built. I never stopped feeling disconcerted with how it never felt like it even moved. It seemed like such a silly thing to waste tech on. Was there a dedicated elevator Tinker? Did they spend their days traveling across the country fixing their fancy elevators? Who knew.

I stepped off once the doors opened, and took the first door off the elevator landing, which lead to the Tinker workshops. The PRT guard stationed outside gave me a bored look as I stepped through.

As much as the tinker part of me wanted to go to work, I had to push that away in favor of simply retrieving my light power armor. I spared very little for aesthetic. It was a dark blueish-gray set of armor with a tinted visor. Its most distinctive characteristic would be the heat-waves radiating off of it whenever I got into a fight.

After a sad glance at the uncompleted twelve foot tall Torunn mech sitting in the corner, I stepped out in my power armor, my footsteps now far heavier.

I found Red Light waiting for me outside. He wore a dark-blue bodysuit with a depiction of a traffic light on his chest. His mask covered most of his face, exposing only his brown eyes and a dark chin covered in stubble.

“Hey, TB. Figured I'd wait here,” he said.

I nodded. “That's fine. It'll only be us two patrolling today, anyway.”
“Flash and Em call off or something?”

“They were held back for today. They weren't quite meeting testing standards.”

He rolled his eyes. “Figures. Where are we patrolling today?”

“Around northern Lakewood and Wheat Ridge. Apparently someone reported seeing an Imperium bot in the area.”

“Fun. Well, lead the way, boss,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes as I walked by, knowing he couldn't see, and we made our way back down the elevator to the garage. We both had custom-made motorcycles, stylized mostly by PR. Red Light's motorcycle mostly differed in coloration from any other PRT issue vehicle, while my own was custom made to handle the weight and temperature of my armor. Traffic wasn't too bad this time of day, and we made good time. I tuned out the waves and camera clicking that was oh-so-common on patrol, settling into the routine.

“I'm beginning to think these reports are just made to keep us busy while crime happens elsewhere,” Red Light radioed, an irritated tone in his voice.

“Normally we at least see something going on. You might actually be right,” I replied.

“Oh gee, way to have faith in me.”

“Shush,” I said, smiling.

“Flashstep here,” I suddenly heard over the radio, his voice as hesitant as ever. “Umm, you know that unknown person sending us tips?”

“Them again?”

“Yeah. We just got another one. Thought you'd like to know.”

I sighed. For the past couple of months, we had been getting some tips about the Ravens—one of the two bigger supervillain gangs in the area—from some unknown source who wouldn't reveal any personal info. The Denver Protectorate, who mostly went after the Ravens, wanted nothing to do with someone who refused verification. We, the Wards, mostly went after Imperium, the other major force in the city, so we'd never bothered acting on them anyway.

Honestly, I wasn't even sure why Bunker bothered passing them on to us. Maybe he got some amusement from wasting our time, however brief. I was about to tell him to ignore it as usual, but with how fruitless today’s patrol was, it might be better to try to accomplish something.

I radioed back, “You know what? Sure. Let's check the source for once.”

“Huh. Didn't expect that. It's about time,” Red Light commented.

“Okay. It's, uh, apparently some exchange is going on tonight over on the east side. Want the address?”
I shivered a little, looking down at the street from my rooftop perch as drizzle poured down from the night sky.

I'd been there nearly two hours, and was beginning to think the intel I had received was bogus. The Ravens, one of the largest gangs in Denver, were supposed to be here, some sort of deal going down with people from out of town. But my source hadn't been wrong yet, and at the very least I had a chance to think while I waited for someone to show up.

I was a cape, a person who had gained superhuman powers. Some capes had cool abilities like strength, teleportation, time manipulation. Mine wasn't nearly as cool as any of that, though. I was a Tinker, a parahuman who could build fantastic pieces of technology. Or, well, some Tinkers could. Everyone had a niche, and mine happened to be body augmentation. Not quite death rays and time machines.

It was kind of a sick joke, really. I could make implants, artificial limbs, and such, but using them meant going under the knife. I didn't even have any idea if the stuff I made would work with anyone but myself. And there weren't exactly lines of people signing up to let a 17-year-old girl slice them open, so I wouldn't be finding out anytime soon.

At least I got to make kinda cool implants. After I'd lost one of my arms I'd fitted a mechanical replacement, even managing to pack a weapons system or two inside. Then there was my flight system, two wings with titanium feathers sprouting from my shoulder blades, with a pair of miniature jet engines to provide thrust. An implant in my torso filtered toxins and poisons out of my bloodstream before they could have much effect.

All that tech, and I was still just a girl sitting on a rooftop, shivering in a costume, soaked by rain.

Movement below caught my attention, and behind my mask I saw a car turn onto the street a couple blocks away, heading towards me. I knelt down, low to the rooftop of the rundown shop I was perched atop. The car stopped just below me, but the occupants didn't get out. With a mental command I switched my mask's vision to infrared, and the silhouette of two people popped out. I switched back to normal vision and leaned back.

A few minutes later, another car pulled up across the street, and a lone man got out, unfolding an umbrella and walking to the center of the otherwise-deserted street.

I performed a habitual check of my systems. My wings, mask, arm, shoes, all reported no issues. My arm only had the taser and shotgun modules in it tonight, not that I really needed the latter for this job.

The two figures who had arrived first got out of the car, meeting the third in the street. This was it. I spread my wings and glided the thirty or so feet down, slamming into one of the men with a crash. He fell to the ground, pinned under my weight. He lifted his head, and a hydraulically-assisted punch slammed it back down. I clambered up and turned to face the other two.

The one with the umbrella backed up, unsure. The other, though, grabbed a bat from his car, running towards me. Too easy, I thought to myself. With a mental command I opened a panel on my prosthetic arm, and a pair of electrodes shot out. He fell down, writhing as electricity coursed through his body. After a few seconds I turned off the taser, letting the electrode wires fall out of my arm, and turned to the umbrella guy.
He had backed up, a fearful expression on his face, holding the umbrella in front of him like some sort of shield. “I'm not armed!” he shouted at me in a distinctly Minnesotan accent, his voice quavering.

“Why are you here?” I asked, the mask distorting my voice.

“I–my boss sent me, to pick up a shipment from these guys,” he replied in a panicked voice.

“So you have money?” I asked.

“Y-yeah, you want it? I'll give you everything I got, just don't hurt me.” This guy's kinda wimpy for a criminal, I thought to myself.

“Sure,” I said, gesturing towards his car. He walked over, slowly, and popped open the trunk, pulling out a duffelbag. “Set it on the ground,” I commanded. He did so, kicking it towards me before backing up.

I stepped forward, keeping my arm pointed at him, ready to tase him if he did anything. I knelt and unzipped the bag. Bundles of dollar bills were stuffed inside. I smiled to myself, and pulled a bundle out, tossing it in the air idly.

“You don't look like a hero,” he said, unsure, “but you don't seem to like these Raven fellows.”

“I'm no hero, at least, I'm not with the Protectorate, if that's what you mean,” I said. “But it doesn't matter. You go back to wherever the fuck you came from, tell your boss to stay the fuck away from this city. Understand?”

The guy nodded, and I gestured towards his car. He moved slowly towards the driver's seat, careful not to come to closely to me, before jumping in and driving off in a screech of tires.

I rolled my eyes and looked through the other car. Nothing noteworthy in the trunk, but there was a small wooden box, small enough to fit into a backpack. I pulled it out and opened it.

Inside were four vials wrapped in foam padding. I pulled one out, tossing the padding to the ground, holding it up to the light to get a better look. A clear, pink-tinted fluid. Heartbreak. One of the signature drugs the Ravens produced, nasty shit and very addictive.

I grimaced and pulled the other vials out to verify they were the same. Yep. All this cash, for four little vials of Heartbreak.

I pulled the stoppers off, pouring the contents of the vials onto the rain-soaked asphalt, before tossing the empty containers back into the thug's car.

I heard a splash behind me, and I froze, mind racing. I'd been so caught up in looking through the car I hadn't been paying attention.

I spun around, charging the taser. A figure stood there, dressed from head to toe in some sort of power armor. The rain sizzled as it fell on him. Except for the obvious heat radiating from it, the dark blueish-gray armor didn't have any distinctive characteristics.

Great, a fucking cape.

Tank Buster

I got off my motorcycle, leaving it parked in the alley. Raindrops sizzled off my heated armor as I
poked my head out enough to get a look at the scene. Three figures stood in the center of the street. I keyed my comms, “Hey, it looks like that source might have been onto something.”

“See, I told you we should have listened to them before,” Red Light, radioed back. “I've got PRT standing by if you need them.”

“Okay,” I replied, watching. My eyes widened as I saw a silhouetted figure standing on top of a rooftop above the three. I was about to radio it in, when the figure jumped down, crashing into one of the thugs. I saw now that they had wings sprouting from their back.

“Hey, what was the name of that cape we were talking about the other day?”

“Oh, Icarus? With the wings?” Red Light asked.

“Yeah. She's here.”

“No shit? Do you need backup?”

“No, I don't think so. Stand by,” I replied. From what I recalled, Icarus was either a villain or a vigilante, who had started popping up a few months ago. A Tinker possibly specializing in flight. Or *maybe not*, I thought as I watched her shoot electrodes from her arm into one of the thugs.

The fight was over quickly, and after a brief conversation I couldn't hear from my position, the last remaining thug got into his car and drove off. “There's a dark-colored sedan heading east from my location,” I radioed. “See if we can stop that.”

“Copy that.”

“She just took out two of the Ravens' thugs, and let some other guy go after getting something from him. Now she's going through the other car.”

“Looking for something?”

“I don't know. I'm going to go say hi,” I said, stepping out of the alley and walking down the street.

“You're doing what?”

“We hardly know anything about her. Seems like a good time to fix that,” I radioed as I approached, stopping a short distance away.

Suddenly Icarus spun around, sparks flying from her arm as she leveled it at me.

From this distance I could get a better look. Her right arm was metal, a gunmetal gray that matched the wings that were currently folded against her back. She wore a mask shaped like an inhuman skull, its eyes glowing a faint blue. The rest of her costume was an elegant-looking black dress reaching down to her calves, and a pair of impractical-looking high heels. I didn't move, and after a few seconds Icarus spoke, her voice sounding as if several people were speaking at once.

“You're not a Raven,” she said, tilting her head to the side as she looked at me.

“No,” I replied.

“Then who are you? Kinda creepy, just standing there.” *This coming from the woman with a skull mask.*

“Tank Buster, I'm the team leader of the Denver Wards.”
Icarus paused at that, and after a few seconds she lowered her arm, the sparking taser folding away into it. “Wards don’t fight the Ravens. Hell, the Protectorate barely does anything about them either,” she said, leaning against the car. She was still tense though, as if she were ready to leap away at the slightest motion. “So what’s ‘Tank Buster, the team leader of the Denver Wards’ doing out here?”

“I was about to ask the same about you,” I said. “You've made a bit of a name for yourself over the past few months.”

Icarus snorted, and I got the impression she was rolling her eyes behind the mask. “If you ‘heroes’ were doing your jobs, I wouldn’t be a name at all,” she said bitterly, walking over to the bag she had gotten from one of the goons. She dropped it on the hood of the car and unzipped it, pulling bundles of cash out and sorting them into piles. If she didn't occasionally glance up at me, I would have thought she had forgotten I even existed. There had to have been at least twenty thousand dollars sitting on the hood getting wet.

“What do you plan on doing with all of that?” I asked.

“What does it look like I'm planning?” Icarus replied, “I'm not standing in the rain counting it for fun.”

“Well, see, we're not really sure what to think of you, to be honest. We know almost nothing about you and your motives. A lot of people believe you to be an independent villain, and your costume hardly refutes that, no offense.”

“What you or anyone else thinks of me is not my problem. I'm just doing a job that needs doing, and nobody else will step up and take care of the Ravens. So, here I am.”

I paused before replying, “To answer your earlier question, a source we weren't sure of has been sending tips that the Protectorate never touched. I decided to take a look while Imperium is quiet, but you beat me to it.”

“So the heroes are finally stepping up to the plate? I'll believe it when I see Bloodletter in the Birdcage, no offense.”

“You don't have very much faith in the heroes,” I observed. “I was going to offer you a place in the Wards, but I suspect I already know your answer.”

“Oh, so this is a recruitment attempt? I've already turned down ‘offers’ from half the groups in this city. Are you going to send me death threats when I turn yours down too?”

“No. I just wanted to let you know that door is open, especially given how hard it is for a Tinker to remain solo. Parts aren't cheap, and everyone wants what one of us can offer. We would certainly rather you be with us than, say, Imperium.”

“Fat chance of that, his gang is nearly as bad as the Ravens. Tell me this, Tank Buster ‘Team Leader of the Denver Wards’. If you were in my position, watching the heroes of the city do next to nothing against these criminals, and some guy in power armor walked up to you and said, ‘hey, how about you come play hero with us instead of taking out the Ravens’, would you say yes?”

I shrugged. “Probably not,” I responded, as I took off my helmet. I wore only a basic mask underneath. Enough to hide my identity, without disguising my voice and gender. “Though, I'm not exactly a guy.”

“Some girl, then.” Icarus paused for a moment. “Tell you what, I'll give you the same deal I gave Imperium. Give me one good reason to join you, that isn't money or power or safety in numbers, and
I'll consider it."

I paused for a moment, considering my response. “Even as a hero myself, I have my own problems with the PRT and the Protectorate. They aren't anywhere near perfect. Some of them I don't like personally, even. I guess I could puke up some PR garbage for you, but I doubt that would look at all appealing to you.” I paused before continuing, “I just have a question to ask. How are you doing?”

“Me?” Icarus asked with a snort, “I'm cold, and wet, and hungry, and irritated. But I just stopped these fucks from drugging some innocent women in god-knows-where, so I'm pleased with that. What's your point?”

“I was thinking in general,” I said, looking up at the rain. “Being a parahuman kinda disconnects us from everyone else. More than just having powers. The things that we go through? Normal people just have a hard time understanding.” I looked back at Icarus. “It's nice to be able to connect with others who know what it is like. Being part of a team is more than just safety in numbers. We could be your friends, too, so you don't have to go it alone. Ultimately, it's up to you. If you say no, we'll basically just stay out of your way unless we hear that you've gone too far. The door is open, though, and it'll take a lot to close it.”

“Hmm.” Icarus paused. She didn't speak for some time. “Okay, I guess.”

“Okay? Is that for considering, or have you already decided either way?”

Icarus began stuffing the wet money back into its bag. “I'll consider it.”

“Okay,” I said as I placed my helmet back on. “Good night, Icarus.”

“Yeah,” she replied, throwing the bag over her shoulder and walking away.

“Well,” I said into my radio. “I figured out a little more about Icarus.”

**Icarus**

With a sigh, I closed and locked the door of my apartment. It was mundane, something I had done countless times since moving out of my parents' house nearly two years ago. This time, though, there was a strange finality to it. I was sure I'd be coming back, but still.

*Oh, stop being so melodramatic,* I thought to myself as I walked down the dingy hallway to the elevator. The flickering fluorescent lights were just bright enough to glint off my mechanical right arm. The elevator ride was short, if no less terrifying than usual. The building was not very well-maintained, but it was cheap and it had had top floor availability. Being eight stories up did had its advantages.

The thought made me smile, thinking of the wings on my back, hidden under a loose-fitting t-shirt and a backpack. They were one of my first inventions, and certainly my favorite. Unfortunately it had come with a price—constantly struggling to find ways to keep them hidden, keep my alter-ego Icarus safe.

Mistakes added up. I'd tried to keep a low profile with my powers, limiting testing to late at night, my missions confined to the less dense areas. It was hopeless in the end. First, somebody had snapped a picture of me on their cell phone, sent it off to the Post. Then a thug got away, letting his bosses know about my existence. Little mistakes. But the end result was that everyone knew there was a new cape in town, and that they were a Tinker. Then the recruitment attempts started coming, while I was out on missions. Everyone wanted a piece of that pie, they didn't even know my abilities.
but...Tinkers were versatile.

“Brenna!” I was shocked out of my thoughts by one of my neighbors entering the lobby as I got off the elevator, which had just started shuddering and vibrating like an out-of-balance washer. “What is a girl like you doing up this early on a weekend, hmm?”

“Morning, Mrs. Gonzales,” I replied, holding the elevator open. Mrs. Gonzales—whose first name, as far as I was aware, was Mrs.—lived across the hall from me. Her and her swarm of screaming children. “Just heading downtown for errands.”

“Hmm. Well be careful,” she said as she stepped into the elevator, dragging bags of groceries and two children with her. “Those shitheads are planning something, my cousin says. You don't want to be caught in any fighting.” Part of me wondered which gang she was calling shitheads, another part wondered how this cousin came across the info. Better not to ask.

“I'll see what I can do. Take it easy,” I said with a smile, heading out the door. It was maybe seven in the morning, the sun had just come up. Not a cloud in the sky. I took a breath of the morning air, dropping some envelopes from my backpack into a mailbox as I walked.

For a weekend things seemed busy; I wondered if there was an event or something I didn't know of. Probably a football game or something, who knew. I strode down the sidewalk with purpose, my destination only a mile or so away. As I got closer, my heart began to thump hard in my chest. *Hey, Dad. Just thought you should know I'm a cape?* No, that probably wouldn't go well. I sighed. I wasn't sure what to do, but with the way things were going, I just needed to talk to *someone* about what to do.

My father’s job was one of the reasons I was so hesitant. He was a state senator, and with his record he had a good chance of ending up as governor, or even ending up being a real Senator. I wasn't sure having a cape daughter would suit his ambitions very well. But, with the way things were going, the other option was ending up dead, so...

It was a quick fifteen minute walk, plus a few minutes to grab some breakfast sandwiches for us, and by the time I arrived at the east entrance of the state capital building and entered, I still had no idea what to say.

Inside the building, there was no line at the security checkpoint, which was nice. Not much business on a Saturday. “Hey Stan,” I said to the guard seated by the metal detector just inside the doors.

“Brenna! What are you doing here?” He asked in surprise. “It's a weekend, shouldn't you be out having fun?” Stan was probably in his mid-forties, a balding, slightly fat man who'd been a security guard at the capital as long as I had been visiting my father there.

“In the area, thought I'd bring Dad some lunch. You saw the new episode?” I asked excitedly, tossing my keys into a plastic bin. Not that it would make a difference with my arm (or wings, not that they knew about them), but the head of security was a stickler who apparently spent all waking moments watching the camera feeds.

“No, not yet, I had to cover a shift last night. Don't spoil me!” He replied. I nodded and walked through the detector, as usual setting it off. I reached out for her keys, pausing in surprise when Stan didn't hand over the plastic bin. “Sorry Brenna, they got a new policy. Have to check your backpack.”

“Your boss being a hardass again? Good thing I left my pipe bombs at home,” I quipped, slipping off
my backpack and tossing it at him, adjusting my posture to try and minimize the bulge of the wings under my clothes.

“Yeah, sorry, hate to bug you with this stuff, but rules are rules...hey, what's this?” he asked, pulling something out of my pack. I felt my heart jump into my throat. I hadn't been sure if Dad would believe me when I said that I was Icarus, so I'd brought the costume just in case. And Stan was holding the mask.

“Oh, uh, that's just for a cosplay I'm working on.” I stammered out.

“Looks kinda like that new vigilante cape that started showing up a few months back. They gave us a briefing on her a few weeks ago.”

“That's the idea...one of my fans suggested I try it out.” What's this about briefings? Am I really getting that much attention?

Stan squinted at it, clearly trying to recall his briefing. He shrugged. “I guess it looks kinda the same. Keep at it, I'm sure you'll get it right soon enough.” He tossed it back in the bag and tossed it at me.

Asshole! I resisted the urge to give him a piece of my mind. ‘Kinda the same?’ Fuck off. ‘Well, all I've had to go off of is newspaper clippings, so...anyway, I'd better get going,” I replied, keeping my irritation bottled. I put the backpack back on and wandered through the building to Dad's office, irritation at Stan put aside while I panicked more about what to say.

His office was up on the third floor. I entered with a knock and slipped in. His secretary, an older gray-haired woman named Linda, smiled warmly as I entered. “Miss Brenna, if I knew you were coming in I would have moved some things around. He's in a committee meeting now.”

“Oh, no, I was just in the area and thought I'd bring breakfast,” I replied, gesturing with the bag of food. “What's he doing in committee on a Saturday?”

“Well, maybe next session,” I replied in a tone that suggested it was wistful thinking. The Parahuman Incident Recovery Act had been my father's pet project for ages, designed to set up state funding to supplement PRT dollars in the event of damages from capes. It was one of the reasons I was so worried about today--I could hear the opposition in my head now: of course the father of a cape would want the taxpayers to foot the bill for his daughter's damages.

I sighed. “Is it okay if I wait inside?”

“Yes, of course,” Linda said. “He should be back within fifteen minutes. I'll page him if it takes longer.”

I nodded and slipped through the inner door into my dad's office. It was a familiar place, I remembered basically growing up here, and it hadn't ever changed much. Dark wood paneling everywhere, and a mural of the mountains dominated one of the walls. An area to the side had a coffee table and a handful of comfortable chairs. I slid my backpack off on one and paced around the room for a few minutes, racking my brain for ideas.

I was startled by the door opening “Brenna! Sorry if I kept you waiting, things ran late.”

“It's fine, dad,” I said with a smile. He entered and closed the door behind him. His hair was almost entirely gray, but he wore his aging appearance with pride. He'd managed to keep in shape, with regular visits to the gym when not working. Today, though, he seemed tired.
“Bastards don't even want to compromise on this bill. It's going to be difficult,” he explained, his voice carrying a twinge of a Norwegian accent, before I had a chance to ask. “But that's not important. How is my favorite daughter?”

I rolled my eyes, “By virtue of being the only one, maybe. I was...in the area and thought I'd drop in. Here, catch, I brought lunch.” I tossed him a sandwich before grabbing mine and unwrapping it at the coffee table.

He sat across from me. “It's good of you to come visit. Your mother and I don't see much of you since you moved out.”

I shrugged. They'd never understood why I'd moved out when I was 16, and I'd never given them a real answer. “Sorry, I know I haven't kept in touch as much as I could. I haven't even seen Mom in...a couple months?” she was spending more and more time abroad, for her work. Something with the stock market, I had never really wrapped my head around it, but it involved a lot of money and a lot of client meetings.

“Well I'll be sure to tell her you said hi when I call her tonight. She's in London for the next few weeks,” Dad said with a smile.

I swallowed the bite I was on and set down my sandwich. “That would be nice...There's not really a good way to say this, but there's probably some other stuff you'll want to pass on that I need to tell you.”

He paused before speaking, clearly choosing his words carefully, “You know your mother and I love you know matter who you want to be with.”

“What! No, that's not it, I'm not a–I mean–I don't even know what's...okay, let's just do it this way.” *Oh god.* I dug through my bag, trying to ignore my blushing, until I found the mask Stan had noticed. With a deep breath I pulled it out and set it on the table, facing Dad.

He raised an eyebrow, confusion on his face. “Is this from one of your cartoons? I'm not sure what you're getting at here.”

“I watch anime, not cartoons, and it's not. Well, I mean, it is, but that's just an inspiration. See, there's this guy, who everyone thinks is a big bad evil guy and he is at first, but only because he made a vow and got deeper in it that he expected and–”

“Brenna?”

“Ugh. Anyway he becomes a good guy in season 14, okay? I mean I know it's a skull and looks kinda creepy and all but really it's not like an evil icon or anything except at the first glance and anyway that's why I picked it out, you know, I always liked that show and I figure it would scare the villains and all that, so...” I took a deep breath, “I'm rambling. Sorry. Let me try this again...So, I'm a cape.”

Dad nodded, slowly, setting down his sandwich, his face expressionless. He looked up at me, “Okay. Um...sorry, that was a bit to digest. You're not a villain, are you?” I shook my head. “Okay, good...This is going to sound dumb, but are you keeping safe?”

“As safe as I can be,” I replied. “Anyway, I'm sure you've heard Icarus on the news...that's me, I guess.”

“I...how long? Since your arm?”
I sighed. “Before. When I went missing.”

“You never told us what happened, you just came back to us one day.” Yeah. Not really a conversation you want to have with your parents.

“Dad, I love you and Mom a lot, but I don't know if I'm ready to talk about that right now...or ever. Anyway, no. My arm was...a mistake. I thought I would...let's just say it didn't work out so well. I'm less stupid now, don't worry.”

“I...” he trailed off, looking at me with worry. “What are you going to do?”

“I don't know. Part of that's why I wanted to talk. I've been working solo the last few months, taking out thugs, getting info, that sort of thing. But...I'm not sure how long I can keep going by myself.”

“The Wards?” he asked.

“Maybe. They offered, but...I don't know. Villains get away with too much in this city, you know? At least now I'm making a difference. If I committed to being a Ward—I just don't want to have to stand by while these assholes keep doing what they're doing.”

“And what happens when you fight them by yourself and lose? Christ, Brenna. You've always been headstrong,” he replied. “I don't want to see my daughter hurt or killed. At least with the Wards, you have safety in numbers—”

“I'd have ‘safety in numbers’ with any of the other groups that have been harassing me, Dad.”

My father rolled his eyes at my remark and continued speaking. “Safety in numbers means you last longer than a year or so. You said it yourself, you can't keep doing this alone. At least the Wards and the Protectorate are the good guys.”

I sighed. “It just feels like giving up, though...”

Neither of us spoke for a bit after that. I finished my sandwich and leaned back, thinking. Joining the Wards was basically giving up on everything I had done so far, everything I had worked on to take down the Ravens. And yet...I was still unsure.

My father stood and walked over to one of his bookcases, sighing. “I doubt you'll remember something as silly as this, but...when you were growing up, you spent a lot of time here. One day I came in from a meeting and you'd scratched your height into this bookcase.”

“I remember. Every time I visited I would see if I had grown any, and you'd mark it for me if I had.”

I nodded. “It's silly, but it always put a smile on my face when I saw those marks. It was a reminder of my little girl, even after you moved out...Last month some maintenance workers came in and replaced that bookcase while I was away. I was furious, I had the head of maintenance hanging up on me, so I went down there myself to find it. Never did. And now this...” He trailed off, and I didn't have to look to know there were tears in his eyes. “I'm sorry. It's just hit me that you're not that little girl anymore.”

“Well, I'm still your daughter and I always will be,” I said with a smile I didn't really feel.

He shook his head. “I just can't see it, my daughter wearing that mask.”

“Well, here.” I grabbed the mask and slipped it over my face, brushing aside my hair and allowing it to clip into connections on the back of my neck. A second later it initialized, and I saw Dad looking
over at me through the thermal filter. With a mental command it switched to standard vision. “Still me, just with a disguise,” I said, my voice modulated slightly by the mask, just enough to make it sound unfamiliar.

“That's...really creepy. You'll strike fear in your enemy's hearts, I'm sure.”

“Kinda the point,” I said with a laugh. Before he had a chance to respond, however, the door opened.

I didn't have time to take off the mask before my father's secretary saw me. Linda's eyes went wide at the sight of me, her boss's daughter, wearing a skull mask just like the one that was in the newspapers occasionally. “Oh my,” was all she could say.

“Hi Linda,” I replied.
Awakening 1.2 - A new Beginning

Blink

As busy as the light rail stations could be, even Englewood Station didn't see much traffic at 3 AM. It helped that the trains didn't even run at this hour.

I hovered over the deserted tracks, looking for my contact. It didn't take long to find him, a man wearing a black hoodie and an orange cap, walking up the stairs to the station platform. I landed at the top of the steps, waiting for him to approach.

It certainly wasn't the type of place I would have recommended to meet up for criminal plotting, but Imperium was...eccentric like that. Still, the only people around were a couple bums passed out on benches.

“You the cape?” he asked as he reached the top of the stairs.

“Yes,” I said, resisting the urge to say something sarcastic to his obvious question. No, one of the other costume-wearing flying parahumans here at 3 AM.

“Okay. The client wants a quartz duck paperweight from the work desk of a guy at the address written on this paper. He wants it taken without the owner getting hurt,” he said.

“A paperweight,” I remarked, contemplating my life choices for a brief moment.

“Yes,” the guy said, handing me a piece of paper with a pair of addresses scrawled on it.

“Fine. Is there anything about the property I should know about?”

“Uh, there's a single security dude overnight. That's it.”

I nodded. If someone had gone to the effort to hire a guard, it probably meant I should probably expect cameras as well. I doubted it would be a problem, though.

I looked over the paper as I took off. There were two addresses listed. One was in an Highlands Ranch, the other was an industrial address in Commerce City. I took a gamble and assumed the second was the meetup point to give Imperium his...quartz duck. I idly wondered if most criminals did things this way, or if Imperium was just unique. He definitely was unique in other ways.

I was a villain. As in, I was not a particularly nice person, as much as I would have liked to be. My power involved short range teleportation, and I could sense the area within my range, probably so I didn't end up teleporting into a wall. I could also bring things and even people with me up to a limit of, effectively, two heavy people, as long as they weren't attached to something else. My teleports had the odd effect of taking away all momentum, so I used tiny rapid teleports to give the appearance of flight.

All in all, it meant a robbery like this would be a piece of cake.

The flight took very little time, given I was already around the southern half of the metro area. I used the maps app on my phone—the one I used only for cape business—to zero in on the address, which was a rather large mini-mansion in one of the many gated communities in the area. The streets were quiet below me as I hovered in place above the target's house.
Of all the jobs I took, stealing from well-off people was one of the less distasteful types. I landed on the roof first, using my power to feel out the area underneath me. Nothing was moving, so I teleported in. It was some kind of attic, with old boxes and spiderwebs dotting the room. Looking down, I was glad I was still hovering, since the floor was covered in a very thick layer of dust. I floated around in order to “see” as much of the top floor as I could before actually going there.

The third floor felt like basically the bedroom floor, although with only one of four occupied. I ignored them in favor of teleporting into one of the bathrooms, intending to avoid the cameras that could possibly be in the hallways. As I was starting to feel out the second floor, however, I felt changes in the hallway next to me. It felt like someone was walking past. It was probably security, but I wanted to make sure.

I teleported behind them, and I saw someone who definitely was not security.

The woman wore a simple black dress and elbow length black gloves. The most distinctive feature was a silver tiara nestled in her bright red hair. It dawned on me after a second that I was behind the villain known as Tundra, an assassin who created and controlled ice in some fashion. She walked with a brisk pace towards the bedroom door with the sleeping person inside.

I considered tasering her and being done with the potential problem, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to resort to that. The house suddenly creaked behind me during my indecisiveness, and Tundra glanced over before I could teleport away. A sword of ice formed into existence next to her pointed down, hovering in the air. She did not say anything, apparently fine with just staring at me. I felt a chill in the air.

For a brief moment, I wondered why she was one of those capes who didn't wear a mask.

“Strange coincidence. You happened to be here right as I'm in the middle of stealing some prized object that someone else wants,” I finally commented. It definitely felt strange. A part of me was worried it was more than a coincidence, but I couldn't be sure of anything.

“You should leave, girl,” Tundra said, another ice-sword appearing in the air on her other side.

“‘Girl?’ You aren't even that much older than me,” I replied, one eyebrow raised behind my mask. My right hand went to my baton, but I did not pull it out just yet.

The other villain stared at me, her face uncomfortably blank. “I am not here to kill you, but if you get in my way I won't think twice.”

A part of me wanted to just fly away and forget the whole thing. As much as I needed the money, I could get it elsewhere. But then, I couldn't even ignore bullying in school, so I sure as hell could not ignore someone potentially getting murdered.

“Here's the thing,” I remarked, “I have a job, and I need the money. I need to steal something without the owner getting hurt in the process. Are you getting in the way of that?”

The room became even more chill, cold enough that I could see my breath when I exhaled. “You should reconsider how much you want that money. Or come back later. It isn't really my issue.”

“I'm not interested in making any enemies if I don't have to. If you just want to kidnap him or threaten him some, I don't care. But if you're going to shed blood, there's going to be an issue,” I replied, my heart-rate increasing with the tension. I had been in fights before, even against other small-time capes like myself, but Tundra was far from small time. I could actually get seriously hurt or killed if I made one mistake.
“What's your name, girl?” Tundra asked, in an almost condescending tone.

“They call me Blink.”

“Blink. I haven't heard of you before. That must mean you're very new, or very smart. I'm guessing new, or you wouldn't still be here. Who are you working for?”

Her condescending nature somewhat irritated me, but I decided it couldn't hurt to play along. It was not like my working for Imperium was a secret. I admittedly also wanted to make sure there was even the slightest possibility that we wouldn't have to fight. I didn't look forward to that.

“Imperium. I'm not directly with him, but I do jobs.”

“Oh, that smug bastard,” Tundra said, barely a hint of irritation in her voice. “So he doesn't want blood on his hands from having his pet burglar steal something.” She paused, thinking for a moment. Finally, she sighed. “Tell that bastard he owes me another favor now. I don't appreciate his interference.”

“I will pass on the message,” I replied, trying not to let the relief show.

Tundra let her floating swords dissipate into puddles on the ground, and with a huff turned around and walked down the hall and into one of the vacant bedrooms. I heard the shattering of glass as Tundra smashed a window. Bitch. Now I had to make this quick.

Knowing this floor did not have what I needed, I teleported into the second floor at random, finding myself in a room. It appeared to me some kind of game room, oddly enough. Ignoring it, I teleported into another room, and found myself in an office, with the quartz duck paperweight sitting right on top of the desk.

I could hear footsteps running in the hallway outside the room as I grabbed the duck, but there was no chance of them catching me as I was outside only a moment later.

I yawned as I flew into the factory. Between school, my jobs, staying fit, and committing crimes, sleep took a backseat, and my body loved to remind me of it frequently. Still, I kept my guard up as best as I could.

I couldn't tell what was produced here based on what I could see. All I knew was that Imperium owned factories and warehouses all over the city, and possibly even more businesses besides. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if he made more money legally than he did through laundering all his illicit cash.

I noticed movement while I was floating through, and I found myself face to face with a bipedal robot, as tall as I was. It was a plain steel gray, with a bulky torso that gave the appearance of being top-heavy, but accounts I'd heard said they could be surprisingly agile. It glanced at me for a moment before continuing on its patrol.

Imperium's niche involved building different kinds of robots, though I only ever saw those bipedal soldier-like robots and the occasional flying drone. They could operate alone to some extent, though as far as I was aware, they weren't sentient. Imperium himself lead a gang called, somewhat embarrassingly, Imperium Inceptivus. Apparently, Imperium really liked the Roman aesthetic, but he was literally the only one in his own gang who utilized it, thankfully. I was surprised to see his
presence here. I had only met him once before, to set up my current arrangement.

A few seconds after the robot walked off, a drone flew over and hovered in front of me. It was a plain steel gray like the other robot, but was a half sphere with...something I couldn't identify on its underside, though I imagined it had to do with how it floated. There was a very quiet hum that I could only hear now that it was in front of me. It flew a lazy circle around me before flying off. I figured it wanted me to follow, so I floated after. It took a couple minutes, but it finally lead me over to a door.

I found the man reclining with a book behind a desk. The room itself appeared to be an office with a few personal effects. A couple pictures showed someone who probably wasn't Imperium, given the difference in stature and that I doubt he would unmask himself to me. He had probably borrowed it for the meeting. The moment I floated into the room, he shut his book and looked towards me.

Imperium had the appearance of someone desperately wanting to look like a Roman emperor, but as a cape. He wore some kind of armor underneath a royal purple toga. The armor itself looked like some weird combination of old and futuristic. Imperium's mask had the appearance of stone and covered his entire head with a circle of golden leaves near the top. From what various members of Imperium Inceptivus have said, Imperium had a fascination for Roman visuals and words, but literally no one in his gang used it but him. He was somewhat eccentric, but no less dangerous.

“Ah, Blink, wonderful of you to join us. I presume you have the object?” he said in his weird full-of-himself voice.

Rather than speaking, I simply pulled the paperweight out of my bag and set it on the desk.

“Wonderful, wonderful! Were their any complications? I hope our acquaintance is still sleeping soundly.”

“I ran into Tundra. She wanted me to tell you that you owe her another favor, and that she doesn't appreciate interference,” I replied concisely. I wanted to get this conversation over with.

“Ah, Tundra,” he said, nodding before picking up the paperweight to examine it. “I commend you for not being dead.”

“Oh, thanks?” I said, a little insulted. Sure, she might have been at it longer than me, but that sure as hell didn't make me helpless. I had the advantage of being able to flee, of course, so even if things went badly I'd like to believe I wouldn't die so easily.

“Yes. Well, this has all worked out quite nicely,” he said as he slipped what appeared to be a flash drive out of a compartment on the...duck's asshole, “The reward has already been deposited into your account, of course,“

I didn't jump into crime through one of the two biggest gangs in Denver on a whim. It was by some chance that I ran into his group, and eventually Imperium himself. I was desperate not just for money, but money I could actually use. Sure, I could've just teleported into a bank vault, but that'd hardly be of any use to me besides spending at some gas station. He offered laundered money that I desperately needed. I had been doing jobs for him ever since.

“Okay. Was there something else?” I asked. For Imperium himself to be here, there had to be more.

“Yes, yes. Blink, your efficiency is commendable, and you handle unexpected situations quite well. I would be pleased to officially provide you a place in my growing empire beyond that of a mercenary.”
Oh. He wanted me to be an actual full member of his gang. I tried not to visibly grimace, so as to not offend him. True, I was already pretty much one of his underlings by now, since I didn't exactly offer my services to anyone else.

Yet, I felt like accepting would leave a bad taste in my mouth. I had to hope he wouldn't be too offended, and that I could continue the arrangement as is.

“Sorry, but I like how things are now. I just need the money.”

“A disappointment, to be sure,” Imperium said, sounding oddly sad for a moment, “But I'll respect your wishes. Now, then, to the other matter. How confident are you in your knowledge of our city's heroes?”

“Oh, I've seen them before in public appearances, and I've read about them.”

“Hmm. I hope you can name all of them, at the very least.”

“Yeah. Bunker, Cupid, Chozo, Umbra, Jade, Tank Buster, Red Light, Flashstep, Eimyrja,” I recited, almost feeling like I was in school at the moment. I suppressed a smile at the thought of one of my teachers being Imperium himself.

“Ah, good. I won't ask you to recite their powers, as we both have business to conduct, I'm sure. I just want to ask if you are confident you could fight them.”

Fight the heroes? I knew I was a villain, and villains generally fought the heroes at some point, but it never clicked that I would fight them. A sickening feeling grew as I considered the possibility.

“Honestly? I don't like the idea, but I know how to fight if it came down to it.”

He nodded. “A fine response. It would be nice if we could all be as eager as Encore, but apprehension suggests there's caution, which is an admirable quality.”

I tried not to groan. One of Imperium's ticks was constantly buttering up those he talked to. He managed not to sound like someone who kissed up to people at the same time, given that he also held himself in high regard. I hadn't witnessed it personally, but there were accounts of him abruptly becoming cold and calculating the moment someone took that particular quirk the wrong way.

When I didn't respond, he continued, “I'd like to use your abilities more, and you could very well find yourself clashing with them. Are you prepared to fight?”

I considered my response before replying, “Do I get paid better for this?”

He laughed, “Of course!”

As much as I'd like to stay low and stick to robberies and occasionally tasering a cocky thug, the money I made could only do so much for what I needed. I had to make more, and if I had to cement my villain identity in fighting the heroes, so be it.

“I'm in.”

I pressed my hand to my forehead as I felt a headache coming on. I hadn't eaten today yet, and I
barely ate yesterday from being so busy. I would have to watch that. I couldn't afford to let something stupid like hunger do me in. I flew far over the quiet and darkening streets, this time heading into Aurora.

I've been searching for someone whenever I could since I...since I got my powers four months ago. Three years ago, my best friend disappeared with no explanation. Nothing turned up from either the police or the PRT. When something like that happened to a girl, there were only two likely outcomes. Either she died and her body was found dumped in some ditch, or she'd been forced into the Ravens' sick trafficking.

I felt so hopeless when Jenna was taken from me. I felt so hopeless, fuck, three and a half months ago. Hadn't it been longer? I shook that thought away. Regardless, no matter how hopeless the search was, it gave me something else to do. If nothing else, the information I'd passed on to the heroes and a couple vigilantes had lead to some of their victims being freed, though as far as I knew, only Icarus had ever used my anonymous tips.

Using my phone as my guide, I flew over to a house off of Peoria Street. I set down on the ground in front of the house in question and knocked on the door. After a few seconds I heard someone gasp, and the door opened slowly, as if hesitant. A young woman, I would guess to be in her late 20s, looked at me with a fearful expression from her deep brown eyes. I didn't pay much attention to her appearance besides her long black hair with blonde streaks.

Searching for one person in a city as large as Denver three years after they went missing, and with so little to go on required extensive searching, and I could hardly rip up every single Ravens den without attracting undue attention. Victims, while usually too scared or hesitant to talk, could sometimes pick up interesting details, at least according to the little research about investigation I had been able to do. I'd tried reaching out to several, and only a few ever responded. This woman, Amanda I now recalled, was one such victim, and she claimed to have something for me in person.

“Uh, hello,” I said nervously. “I'm the one from the messages.”

Amanda nodded slowly. “Please come in,” she replied simply as she opened the door wider, inviting me in. I walked through, not feeling the need to put on an act or use my power in any way. Not with this. The inside of the home was fairly ordinary. I could see a small living room with a couch, a couple chairs, and a TV. Large bookcases covered a wall in the back, with a shelf dedicated to what appeared to be sketchbooks.

“Can I get you anything?” she asked hesitantly.

I was about to say no. “Uh, water please if you don't mind,” I ended up saying.

She nodded. “Please have a seat over in the living room. I'll be right over.”

As I walked over to one of the chairs, I heard a door creak open. A boy, I would guess about 8 or 9 years old, walked into view. His eyes widened farther than I would think possible.

“Oh wow. You have a mask! Are you a hero?” he asked in a squeaky voice.

“No,” I said. Perhaps I should've replied differently to such a young kid, but I was honestly too tired. Not to mention I had been forced to see how unkind the world was at his age, so I didn't have the greatest sympathy for that.

“Brian, please go back to your room,” Amanda said as she handed a glass of water over to me.

“Thank you,” I said as the kid groaned and walked back to his room. Amanda shook her head.
"I'm sorry about that. I thought he would be asleep. He must have had another nightmare," she said, an apologetic tone in her voice.

The pounding in my head reminded me, again, how dumb I was for forgetting to eat.

"We should get to business. I don't have long," I replied, more gruffly than I'd intended.

She nodded. "Okay, miss—uh, what do you go by? I'm afraid I don't follow cape stuff."

"Blink."

"Okay, Blink. I know you're busy, but I still wanted to thank you in person for the part you played. Brian would've been left without a mother. I'm not sure how you aren't a hero."

I shifted uncomfortably. It wasn't the first time I had been thanked. I didn't deserve it.

"I'm not a hero. I just want to find someone. You said over our messages that you had something for me that you had to give in person."

Amanda nodded, walked over to the nearby bookcase, and pulled out a sketchbook. She flipped through the pages before settling on one. A man, somewhat rugged, with beard shadow and messy short hair was drawn expertly into the book.

"His name was Shawn. He...made sure I was cared for during my, uh, when I was kidnapped," she stopped, her breath shuddering. "It would've been a lot worse if it wasn't for him. I...God, I don't know if I would be in one piece. I'm sorry, I know it isn't much to go on, but it's what I have."

I pulled out my phone and took a few pictures.

"There. That's all you had to do," I said, perhaps a little more grumpily that I meant to.

"Sorry I wanted to thank you in person," she said, hurt in her voice.

"Look," I said, standing up. "I don't need thanks. And I'm not the type of person you should be inviting into your home."

She sighed. "I can't begin to comprehend what sort of person you are, but I know you didn't have to pass on that info. I know you only contacted me to find whoever you're looking for, but I wish you luck."

My phone buzzed. I had an incoming call. I gave Amanda one last look before teleporting through the ceiling and out into the evening sky.

"Who is this?" I asked, answering the phone.

"Recollect. Imperium wants you for a job right away. I'm texting you the location," he said before hanging up.

**Icarus**

"Bus is broke down," the driver announced over the PA system. "They're sending a replacement," he continued over the groans and angry mumbling of the passengers. Of course it had to break down on today of all days. I was already running late, and I knew from experience that the replacement bus would probably take over an hour.
“Hey, do you have a cell phone I can borrow?” I asked the woman sitting next to me on the bus seat. “I just want to let my friend know I’m going to be late.” After a suspicious squint at my clothing, she sighed and handed it over. I dialed Amy’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hey Amy, it’s Brenna.”

“Hey! Where are you? The line’s halfway around the building.”

“My bus broke down, and it’ll probably be an hour before a replacement comes.”

“You’re totally missing out. How far are you, can’t you just walk the rest of the way?”

“I mean...I’m not really in a good neighborhood right now. Plus I’m in costume, and people are already staring.”

“Pffft, who cares. They’ll just think you don’t know when Halloween is or something. Plus, it’s like the middle of the day. Just walk.”

I sighed. “I guess. Probably half an hour for me to get to the convention center?” I didn't get a response. I looked at the phone, just in time to see the “Call Ended” message disappear. I shook my head to myself and handed the phone back to the woman. “Thanks.”

I stood and stepped off the bus, smoothing the wrinkles out of the black dress I was wearing. There was some drizzle, so I pulled the red hood of the costume up as I began my trudge down the street. It took about a minute before I got bored and pulled my MP3 player out of one of my costume’s pockets and blasted music to cut off the noise of the street.

I didn't know how long I'd been walking, maybe ten minutes? I got the feeling someone watching me. I took an earbud out and glanced around, then shrugged. Nothing, just a slightly less than pristine neighborhood. A dingy-looking motel listing rental prices by the hour, a pawn shop with iron-barred windows, a run-down fast food restaurant. Certainly it wasn't a good place to be after dark, but ten in the morning on a Friday? I'd be fine. I put the earbud back in and slipped back into my daydream.

The abrupt feeling of a hand grabbing my arm told me I would not, in fact, be fine. Before I could so much as blink, I was pulled into an alley. I spun around to face whoever had grabbed me, ripping my earbuds out. “Hey what the fuck?” I ask-shouted.

My assailant, a figure in a hoodie with a ski mask, said nothing, only pulled me further into the alleyway. I managed to wrench my hand free, but before I could take more than a step towards the street a second figure, masked like the first, stepped into the alley, cutting me off. I froze, looking around for a way out.

When I'd made this costume, I'd also made the weapon to go with it. Unfortunately, the con had a last-minute policy change, meaning I'd had to leave it at home since it was considered “too real”. Not that a giant scythe would have done much good in the narrow alley, honestly, but maybe it would have scared them off.

The second figure stepped forward, and I could hear the first guy behind me move as well. With no other option, I rushed towards the street, hoping to dodge out of the way. He threw out a leg, tripping me as I ran past him, and I fell, skidding my knees on the asphalt with a scream. I scrambled back, now at least I had both attackers on the same side of me, my back.
Behind me, I heard screeching tires as a car slammed to a stop. I spared a glance, and saw a dirt-encrusted white van, the type you would expect a shifty plumber to drive. The sliding door opened, and a cloaked figure stepped out. Instead of a cheap ski mask like her cohorts, her face was covered by a mask made of black feathers tied together. In her hands a large needle, dripping as she squirted some of its contents onto the ground.

I bolted up, my right arm extending outwards as adrenaline filled my veins. Sparks flew as the taser module installed in it charged.

I looked around. I was in my old bedroom, at my family's home. A digital clock blinked “2:43” at me through the darkness. Just a dream, again.

I fell back onto my sweat-drenched bedsheets, the taser returning to its spot in my arm, hidden under a panel. I let out an unsteady sigh, staring up into the darkness, feeling the pounding of my heart slowly lessen. Almost two years, and it still haunts me.

I knew from experience that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, so I pulled myself out of bed, tiptoeing out of my old room and downstairs.

It had been a year and a half since I'd moved out, and to be honest this home didn't really feel welcoming anymore. It was nothing I could place, but it just...hadn't felt right. I glanced at one of the many family photos on the walls of the living room. Me and my parents, smiling away in some portrait studio. I couldn't have been older than ten.

I walked into the kitchen and shuffled through the fridge, pulling out a carton of eggs. An egg sandwich sounded good. All my implants, at least in part, were powered by my body's energy, which meant I was in a somewhat-constant state of hunger. I grabbed a pan and tried to put my mind at ease.

A couple minutes later, I heard the stairs creaking. I turned around to see Dad enter the kitchen. “Couldn't sleep?” he asked. I simply shook my head. “Are you having the dreams again?”

“I never really stopped having them,” I said with a shrug, turning my attention back to the eggs.

“Have you reconsidered seeing someone? I know you don't want to talk about it with your mother and me, but...”

“It's fine. They can't undo what happened,” I replied, wincing at the touch of bitterness in my voice. “But maybe I can settle the score.” I cracked another couple eggs into the pan for him.

He nodded. “Just be safe.”

I shrugged. “I'll be as safe as I can.”

They were silent for a time.

“Brenna?” He had a peculiar expression on his face, one I couldn't quite place.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Good work with the wings.” Oh, right. I realized this was probably the first time he had seen them.
Outside of my school and work uniforms, I'd altered most of my clothes to accommodate them. Keeping them hidden under clothing was uncomfortable and a pain, so I didn't bother unless I was going out.

“I got the impression you wouldn't like them, actually."

He shrugged. “You're my only child. It's...different, a little unnerving. But seeing them now, seeing you not having to hide them...” I glanced over at him as he trailed off. “They're metal, not flesh and blood, but they're you.”

That was true. In the year or so I'd had them, I had gotten so used to having them that I felt...unbalanced, if they weren't attached. They popped off with ease, from connections I'd paid a surgeon under-the-table to implant, but I never removed them unless I was repairing or upgrading them. I even slept with the things. I was at the point where I had trouble even walking without them, I was so used to using them subconsciously for balance. I couldn't help but be reminded of when I had lost my arm, having to learn how to do everything left-handed until I could make a replacement.

I smiled. “Have I won you over? Should I start making a second pair?”

“God, no. I can hardly fly in a plane, I'm fine on the ground.”

“Your loss,” I said, sliding a plate with an egg sandwich over to him.

“It's a bit...revealing, isn't it?” Dad asked skeptically.

I was standing in the living room, in full Icarus costume.

I frowned, lifting my mask a little. “Not really. I just want them to know I'm not some dude. When the Post reported on me and called me Icarus, they thought I was a guy.”

“So? I mean, what if you get shot at?”

“Strategic kevlar, Dad. Plus, everything’s flameproof. Kinda needed, what with the engines.”

“And you...fight in those?” he asked, gesturing at my footwear.

I nodded, “It throws people off, they think I can't run or jump, but I made a few mechanical modifications. They adapt to the surrounding terrain in real-time, I could do a full-out sprint if I wanted.” It would have probably been easier just to wear practical shoes, but where was the fun in that? Plus, the modifications helped absorb some of the shock from hard landings.

Dad shook his head. “Seems like a lot of work for pretty shoes.”

“Mom would understand,” I said jokingly, slipping my mask back into place. “I'm gonna head off. I'll see you around, I guess.” I stepped over and gave him a hug before opening the door to the backyard. As I stepped out, the pair of thermal jet engines I had on my back clicked and began spinning up. They were pretty quiet when idle, but caused a fair amount of noise at high thrust. Thankfully, it didn't take much to lift me off of the ground, especially with me flapping my wings to help. Probably didn't even wake the neighbors.

It was still dark out, but I'd wanted to get an early start. As I rose into the sky, I locked my wings into
an extended position and punched the throttles up to fifty percent, wincing as the acceleration tore at me. *That* noise probably woke the neighbors up. I shot north, towards the city proper, gaining altitude as I did so.

As I climbed, I mentally tuned my communications system to listen in on the local air traffic control, my mask's HUD automatically overlaying the positions of aircraft above me alongside my personal speed and heading. I was too small for them to see, and I didn't want to get sucked into an engine on the off chance of a low-flying jet. I kept my speed low, taking my time, my head turning back to my thoughts.

Dad and I had talked for a long time, mostly me catching him up on what I had been doing. It was nice in a way, being able to finally talk about cape stuff with someone instead of keeping things bottled up. He was deadset on trying to get me to join the Wards, and to be honest I had been giving it serious consideration.

Everything else aside, I'd more-or-less hit a wall as far as my technology was concerned. There was only so much I could make in my apartment in between school, work, and cape stuff. It was all pretty cool, but I knew I was just scratching the surface of what I could do if I had proper resources.

I continued flying for some time, gliding over the city, high enough that anyone looking would just think I was a bird or something.

I was probably an hour into my quiet patrolling when I saw smoke and fire erupt out of a decrepit church below, with what looked like fighting outside. I lowered my altitude to get a closer look, sighing. At least being a cape wasn't *boring*.

**Tank Buster**

My patrol today involved a drive through Commerce City early in the morning. It wasn't the worst part of the metro area, but the overgrown buildings and parking lots did not tell a kind story. With the expansion of the city east, this place was largely ignored, with little in the way of fully functional buildings. It was unnervingly quiet for the most part, the only sound that of my PRT motorcycle. I could feel the eyes of the homeless gazing at me. I wondered what it must be like, to be on the bottom and looking up at the shiny hero. Looking around at the poverty, it was hard to remember that I actually did any good.

“Uh, Tank Buster,” I heard Flashstep say over the radio, pulling me out of my thoughts. He was patrolling close to me, given I never let anyone patrol without someone else nearby. “We have a situation.”

“What's the problem?” I asked.

“You know that, uh, church over on Monaco street?” he asked. Flashstep was terrible at getting to the point immediately, even during situations requiring haste.

“What's the problem?” I repeated, already making the turns.

“Some goons are attacking it,” he reported. “I don't see any capes, but I think I see vials.”

“Could be Potion or Starving Artist. Engage, but be careful. Focus on drawing their attention until I get there,” I ordered. I wasn't too worried. Despite his nervous demeanor, Flashstep was competent at what we do, and his mover power made him hard to pin down. He could set four points or objects in a large area and teleport to any of them.
I made sure to send an alert to the PRT, given there was at least one cape involved. With a voice command, I set my suit to start heating up to five hundred degrees Fahrenheit. My secondary power protected me from extreme heat, so it served as a useful deterrent to anyone who wanted to get too close without some protection. If I wanted to, I could take a swim in molten steel. I'd be more at risk of drowning than anything.

Shortly before I arrived there, I saw smoke. One of the thugs must have set fire to the building. The so-called church looked as if it had been abandoned years ago. Boarded up windows could be seen even through the fire that was rapidly taking over. People of various economic standings streamed out, men and women in what were basically rags juxtaposed with those in suits and dresses.

I found Flashstep moving from location to location, hitting the irritated thugs and continually throwing out new “tags” to keep them guessing on where he'd be next. All of the thugs were wearing deep purple bandannas covering the lower half of their faces.

I grimaced. The fire reminded me too much of memories I wish I could forget. Even if I could no longer feel the intense heat of roasting alive in a burning building, I could remember it all too well. Stepping outside only to see the towering figure of the Endbringer Behemoth in the distance...I shook my head. I needed to focus on here and now.

A woman who could only be Epione, the leader of what might be best considered a cult, strolled out, a man draped across her shoulder. The rogue was, as far as anyone could tell, new to the scene, though she looked to be in her late twenties. She wore a simple white robe that exposed the left side of her chest, mastectomy scars left uncovered. We didn't have a very good understanding of her powers, but she took in the destitute and drug addicted members of society and somehow healed them to the point that they could recover. Given that they would continue to be a member of her “church”, it was possible she had some Master power that involved subtle control over them, but there was no way to verify, so the PRT had kept a hands-off approach.

I took a deep breath and brought to focus my years of training and experience. Even simple thugs could prove dangerous if I let myself become complacent and careless, even in my power armor. I saw couple thugs take notice of Epione and charge at her, but I drove my bike over to block their path.

They continued charging after me, but I calmly stood off the bike and met their charge. These thugs apparently never got the memo about my armor, given they attempted to grapple me and yelled when they found it burning hot to the touch. I shot electrodes into both of them, ensuring that they would stay down.

Some of Epione's church members of all backgrounds began engaging the thugs, either holding some improvised weapon or opting to make fists. I decided to engage to try to reduce the potential for serious harm.

Before I could, there was a roar of jets and Icarus, to my surprise, swooped down and shot something at one of the thugs.

With how quickly he fell, I was worried that it might be something lethal, but the lack of blood suggested otherwise. There was no time to confirm, so I decided to trust her. I charged between a fight happening between two thugs and two of the rougher looking church members, and as all four of them backed off, I shot more electrodes into the thugs. To my surprise, only one of them fell, the other grabbing at me. I quickly realized he must have been under the effects of Potion, especially given the super strength he showed when I resisted. I caught him off guard with a directed kick and threw him over my shoulder. I noticed Icarus shoot another dart at him, and this time he stayed down.
I tried to shout a warning at Icarus as a thug leaped up and bashed her in the face with a bat. The thug grabbed a hold of her, and the two of them both fell to the ground. A couple of thugs stepped in my way, but Flashstep ran over to attend to Icarus, so I focused on the immediate threat.

One thug was stupid enough to shoot a pistol at me, and I wasted no time in punching him. He might not have been able to get past my armor with such a pitiful low caliber, but he could easily hurt someone else. Epione then casually walked over to the other thug and grabbed him in a choke-hold before he could attempt to retaliate against me.

“Hey, you could seriously hurt him doing that,” I warned, as I shot electrodes into the gun-wielding thug.

“I once studied to be an EMT,” she said, calmly, gazing intently at me. “I know when to stop.”

Epione then threw him on the ground and tied his arms and legs with clearly practiced speed. The thug gasped and started to struggle, but the knots were too tight for him to escape.

The last of the thugs finally gave up and ran off. A couple of Epione's members tried to follow, but their peers held them back.

“I appreciate your help, hero,” she said, her voice unnervingly melodic. She glanced at her burning church. “This is an unfortunate setback, but there were no serious injuries, at least.”

“PRT will be here soon to take them in,” I said, glancing at the members and then at Icarus who was walking towards me. “Do you know why they attacked you?”

“Curing addiction is but one benefit I offer to these people. There's many who don't take kindly to losing customers,” she replied.

I nodded. “We offer protective custody to those being targeted,” I offered, though I already knew her response. It wasn't the first time she was attacked, and Cupid had offered the same thing.

“No. My place is out here, where I have people I can care for. Thank you again, hero. I must now see to my flock,” she said, turning away to attend to her members.

“She is...certainly something,” Icarus commented as she stepped up. I noticed that her mask was cracked where the bat hit, and she was clutching her left shoulder. Flashstep stood awkwardly to the side.

“Hey, Icarus,” I said. “I was surprised to see you jump in.”

“I saw smoke and figured I'd check it out.”

“You doing alright? Can we offer you any medical aid?”

“Um. I'll be fine. More worried about my mask, but I doubt that's something you'd be able to fix.”

“Alright, if you're sure. Just to be clear, though, those were some kind of sleep dart, right?” I asked, still concerned.

“Yeah, tranquilizers. I try not to murder too many of them,” she said sarcastically.

One of my eyebrows rose, though she couldn't see it through my helmet. “I'm sure you are speaking sarcastically, but I do have to seriously make sure.”

“I get it,” she replied awkwardly, trailing off.
“So, have you given my invite any thought?” I asked. I wasn't sure why else she would still be standing here. I honestly wanted her on my team. We could use a high level mover to cover the air, and I could hopefully direct her efforts to help the public out more than she had so far.

She sighed and didn't say anything at first. “I'm not about to stop going after the Ravens.”

“We'll figure something out,” I said. “You wouldn't be able to exclusively fight them, though, since you might be needed in all sorts of locations, but you'll definitely get the chance. The Ravens certainly provoke us enough.”

“That's fine, as long as we can bring that scum to justice someday...” she paused, glancing at myself and Flashstep, before continuing. “I guess I'm in, if the offer's still open.”

“Great! It'll be good to have you. It won't be easy, but I think you'll adjust fairly well.”

“Thanks, I guess. Sorry, I don't really...know where to go from here.”

“You can stick around, if you want,” I said, as a couple PRT vans pulled up. “I'll help you from here.”

Icarus

The Denver PRT Building was an imposing tower, twenty floors of glass and steel, placed right in the middle of downtown. It was the command center for most of the hero activity in the Rocky Mountains, and one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city. I'd been there several times, dragged along the dorky tour during several different middle-school field trips. I'd never liked heroes, when I was a kid they'd always struck me as glorified cops that happened to get a lot of attention. That opinion had only gotten worse after I'd triggered.

And yet, here I was, sitting in the back of a PRT van, looking out the window at their headquarters looming above us. Flashstep was with me, but he didn't seem like the type to start talking with complete strangers. Which was fine with me.

The van pulled into a side entrance of the building and descended into an underground parking lot filled with identical PRT vans and trucks. The driver parked and Flashstep and I clambered out of the back. He started walking towards a stairwell in the corner of the lot and I followed nervously.

Tank Buster was waiting for us at the top of the stairs.

“Hey. I was just talking with the Director. Luckily, she's actually here for once, having just flown in yesterday. We have a meeting room already set up. Follow me.”

I followed the hero through a hallway and into an elevator. The hallway itself wasn't anything special, but the elevator appeared to have been designed by a tinker. It looked and somehow felt different, and we exited onto another floor without even the feeling of movement. I idly wondered how much of a pain it was to fix when it broke down.

The hallways here were far more decorated than the ones down by the parking garage, with random posters and paintings lining the walls. Here and there a fake potted plant was stuck in a corner. We weren't the only ones in the halls, either. Occasionally we'd pass a PRT guard stationed somewhere, and various office workers were scuttling around cubicles as we walked past the occasional open door. Besides the occasional wary glance thrown my way by a passerby, it was all very...ordinary.

I was so busy looking at my surroundings that I only barely noticed that Flashstep didn't follow us
off of the elevator. Tank Buster lead me a little ways more before stopping in front of a door. After a pause, she opened it and beckoned me inside. A sleek oval-shaped meeting table stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by surprisingly comfortable-looking chairs. I noticed a water urn to the side, and I immediately made my way over.

I paused after pouring myself a cup, remembering that I was wearing a mask. Tank Buster glanced over.

“If it makes you feel any better, we're going to have to learn your identity at some point if you're going to join us,” Tank Buster said. “Actually—”

The hero pulled off her helmet with a hiss. After placing it on the table, she took off the mask I saw a few days prior, revealing her entire face. The girl appeared somewhat tomboyish, though still clearly female. I could see a few freckles speckled, and now that it wasn't raining, I could see her shoulder-length dirty blonde hair. Deep blue eyes gazed thoughtfully at me. More than anything else, though, she looked tired.

“My name when I'm not in costume is Naomi,” she said, with a touch of nervousness I realized to my surprise.

After a pause, I reluctantly pulled my own mask off.

“My name is Brenna,” I said even more nervously. I quickly took the opportunity to down the cup of water.

As Naomi opened her mouth to respond, I heard the door open. I turned to see a woman in a PRT uniform with a no-nonsense attitude about her. A badge on her chest identified her as Director Veronika Meyer. She was a couple inches taller than me, and looked to be in her thirties, with blonde hair and heterochromatic blue-green eyes. I got the impression it wouldn't have been hard for her to kick my ass if she wanted, even with my powers.

“Icarus. It's good to see you make the right decision. I am the PRT Director for Denver and the rest of the Rocky Mountain region,” she said as she walked over to a chair at one of the ends. “Please, have a seat.”

I took a seat close by, while Naomi sat on the other side.

“We have files, but I'd like to learn about you firsthand, if you don't mind,” the Director said in a way that suggested it would be a poor idea if I did, in fact, mind.

“Uh, sure,” I said nervously, “What do you want to know?”

“For starters, I'm curious why you changed your mind about joining us.”

“Um, to be honest I don't really know,” I replied, suddenly feeling very self-conscious without my mask on. “I hadn't really made up my mind until a short while ago.”

She nodded, as if that was a typical answer everyone gave. For all I knew it could've been. “And your Tinker specialization? Our files had you down potentially for flight systems. I see now that that is inaccurate,” she said, gesturing towards my arm.

“I'd...it's hard to say exactly, but I suppose ‘bioaugmentation’ would be a good term. Implants and stuff. But if it's not part of my body, or at least interfacing with it, my power won't help me.”

“And any Tinker work done on others, or just yourself?”
I shook my head. “No. I think my power would work on other people? I mean, I can't perform surgery on myself, so I have a guy I pay under the table. To me, that suggests it'd work fine on other people, right? Like, I totally could, um, install things on people, but if others can install what I've built...Sorry, that's the best explanation I can come up with.”

“It's fine,” the Director said with a tight smile. “You understand, as a Ward, the PRT is required to inspect and approve your work before you can use it, yes?”

“Um, pardon?” I asked, confused. Tank Buster gave me an apologetic look.

“It's to ensure the safety of you and the citizens we protect. After a brief inspection period we will return your equipment—”

“No,” I said flatly. “You're asking me to surrender my wings and my arm?”

The Director nodded. “For a brief period. It's standard protocol to make—”

“That's not gonna happen, sorry,” I cut her off again, “You're asking me to take off parts of my body? What about the other stuff inside me, you want to tear that out and make sure it's safe? Do you really think I'm going to implant something I don't trust?” I took a deep breath and stood. “Sorry for wasting your time, but I'm not giving away my body for you to study.” I made my way to the door.

“Wait,” Tank Buster said, “How about this. Icarus, would you be willing to have them looked at if they, um, stayed on you? Whatever else you have that the PRT can't look at, we can go off schematics or something like that. Will that work?”

I paused for a moment. “I guess.”

She looked over at the Director. “Does that work for you? It's a compromise, but I could really use her on my team. We haven't had a high-classed Mover since Honeybee was transferred to Billings.”

“That would be acceptable, but I will hold you personally responsible if there are any violations,” The Director said coolly. “Moving on, if—” she was interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing. No, two phones. Tank Buster answered hers, while the Director let hers ring.

“Hello?...Yeah, I'm in a meet—...yeah...oh geez...okay, I'll meet you downstairs.”

Tank Buster hung up the phone, then looked at the Director. “Situation. DPD was running a sting operation over in Wheat Ridge with a seized drug shipment, and Imperium caught wind. We're moving out.”

“Okay,” the Director replied, standing and making her way towards the door. “We'll finish this later. The Protectorate is tied up with another Treant sighting, so you'll be on your own,” she said as the left.

I glanced over at Tank Buster. “Uhh...?”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Welcome to the Wards, Icarus. We'll get you set up on the way.”
The woman walked down the street, humming to herself. It was night, and the sidewalks were empty underneath the light drizzle of an ebbing rainstorm. Around her a quiet residential neighborhood, the tree-lined streets devoid of sound except her hums.

She wore an elaborate kimono and sugegasa hat, and her upper face was covered by a simple mask, framed by her long black hair. Behind the small slits in the mask her eyes glinted a bright blue. Tucked into the cloth of her kimono, a well-worn, simple-looking wooden flute.

A smile was on her face as she stopped abruptly, turning her head to glance at one of the houses. It was just like all the others around it, painted a boring pastel, hardware store stickers on the mailbox giving the house number “451”. The lawn was neatly-trimmed and the cracks in the driveway were free of weeds.

Her humming grew louder. *Form.* She felt an almost-imperceptible shudder as the asphalt of the street began to deform. A humanoid figure made of the same asphalt pulled itself from the ground, rising to its feet in mere seconds. It was no more than four feet tall, devoid of distinguishing features. Still, it turned to face her, awaiting her command. Her smile grew, and she brought her flute to her lips.

Like her humming, the hushed notes of her music were almost hypnotic as they shivered though the still air of the night. Her music came from the heart, pure improvisation that wandered and meandered like a lazy river flowing through a forest. *Watch.* The golem shifted, its eyeless head turning to keep a lookout over the street.

The woman walked toward the front door of the house, still playing her flute quietly. She reached the front door and, without a pause in her music, the door began to distort, another golem formed out of the wood of the door, pulling itself out inside the house. The woman could not see it, but her power gave her a sense of her golems. It could barely hear her music through the door, but as long as it was within earshot she could give it commands. *Scout. Return. Open.* She felt the golem walk away from the closed door and soon it slipped from her senses as it left the influence of her music. The golems were not smart by themselves, and she trusted only the simplest commands to their autonomy. Left too long from her music, and they would grow erratic, and eventually die and collapse into a pile on the ground. But the minute this golem was gone was not enough to cause issue, and soon it returned to the door, turning the deadbolt and opening the door in a mechanical motion. It did not speak or gesture, but through her power she knew it found nothing. The house was empty. *Discard.* There was no more need for this golem, so it collapsed into a pile of woodchips and sawdust on the carpet.

The woman stepped through the doorway, her music amplified slightly by the interior of the house. Like the outside, everything was neat and orderly in the small home. A minimalist living room, a kitchen filled with new appliances, everything floored in sleek tile or thick, plush carpet. She found the room she was looking for with ease, a spare bedroom turned into a home office. She entered the office and, with barely a thought, summoned a tiny, inch-high golem to flip the lights on before evaporating into bits of beige plastic to litter the floor. No sense leaving fingerprints.

A computer hummed away in the corner at a desk littered with papers, of no interest to her. The woman's target was a safe, almost waist-high, in the corner, embedded into the wall. *Form.* A tiny golem, made of the steel of the safe door, formed on the inside. Through it she sensed the contents: some papers, a few bundles of cash inside a duffelbag, a gun. Mostly empty space.

She'd been hired to retrieve the contents of this safe, and since safe manufacturers seldom had to deal
with the problem of breaking out of their product, it meant she had a step up on conventional locksmiths. Especially here, she’d been told this particular model was equipped with electronic vibration sensors that all but prevented any sort of drilling to get in.

Through the golem she began working, feeling out the inside door of the safe. It took little more than a minute to find what she is looking for. A manufacturing oversight, some would say. An optional extra for this model was an interior release handle, in case a small child locked itself inside or some such. In order to save on design costs, versions without the handle still had all the mechanisms to unlock the door, just hidden behind a panel.

She re-formed the tiny steel golem, deforming one of its arms into a screwdriver-like appendage. In seconds she heard the clunk of a panel falling off on the inside of the safe. Another quick reformation of the golem to manipulate the mechanisms, and there was a thunk as the door opened.

She put her flute away, returning to mere humming, and pulled out the contents, stuffing it all into the duffelbag that had been inside, resisting the urge to see what the papers said. Given the relatively small amount of cash, she suspected those documents were why she was here. Playing it safe, she brushed all the papers on the office’s desk into the bag as well before zipping it shut and slinging it over her shoulder.

The woman stepped back onto the street, summoning a golem just to close the door behind her. Outside, her asphalt sentry remained dutifully watching over the quiet street. She discarded it, and it crumbled into chunks of asphalt in the middle of the street. She began her quiet walk back to her hideout, still humming.

The woman turned the corner to her hideout, a worn-down looking house surrounded by weeds. Still humming to herself, she opened the creaky gate leading to her yard, then froze. The door was open, and a man, a cape by the looks of him, stood in her doorway. She could spot another figure behind him. Her humming grew in volume, the tones becoming slightly darker, as she summoned a pair of golems out of the ground, weed-covered figures of earth rising up around her. Defend. The pair moved in front of her, offering some protection. She halted her humming, the first pause in her music that night, to speak, her voice tinged with a slight accent. “Who are you, and why have you decided to break into my home?” she asked quietly, even her words were almost musical in nature.

The intruder spread his hands apologetically. “My apologies, Woodwind, but I did not know how long you would be and did not wish to attract undue attention to your abode,” he spoke, in the voice of someone too full of himself. “I am Imperium, I’m sure you’ve heard of me. I would wish to do business with you.”

The woman, Woodwind, shook her head and stepped forward, her golems moving out of her way. “Breaking into my hideout is not a very good first step for a client,” she said, climbing the handful of steps up to the weathered porch at the front of the house, looking past the villain and into the inside of her hideout. A bipedal robot inside, and likely more she couldn’t see.

“Ah, but I am no mere client, offering petty jobs,” Imperium said. “You see, I wish to build something over the dying embers of this world, and your power is very much of interest to me. I have money, if that is your wish, but I would be more than happy to offer you a place in the beginnings of an empire.”

“I would take my payment in cash, not the chance to be a servant,” the woman replied. “What is the
“First, I'd like you to demonstrate something. A way of confirming what I believe about your power and to show what I have in mind,” Imperium answered as the robot minion of his placed a lump of some kind of metal on the ground. “I'd like you to make a golem out of that metal and immediately dispel it.”

“This is what you came here for?” Woodwind responded cautiously, beginning to hum. *Form.* She hummed a small metal golem and discarded it, leaving a small pile of metal shavings on the ground.

Imperium nodded with satisfaction. “Excellent. Your power creates golems out of a material, but it doesn’t take from it. Instead, it creates new material somehow, leaving it behind when the golem has served its purpose. You see, I have accumulated a fair amount of wealth through my gang's activities, but one thing that is surprisingly difficult to get a hold of is iron, titanium, and other metals in more than pitifully small quantities. I wish to use your power to create large quantities of metals.”

“This is a waste. If you wish to use my music for this, I am afraid I must decline,” Woodwind replied, a little insulted.

“I would add that I am willing to pay double your typical fee,” Imperium stated, as if he had known she would say no.

She paused. “That would be sufficient for me to suffer this burdensome job,” she remarked after a moment, the hint of a smile breaking out on her lips.

Imperium nodded before responding, “Of course, of course. I understand it might seem an insult beside your capabilities and exploits, of which I have respect for. I also have a handful of more...interesting jobs, if you wish to space out this particular one.”

Woodwind's smile became a smirk. “You should have said so earlier.”

“So we have a deal, I presume?” he asked, offering his hand.

She shook it, still smirking a little. “I guess we do, Imperium.”
Icarus

Initiating full hardware diagnostic check...complete
ACESO Mk 2 Blood Contaminant Filtration Service - nominal
ACHILLES Mobility Enhancement System - nominal
2/8 target acquisition sensors damaged.
ICARUS Mk 3 Biomechanical Flight Apparatus - nominal, fuel and power subsystems at 100%
XIAOLONG Mk 5 Weaponized Forearm Replacement - nominal, 3/3 installed weapon modules armed
Current system time is 10 Apr 2010, 3:18:42 PM

The truck hit a pothole, and the four of us—Red Light, Eimyrja, Flashstep, and myself—braced ourselves as the vehicle bounced around. Certainly not designed for comfort, I thought to myself as I continued running through my equipment checks. I'd already done it before we'd even left the PRT headquarters, but it helped keep my mind off the coming battle.

I'd been in fights before, but not as a team, and certainly not against a team of villains. And to top things off I had little more than guesses at what my fellow Wards were capable of. For at least the tenth time that day, I cursed myself for not paying more attention to who was who with the Denver heroes. But...nothing to be done about it now.

There was a click in my ears as the PRT duty officer radioed us from headquarters, “Attention, supervillains confirmed to be with the gang Imperium Inceptivus. Potion might be present, so watch for invisible enemies, and don't underestimate the unpowered gang members. Expect multiple Imperium robots and be wary of mines.”

“You'd think we'd know the villains in our own city by now,” grumbled Red Light.

“Do you want another mark on your record? You know it's protocol,” said the officer in response.

“So,” I half-shouted over the din filling the back of the truck. “Pardon my asking, but what's everyone's powers?”

Eimyrja gave me a strange look. “You're saying you've been a cape for...four months—” closer to two years, but they don't need to know that right now “—and you've never taken the time to learn about the Wards or Protectorate?”

“I was more worried about the villains, since they were the ones I was fighting,” I explained.

After a brief awkward pause, Red Light spoke up, “Well, when I'm motionless, I am utterly untouchable and invincible.”

“I can tag up to four objects or spaces in a large area and teleport to them,” said Flashstep, barely audible over the background noise.

“And I create and control fire, so try not to get in the way,” Eimyrja responded with a smirk as she held up a finger and produced a tiny amount of flame. “And Tank Buster has her mech.”

I at least knew that the Wards had some kind of large mech, though I hadn't known it was Tank
Buster's until now. I assumed that while h–while she would wear a more simple suit of power armor while patrolling, as when I met her, she would bring out a hulking mech for times like this.

“Cool,” I replied, nodding. “I guess you know this already, but I've got my wings...” I trailed off, feeling pretty B-list compared to invincibility, teleportation, fire, and giant robot mechs, to be honest. “...I guess my arm as well? It's also a gun...”

“You'll do fine,” Flashstep replied reassuringly as the truck slowed to a halt. The others opened the door and hopped out, and I followed, checking my arm one last time. Shotgun, tranquilizer darts, taser. Looking outside, we were on the western side of the city, in a run-down-looking industrial district. A pair of police cars, lights flashing, blocked the road ahead, and smoke rose about a block or two away. Tank Buster was here as well, her mech doing some sort of reconfiguration. Even from where I stood, maybe fifty feet away, I could feel the heat radiating off of her. The mech was, quite honestly, an imposing figure, probably ten feet tall and more than half that wide. I wasn't sure what color it was given it glowed white from the heat.

As I was glancing around, the ground shuddered and an explosion rattled the air. “Icarus, can you scout things out? From a safe distance.” Tank Buster said over the comms, in a commanding tone. I nodded and took off, rising above the dilapidated warehouses to get a look around. It didn't take long before I found our target. To the northwest, a handful of drones hovered around a semi truck and trailer idling in a vacant lot. I shot upwards, keeping my engines as quiet as possible, and glided over them to get a better look, hoping they wouldn't look up.

The leader of one of Denver's two prominent gangs was a Tinker named Imperium whose specialty was robotics. I didn't see him, but several of his bipedal robots were there with the drones, along with several people. More worrying than the robots were three of the people I saw with them.

There was Potion, a villain who made what she called potions–hence the name–she could give to her allies to give them powers. She always dressed in street clothes, with the only real costume piece being her gargoyl face mask and purple witch hat.

Next was the source of the explosions: Kaboom. He was what was called a Case 53 by the cape community, a parahuman whose powers had mutated them physically. In his case, his yellowish skin was covered in cracks, every so often oozing out a clay-like explosive substance that he could lob and detonate like grenades. Looking at him, I was certainly thankful my powers only made me need to turn myself into a cyborg. As it was, Kaboom also had the issue of being slightly...reckless...with his explosions. Not a good trait in a villain. He was only wearing a pair of pants right now, though that was typical.

Last was Blink, a villain mercenary who seemed to have been hired by Imperium's gang for the job. I hadn't seen her before, but the cape I was looking at matched the few descriptions I had heard, her costume being just a simple generic-looking black bodysuit and mask. She hadn't made many waves in Denver, so I knew little beyond her name and appearance. That was the biggest worry for me. I didn't like question marks in a battle.

“Okay, we've got three capes. Kaboom, Potion, Blink. Five human associates, as well as multiple Imperium robots. Twelve in total, six are fliers.” I switched to infrared sensors in my mask, “Truck is empty, and I'm not picking up any other bodies in the vicinity.”

“Blink? Imperium got a new recruit?” one of my allies asked, one of the guys. I didn't have everyone's voices down yet.

“Mercenary, mostly does nonviolent stuff,” I explained, “Bank jobs and the like. I don't know why she's with these guys...or what her powers are, she's kept a low profile.”
“Copy that, Icarus. We're moving in. Wards, watch out for mines,’’ Tank Buster replied. Several hundred feet below me I could them deploying, Tank Buster leading the way in her mech--now a menacing-looking combat form whose core whitened out my infrared filter from the heat. There was heat around Eimyrja as well, flames engulfing her hands and masking her face.

“I'll keep the skies clear for you--” I was cut off by an explosion below. I looked down to see a portion of the road in front of my teammates engulfed in fire. “Shit! You guy--” Cut off again, by a second explosion. This time I could see the flame-covered Eimyrja get flung into a wall. I dropped down towards her.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I heard her voice over the radio, “Stepped on a fucking mine. I'm fine.”

I cut off my dive and flew back up, getting a look at the villains to see if our quiet approach was compromised. My heart sunk.

Blink was floating in the air above them, staring straight at us. When she saw me looking back, she just...disappeared.

“Update: Blink can float in midair, apparently, and either teleport or turn invisible. Also she saw us,’’ I paused, growling in frustration as I saw the villains shuffle into vehicles, a pair of goons getting into the semi and others piling into two cars. I dropped down, landing next to my teammates with a thud. “They're moving out.”

“Copy that. Flashstep, hand Icarus one of your tokens,’’ Tank Buster ordered over the comms.

Just as I landed, a panting Flashstep came running from where our PRT truck was parked, halting in front of us. “Stepped on a mine, had to teleport back before it went off,’’ he explained, taking a deep breath. He reached into one of his pouches and tossed something at me. I caught it and looked. It was a small coin-like token. “If you can get that in a good spot, let me know,’’ he said to me. I nodded.

“Icarus, slow that truck down if you can, we'll catch up with you,’’ Tank Buster ordered, continuing towards the villains.

“I'll see what I can do.” I took off again.

Up ahead, the truck was slowly accelerating, heading away from us at a crawl, half a dozen drones circling around it like bees circling a hive. The high-pitched scream of my engines intensified as I shot towards it, and as I approached the Imperium drones swerved around, forming up between the truck and myself. I wasn’t too familiar with them, but knew they shot bursts of compressed air at their enemies, and could also cause a painful shock.

With a flourish I armed the shotgun module of my arm, and a panel on my forearm opened up, a short barrel poking out. A message flashed across the non-flickering portion of my mask as I did so. _Targeting system anomaly: Assistive aiming disabled_. I cursed to myself and made a mental reminder to never get hit in the face ever again. I wasn't a bad shot, but at the speed I was going, I would have appreciated the help.

I pointed myself straight at the middle of them and steeled myself, hearing more than feeling the impact as I struck one of the drones. I fired blindly with the shotgun as I shot past, circling around and hovering over the street a distance away to get a better look. _Good shot_, I told myself as I saw the debris scattered across the pavement.

I continued forward, flying towards the truck, which was still accelerating slowly away. One of the two cars was escorting it as it trundled towards a police barricade. I shot in front of them, swinging
around in a wide circle to get a look at who was inside the vehicles.

“T’ve got Potion and three goons here,” I relayed to my team. “No sight of Kaboom or Blink.”

“They're here,” one of the Wards, who I was fairly certain was Red Light, replied.

I shot back towards the truck, landing on top of the hood of the semi and taking a punch at the windshield. It cracked under the strength of my artificial arm, and I pulled back to throw another punch.

As I was swinging, something—a blast of air?—hit me from the side, and I was blown off the hood of the truck.

I slammed into something, I wasn't sure what.

It took me a second to get my senses together. I'd spun around as I was struck, and my left side had taken most of the landing, if it could be called that.

I had hit a telephone pole at the side of the street. My arm, the real one, hurt like a bitch and had more than a few splinters hanging out of it. I took a deep breath and took back off, thankful that nothing important, like my wings, had been harmed.

The remaining drones were waiting for me, hovering around the truck as it sped forward. I took another pass at the drones, firing several shots at them as I shot past, barely dodging their retaliatory bursts of compressed air. Looking back, I saw that I had shot nothing but empty space. Nice shooting, idiot.

I lined myself for another pass and plowed through again. Nothing again. I sighed.

Without my targeting system to help, shooting at the speeds I was going was pointless. Only one thing for it, then.

I landed with a thud on the back of the trailer. I took my time as they flew towards me, taking aim. Standing still and not distracted by flying, the recoil from my arm-gun was much more noticeable, but I kept it steady, backing away slowly as they approached. I got two of the remaining four by the time they reached me, and I fell backwards off the back of the trailer, allowing myself to slip into a slow hover as I continued firing. The remaining two drones fell to the ground, the lights and sensors embedded in their spherical shells flickering off.

But in the time it had taken me to destroy the drones, the truck had continued on, its car escort following. I could only watch as it slammed into a makeshift police barricade, a handful of police officers leaping out of the way. The hit halved the speed of the semi, but it continued forward.

To my surprise, while it was slowed down one of the cops leaped towards it, landing precariously on the passenger-side running board. As I flew to catch up, he threw an elbow into the passenger-side window, cracking it slightly, before reeling back in pain from the impact. I approached, landing next to him. “T’ve got this, just make sure that car doesn't come around and surprise us.” He nodded, and shifted back away from the window, letting me get in position. With the window already cracked, it'd be easy enough.

I pulled the token Flashstep had given me out of a pocket, my metal fist enveloping it. I got a glance inside the truck as I swung, two goons inside, each downing a flask of liquid. Potion's potions. Great. The glass shattered, and I let go of the token, allowing it to fly somewhere into the cab.

“Flashstep, your token is in the truck, but there's a couple goons. Give me a—” I cut off as the
passenger goon grabbed my arm and pulled on it. With my free hand I braced myself against the door, ignoring the screaming pain from it as the goon tried to pull me into the cab. I could feel the mechanical components inside my arm grinding and slipping as he pulled. *Must've been a strength potion he took.* A warning message popped up on my mask's HUD, as if I wasn't already aware that he was about to rip it off of my shoulder. Unless...

I let go with my other arm, allowing myself to be pulled just enough into the truck to change the angle my arm was facing, and shot my taser straight at him. He jerked and convulsed, and more importantly let go of my arm. I pulled myself back out, taking a deep breath. “Passenger down, just the driver. He took a potion, I don't know what,” I radioed to my teammates.

They said something back, but I was distracted by the sound of screeching tires behind me. I turned around, just in time to see the truck's escort car swerving in, with a bat-swinging goon aiming straight for me. No time to dodge. His swing collided straight into my ribs, and I was thrown back. I heard more than felt myself slam into the pavement, my back scraping across the asphalt. Then all at once I felt a lot of pain, and my vision faded.

**Tank Buster**

“Icarus, slow that truck down if you can, we'll catch up with you,” I ordered as I stomped to the group blocking our path. As Icarus confirmed and flew off, I engaged Imperium's ground robots. While they were formidable in their own right, they were nothing to a several ton mech.

I wouldn't call myself a violent-minded person, but it admittedly felt nice to be charging in my mech as opposed to patrols or stupid eternal paperwork.

I slammed my fists on a pair of them and collected the crushed metal with a third arm extending from my mech's chest. A couple of them tried to circle around me, but I loaded the scrap of their brethren into the gun on my left arm and tore them apart with the super-heated shrapnel. Another two were running straight for Eimyrja, but I caught them in a charge before they could get halfway.

I could see the glow of fire from my peripheral vision as I turned to look at Kaboom. I realized too late that he had been preparing a nasty explosive that I saw too late to dodge. It tore through a chunk of my armor and lost me my mech's right arm.

Apparently Kaboom found that hilarious enough to point and laugh at the smoldering ruins of my arm. Thankfully, the core of my suit was untouched, so the built-in forge would have no problem repairing the damage, though it would take some time.

Flashstep teleported behind Kaboom as he was still cackling and tried to take a swing at him, but before he could connect, Blink suddenly appeared next to him. She punched him in the chest and placed a hand on Kaboom and as quickly as she appeared, both her and the other villain were gone.

“Update on Blink,” I announced as I looked around for her. “Her power involves some kind of teleportation, and she can teleport others. I suspect that aspect of hers is a touch ability.”

I finally spotted the pair behind Eimyrja and Red Light, who had just disabled a thug. “Behind you!” I shouted as Blink moved to touch Red Light.

There was an awkward pause, as nothing happened. The pair ended up staring at each other for half a second.

“Hey there lady. Come here often?” Red Light joked.
“Oh. Your power overrules mine. This is awkward,” Blink responded. A second later, Eimyrja took a shot and blasted fire at the villain.

Blink shrieked and teleported a distance away, rolling on the ground to snuff out the fire that had caught on her leg. I could see more than hear Eimyrja chuckling.

“Red Light, no fraternizing with villains,” I reprimanded, even as I grinned in amusement.

“Fine,” he responded, but I knew he would crack a joke again later. I could almost hear his eyeroll over the comms.

Kaboom had not moved from his location since Blink moved him. His hands were behind him, and he had the second most irritating smile I had ever witnessed.

I realized too late what he was doing. A toy car of all things, loaded with explosives, rolled right underneath Eimyrja.

“Don't move,” he growled, waving the controller to his toy car at us. “I'll be more than happy to blow up miss fire girl.”

“Fuck!” Eimyrja shouted as she glanced at the bomb. Red Light looked at the bomb and froze.

I mentally cursed myself for not seeing it. I slipped. I should've known he'd have some stupid trick up his sleeve.

“You wouldn't dare seriously harm or kill her,” I said. “You would get a kill order very fast.”

Kaboom shrugged. “I 'unno, man. Could be fun. I've never had a kill order before.”

Over to the right I could see Blink floating in the air, a frown visible.

“Don't be so stupid. Just stay put,” Blink shouted to Kaboom, right before she flew away in the direction the truck went.

“Oh! You leaving me here alone, you stinking bitch? Fuck. I take one hostage and she gets hissy.” Kaboom smiled at the three of us. “Oh well. I guess we'll just sit here 'til my no-good buddies have done away with the truck. How about a story?”

“How about go fuck yourself,” Eimyrja said in response.

“Well fuck, be a bitch then.”

This was getting nowhere. There was no telling what Kaboom might actually do.

“Icarus,” I said into the radio, my armor ensuring no sound escaped outside. “Can you carry a person, and pick them up quickly?” There was no response over the radio. “Icarus, come in.”

“Yeah. Sorry...bumped my head. Uh, sure?” Icarus responded after a long pause. “I can't hold them for long, and they'll probably feel it afterwards. What's going on?”

“We have a hostage situation. There is a bomb right under Eimyrja. Trying to wait and negotiate is too risky. Can you extract her quickly?”

“Jesus. Yeah, give me–” she paused. “Give me a sec, on my way.”

Kaboom stared us down with the creepiest grin I had ever witnessed.
“Remove the explosive and we'll go easier on you,” I offered, more for the formality than any likelihood he'd listen. “Your teammates have already abandoned you. You aren't going anywhere.”

“Eh, fuck that. Blinky bitch really oughta come back here, or I'll sneak her a little present when I break outta your shitty paper mah-shay walls,” he said, looking proud for what I assumed was his poor attempt at a fancy word.

“Paper mache, you fuckwit,” Eimyrja grumbled loudly.

“Hey little bitch. Wanna say that to my face? Oh wait! Hah! You're trapped, dumb fuck.”

“Eimyrja, do not egg him on,” I ordered over the radio as she opened her mouth to reply. “Kaboom. Blink is not here, and she's not coming back. Surrender or–”

The ever-present roar of Icarus's jets grew louder, and without any fanfare she flew in from the behind and slammed into Eimyrja, flinging the pair of them away from the bomb. A large explosion went off immediately after, but Icarus and Eimyrja were already clear, laying in a pile inelegantly a distance away.

“Huh,” Kaboom said before running off.

I noticed Kaboom running, but in my mech I quickly caught up and pinned him to the ground with an oversized mech hand. Something exploded, but it did nothing to dislodge my hand, and it simply made Kaboom slightly worse for wear. I glanced at Red Light, who had fallen into the small crater left behind from the explosive.


Eimyrja gave me a thumbs up from her sitting position as Icarus coughed and shakily stood up.

“Do you need medical attention?”

“I wanna go punch that shirtless freak in the face,” Eimyrja snarled. Right. Eimyrja is fine.

“I'll be...fine,” Icarus coughed through the radio. “Just need a second.”

I wasn't so sure. “Are you sure? No one will hold it against you if you need to sit the rest of this out. I would rather they get away than have one of my own be hurt.”

Rather than responding, Icarus flew off with a roar of jet engines. I sighed.

“Red Light, come zip tie Kaboom's arms and legs. PRT, we could use the truck and its containment foam. I want to take all precautions on our captive.”

Icarus

Everything was in differing stages of pain, and it had all magnified tenfold when I'd slammed into Eimyrja.

The metallic taste of blood in my mouth now was not reassuring, and neither were the sharp pains whenever I took a breath, but that was a problem for later. More worrying at the moment, my mask was probably a lost cause, the cracked lens had completely shattered after I'd gotten hit off the truck. God, that's going to be a pain to fix.

“...I would rather they get away than have one of my own be hurt,” Tank Buster finished saying over
Fuck that, I thought to myself, taking off into the sky. The acceleration made all the bits of me that weren't metal cry out in agony, but I was still able to fly.

I heard the sound of helicopters above me as I made my way back towards the fighting. A quick glance showed they weren't police. *News choppers? After only a couple minutes?* I wondered how much my injuries would be on the ten o'clock news.

The truck was speeding through the streets now, its escort car trailing behind unsteadily. As I got closer I saw a flicker of motion out of the corner of my eye, and I tilted enough to see Blink lunging towards me, a baton in her hands. It struck my arm with a pitiful metallic thunk, and I offered a smirk I knew the villain couldn't see.

As she reached a hand out to grab me, I spun away, gaining altitude. She gave chase, and I noticed something peculiar. While the wind of our fast flying was tearing past me, it didn't seem to affect her. Her black hair was completely motionless, as if she were just sitting in a park somewhere. The thought was broken off as she abruptly flickered out of my view. I spun around, looking for where she'd gone but seeing no signs of her. *Did she give up that easily? Or something else going on?*

I put Blink out of my mind. There was no time to worry about the supervillain's fancy hair.

I screamed past the escort car first, shooting out one of its tires as I flew past. Another tire had already gone flat somehow, which meant it was now having serious trouble keeping up.

I landed on the hood of the semi, throwing a punch at the already-cracked windshield. The two passengers inside shielded their faces from the shards of glass, and the driver instinctively hit the brakes, throwing me off balance as I pinwheeled my arms to keep from falling over.

To my surprise I felt a shove behind me, pushing me back into a safe position, and I spun around just in time to see Blink thrusting a taser towards me. Without even thinking, I threw up my arm to block it, spun the rest of the way around, and blasted my engines to get away.

It was only a glancing hit with the taser, but enough for my entire body to convulse, my engines beginning to flicker as the nerves controlling them spasmed. They stayed more on than off, though, and it was enough to keep me moving away. I glanced behind me. Blink was following hesitantly, cradling her arm. I surmised that, as I was getting away, she'd been hit by a blast of superheated exhaust from my jets. *That's what you get for tasing me, you bitch.* I said to myself even as my hands continued to shake like I was the world champion of having Parkinson's. She saw me looking at her and, again, flickered away.

I took a wide loop around to get myself in position, giving myself a few seconds to get a plan together. *“Flashstep, are you still with us?”*

*“Yeah, what's going on?”*

*“I've got a plan. On my signal, teleport in and tase the shit out of the driver. I'll knock out the other guy.”*

*“Copy that. Standing by.”*

I came back into view of the truck, and the first thing I noticed was that the villains had gotten a new car somehow, and I could see Blink flickering between the two, transferring the passengers with her power. Tank Buster was giving chase, her mech back in transport mode, with a PRT van right behind. I brought myself in front of the smashed window, leveling my arm at the passenger. As soon
as the tranquilizer gun popped out of my wrist, I clicked the radio, “Now!”

Flashstep came into view, slamming a taser into the driver. It didn't matter that my dart went wide, embedding itself next to the passenger goon, because he then swung around and tased him, too. He pulled himself over into the driver's seat, slamming the brakes.

Just as he did, though, Blink flickered into place just long enough to deposit Potion into the cab and pull out one of the tased goons.

Before I could even shout a warning, Potion slammed a liquid-filled flask into Flashstep's face. He disappeared as soon as it made contact, but based on the angry, groggy-sounding cursing I heard over the comms, he'd gotten a dose of whatever the villain had put in her flask.

Potion pulled herself in front of the wheel, and the truck lurched forward, accelerating slowly. Behind it, I could see Tank Buster transitioning into combat mode, with a new villain approaching.

“Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me,” I moaned.

Encore was a gaudy, attention-whoring cape villain who got stronger and more powerful the more people were paying attention to him. He wore a dark blue bodysuit with gold flakes on the front and back of his arms and legs, as well as a depiction of clapping hands on his chest. He wore an absurdly bright pink cloak. He must've been waiting in the wings until enough people were paying attention to the battle. I looked up at the news choppers floating overhead. They don't even know what they're doing. Or they don't care.

I put him out of my mind, one less viewer to give him strength, and returned my attention to the truck. To my surprise, I saw Red Light, running towards the front of the truck. He's going to freeze in front of it. Before he could freeze in place, though, Blink continued the pattern of being irritating and teleported him away. But...it gave me a thought.

“Okay, guys. You're gonna hate me for this.”

“What, Icarus.” Tank Buster replied, irritation in her voice.

“OK so I understand this would have been good to think of ten minutes ago, but...okay, so semi trucks have air brakes on their trailers, they get the air from the cab, right?”

“We're kind of in a fight right now, do you have a point?”

“Yeah, so, for safety purposes, air brake systems are typically built to have a safety system that is ‘held open’ so to speak, that is, if pressure is cut, they–”

“Icarus, just cut the brakes instead of beating around the bush about them!” Tank Buster shouted over the comms, her voice cracking noticeably.

I opted not to respond to her rudeness, instead shooting over the cab and dropping behind it. A handful of cables and tubes connected the trailer to the cab. The shotgun in my arm clicked into position. I wasn't sure what was what, but did it really matter? I began firing shots into the mass of tubes, and after the third shot I heard the tires on the trailer squeal and screech. The truck was slowly pulled to a halt by the trailer.

With a grunt I shot back up and towards the front of the cab, just in time to see Potion down a flask and fade from my sight. A screeching of tires as the Imperium's getaway car sped away, Blink dragging along a protesting Encore and a crate of some sort that I assumed came from the back of the truck.
I considered chasing after them, but a sudden awareness of the pain in my body suggested I consider otherwise. Instead, I sank to the ground, landing in a heap next to where Eimyrja, Red Light, and Flashstep were standing. A short distance away, Tank Buster's mech was morphing back into its mobile form, the heat uncomfortably warm even from here.

“Any injuries?” Tank Buster asked the team. The other three offered various forms of no.

“I feel like shit,” I replied sarcastically.

“Do you ne–”

I cut her off. “I'll wait until...we get back. Don't need my debut as a Ward ending with channel 9's live coverage of me crawling into an ambulance.” I struggled to my feet with a grunt. “See, perfectly fine!”

**Blink**

I still carried the apple crate filled with god-knows-what, ignoring the grumbling Encore from behind me. I wasn't sure how to feel about the failure of a mission. I wasn't particularly prideful, but it still stung that we lost on my first time clashing with the heroes. Still, a part of me knew it was better that they won, even if I'd probably lose out on some money. I wasn't particularly happy helping to spread the drug problem in this city.

Our meeting place was in a small warehouse up in the far northern part of Denver. I wasn't sure if the workers were paid to stay silent, or if they just couldn't be bothered to care about the supervillains walking by. The drone ahead was eerily silent, more-so than usual. I idly wondered if Imperium recently upgraded.

It lead us into some kind of meeting room with the most uncomfortable-looking chairs I'd ever seen. We were the first ones in here, so I picked a chair at random. Encore picked a seat a distance away, opting to slouch into one with surprising noise. The chairs, thankfully enough, were far more comfortable than they looked.

While waiting, I decided to check my cape phone. With nothing new, I opted to just lean back and close my eyes. Encore, irritatingly enough, apparently decided the room was too silent and started whistling off-tune. I got that attention grabbing was part of his gimmick, but did he really need to do that now? I was about ready to lose my patience when Potion walked in. Encore quickly stopped, thankfully. Recollect silently and quickly walked in right after Potion.

This was only the second time I met Recollect personally. I doubted even most of the non-capes in this gang knew he existed. Recollect had some kind of Thinker power, though I didn't know what. He didn't even have a costume save for a simple black mask. As before, he came in dressed in a business suit.

Imperium arrived shortly after, taking carefully measured heavy steps to the largest chair in the room, which did not differ from the other chairs except in size. No one uttered a word as he sat down, and I could see him take a deep breath. I noticed Recollect staring at me, unnerving me greatly.

“Today's events were an embarrassment,” he said, calmly, but clearly agitated. “It's bad enough that we lost that truck. We lost Kaboom.”

“Funny,” Encore spoke up. “We go with some new cape I hadn't even heard of until recently, and we find ourselves failing.”
“Hmmph. Judging by that crate, I’d say she did more than you,” Recollect said, still looking at me. “Ah, but I’ll figure out for sure soon.”

He wasn’t reading my memories, was he? I wasn't sure if I wanted to know.

“She got a crate, yeah, but forgot someone in the process,” Encore grumbled. What the hell was his problem with me?

Imperium’s left hand tapped the table.

“Tell me why Kaboom was left behind,” Imperium ordered.

“He decided to abruptly take one of the Wards hostage,” I answered before Encore could talk again. “He was too unstable. I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't just blow them up if I moved him anyway, so I just left to reinforce the truck defense.”

“You didn't go back.”

“No. I would've been too late.”

“Recollect?” Imperium asked.

“Not yet. Soon,” Recollect responded.

I felt a little insulted that Imperium felt he had to confirm what I said with his Thinker, but I couldn't entirely blame him.

“Hmm. Potion, you've been silent. Tell me what happened,” Potion shrugged. “It was going according to plan, but for some reason Icarus was there.”

“Yes,” Imperium nodded. “An unexpected element. Still, I expect you all to adapt. There is no excuse.”

“Icarus joined the Wards,” Recollect spoke up after an awkward pause. “We will see her again.”

“Hmmph. Why didn't Blink try to stop her, given she's the only one of us who can fly?” Encore spoke up again, irritatingly.

“The way my power works means my blows while flying basically have no effect,” I said. “I could've tried tasering her mid-air, but I’d rather not accidentally kill a Ward.”

Encore tried to respond, but Imperium threw his hand up.

“Yes. That would be detrimental. Now, if any of you have anything else to say for yourselves, speak up.”

When no one offered any words, even Encore, Imperium continued.

“None of you are receiving the full pay, given this embarrassment. Next time, I expect better.” Imperium looked directly at me. “Blink. You're responsible for breaking Kaboom out when we get the opportunity. I don't care about the circumstances. One way or another, you left him behind.”

I nodded, opting not to respond.

“Potion.” Imperium looked directly at the girl. “You mentioned giving flight about a week ago?”
“Yes,” she said, nodding. “I must refine both potion and body before it is of any use. It will be some time.”

“Good. Give me an update as soon as you have one. Now. It's clear given my surveillance that Icarus was the problem. We must counter her flight and maneuverability next time if we are to be taken seriously. Aëroplaniga Mk. V is in development, and when deployed should provide assistance in this matter. With more control over the sky, we should have no excuses.”

I idly wondered if Imperium opened a translator and picked Latin words at random. It wouldn't surprise me. Still, I could at least respect him for looking for solutions as opposed to simply yelling at everyone.

Recollect then shrugged, saying, “Kaboom is, as always, too much of a loose cannon. I wonder if Blink did us a favor leaving him as she did.”

Imperium shook his head. “He has his uses. Kaboom is predictable enough if pointed right.”

I wasn't so sure about that.

“In any case,” Imperium continued. “I want you all to think hard on what happened today. Our Empire is the strongest in this city, and we will remind everyone of that. Good day.”
Awakening 1.4 - Centralia

Tank Buster

It occurred to me that I was staring at the ceiling. I blinked, and rolled over to look at the alarm clock. Six AM. I sighed, knowing I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep for the extra half hour I had.

Actually, I smiled. Despite how tired I was, I might as well make use of the opportunity. I shut off the alarm so it wouldn't plague me half an hour later, rolled out of bed, and walked over to my desk.

I rummaged around, trying to find where I put my damn wireless ear plugs. I finally found them, connected them to my phone, and set the playlist on shuffle, not particularly caring what played. I walked out my door into the common area of the Ward's floor. It had pretty much become my home at some point. I wasn't sure when. Aunt Jen would always work nights, so there really was nothing for me at her apartment, not that we really clicked when we did see each other. Living at the Headquarters was convenient, too.

The large table in the center of the room was the largest flat surface, which made it work for what I needed. I leaped onto it, then sent my phone to the start of another song. I tapped my foot, feeling out the beat of the song, a standard one-two-three-four. I didn't have any particular style in mind. My body moved with the song, driven also by the years of dancing. Even if I rarely danced nowadays, it still felt like slipping into a warm shower after a walk through the snow.

Two songs played before I stopped to open my eyes, finding myself face to face with Icarus, or Brenna, rather. She was in her pajamas, leaning against the doorway to our kitchen, looking at me with a bemused expression on her face. I had no idea she'd stayed the night.

“Uh, morning,” I said, still a little groggily despite the little bit of exertion.

“You didn't strike me as the kind of person who likes dancing,” she said with a smile. “I'm making food, you want any?”

“Sure,” I said, leaping off the table to walk over. “Dancing is actually my passion. I think I started, oh, when I was 8?”

“Well you certainly look like you know what you're doing. You like eggs? How many?”

“I feel like I could eat four, if that's okay. I forgot to eat dinner.”

“You got it,” she replied, cracking a dozen eggs into a bowl. “So how often do you stay here? The place seems pretty deserted to be honest.”

“I pretty much live here nowadays,” I said as I poured myself a glass of water. “There isn't exactly much for me at my aunt's apartment.”

She nodded, hunting around cabinets for spices. “I see. Just you? I haven't seen any of the others yet, although I was up a bit late last night so maybe I missed them.”

I shook my head. “The other three live with their parents. They don't have as much keeping them here.”

“Keeping them here?”
“I'm busier than I should be. Bunker doesn't like me, so I get some shit that's supposed to be covered by the Protectorate. The Director likes to spend her time literally anywhere but here, though that's probably for the best. I do work that I'm pretty sure wasn't intended for just being Ward team leader. And now I feel like I'm ranting. Sorry.”

I ran a hand through my hair. I rarely indulged in caffeine, but today might be one of those days.

“It's fine,” Brenna replied, giving me a smile. “Sucks that they throw all that at you, though. Like, I don't even have any ‘responsibilities’ and cape shit takes up all my free time. I can't imagine piling more on top of that.”

“I probably shouldn't take it, but I feel like I have to prove myself more than other capes,” I said, before I could really think about what I was saying. “Ugh, we only just met without masks yesterday. I shouldn't be dumping this on you.”

“I'm sure eventually I'll be dumping my shit right back onto you in return,” she replied with a laugh, flinging some eggs onto a plate and handing them to me.

“That's fine,” I said with a smile, taking the plate. “It's been a while since I've had someone to exchange ramble crap with.”

I took a bite of the eggs. They were alright. I liked the seasoning, but they were seriously missing something. I grabbed a container of salt from the cabinet and sprinkled a bunch on.

“Oh, by the way, you'll be transferred to Centralia pretty soon if you aren't going already.”

“Oh, yeah, I'm already going there,” Brenna replied as she poured an unholy amount of ketchup onto her eggs, which she was apparently just eating out of the pan. Though, given my salt mountain, I was hardly one to judge. “My dad, um, pulled some strings to get me in.”

“What kind of strings?” I asked with one eyebrow raised.

“Nothing like that,” she said with a laugh. “But I guess he called in a few favors to get me moved up the waiting list. Kinda feels like a waste now, what with my career path already...chosen.”

“Isn't much of a choice,” I said, somewhat bitterly. I felt...uneasy with my powers. Maybe ‘uneasy’ wasn't the best word, actually. I liked that my powers made me strong, but...but what? I don't get to spend my life dancing? In a world where there isn't much to dance for? I set my plate down and rubbed my eyes. It was too early for such thoughts.

“Well, I guess sometimes we just have to play the cards we're dealt,” Brenna said, finishing off the last of her eggs. “It's not like anybody chooses to have powers, but that doesn't mean we can't make the best of it. I should go get dressed for school, you want to walk over together?”

“Sure,” I replied, not wanting to extend the topic any longer. I rushed off to my room to complete a practiced routine. I preferred showering the night before, so getting ready was a quick jammies off–clothes on–pills ingested. While Brenna continued to get ready, I decided to pull out completed homework, since I might as well double check it.

“Sorry!” Brenna exclaimed a few minutes later, hobbling her way out of one of the formerly-vacant rooms off of the main area. If I hadn't known they were there, I wouldn't have been able to tell she had wings hidden under her school uniform. “I wasn't expecting to take so long, I guess I'm still a bit stiff after yesterday.”

“You're fine,” I smiled. I quickly placed everything back into my backpack. “Let's go.”
I took us directly to the nearest elevator to take us straight to the garage. As the elevator doors opened, I spotted Aunt Jennifer leaning against the wall, fiddling with a pack of cigarettes. She wore a business suit, the PRT badge on her breast saying ‘Night Dispatcher Mitchell’. Her long blonde hair appeared even more disheveled than usual. It must have been a rough night.

“Jen?” I said with a touch of worry. We might have our differences, but we were still family.

“Oh!” She almost dropped her pack, but managed to catch it. She looked at me for a moment and hesitated. “Naomi.”

I sighed. Seriously? “It's been two years. I wish you'd stop hesitating.”

She glanced at Brenna, who stood nervously still, before looking back at me. “Who's your friend?”

“Oh!” she said before I could answer, “I'm Brenna. I just, ummmm, started working here?” She offered a hand.

“I'm Jennifer, Naomi's aunt,” Jen replied, shaking Brenna's hand. “It's been a while since there's been a new Ward.”

“Oh, nice to meet you,” she replied in a suddenly much-more-nervous tone.

“How come you aren't at home?” I asked Jen, interrupting the conversation.

Jennifer shrugged. “I had a longer night than usual. Then I saw the time and figured I'd wait here for a bit to see you. You know it's been at least a month, right?”

“I've been busy,” I mumbled.

She placed her arm on my shoulder, which looked funny given she was an inch shorter than me. “Hey, I get we have our differences. I can't pretend I really understand your choices. But you're family to me. You know that, right? My brother...he wouldn't have liked it if I let you drift away. So please, come by sometime? It doesn't have to be long.”

I sighed. There were too many things to focus on. Too many things grabbed at my attention. I got it. I knew she was family, some of the only family I had left, but even if our schedules aligned, it was hard.

“Yeah, I'll stop by sometime,” I finally said. “I'll figure it out.”

“It'll mean a lot,” Jen said, enveloping me in a hug. “Be safe, alright? Or, well, at least as safe as you capes can be.”

“You too,” I replied.

Jen walked away, and I turned to the side only to see Brenna wasn't there. I finally noticed her up ahead, awkwardly looking at her phone.

“Sorry about that,” I said after jogging over to her.

“It's okay.”

“We should probably hurry. We don't want to be late for our bus.”

We didn't talk anymore on the way through the tunnel to Union Station. Honestly, there was so much I was curious about, like how her dad had the connections to get her in, but I kept my mouth
shut. We hadn't known each other long enough that I could feel comfortable asking away about her life.

As we walked through the station, there were some curious glances from people walking past us. I was somewhat alarmed at first, but looking at Brenna, she looked completely unconcerned. I then noticed that her fake arm was moving much more...rigidly and mechanically. Something she did to avoid suspicion, probably. The attention was probably on the prosthetic, I realized. I supposed that Brenna would be used to it by now.

By the time we walked onto the bus, I had already tuned out the glances. I did not drop my guard entirely, but at least I knew the reason for them. I felt surprised, though, when Brenna lightly shook my shoulder, waking me up from the nap I'd apparently decided to have. The bus had just stopped by the school. When did that happen?

“Hey,” was all she said, but she gave me a worried look.

“Sorry,” I said as I stood up.

“Are you okay? You look like you're getting sick.”

“I'm fine.” Sick? Exhausted, more like. I then noticed Brenna wince as she walked down the steps off the bus. “Are you okay?”

“Just sore, and trying not to draw too much attention to it.”

I didn't respond, instead just walking around the corner over towards the entrance to the school.

Centralia High was a recently-built school that served as one of the best high schools in the state. Despite it being a ‘public’ school, it was very difficult to get into for most students. The school was also well known for being where the Wards would go, so, to my eternal dismay, conversations inevitably turned to gossip.

The grand-looking fence and entrance might be impressive, but to me I always got the impression of it trying too hard. Then again, I might just be bitter. School felt like a waste of time, what with everything else going on. I'm obviously never going to be a historian, a scientist, or whatever. I lost the ability to choose the moment that siren went off five years ago.

I ran my fingers through my hair. I wasn't a violent person, but at this moment I could use something to punch.

“So,” Brenna said as we started climbing the way-too-prestigious-for-a-high-school stairs, “Are you a...senior, then? I don't think I've seen you around the juniors. Not that I've been paying much attention.”

“I'm a junior. I've found myself hanging with more sophomores and seniors than other juniors, though,” I said, though when I said ‘hang’, I really meant awkward hallway conversations and lunch.


“What about you?” I didn't pay much attention to other students myself.

“Junior,” she replied, with a little bitterness in her voice. I decided not to press her on that.

Up through the halls and the bustle of students I spotted Isabelle quietly making her way through the
halls. Isabelle Hernandez generally kept to herself, tuning out most of the student body. Even the occasional bully left her alone, given her numerous demonstrations that she wouldn't tolerate that stuff being directed at her or even near her. She was just another face in the crowd for the longest time, until one day she came in, and I could tell something had changed. She'd looked...lost, somehow. I didn't know why she might have felt that way, but it reminded me of my past, and I couldn't help but reach out to her. Now, I couldn't say that we were close, but we talked most days, and we even started sitting together at lunch from time to time.

“Hey Isabelle, how are you doing?”

“Oh, hi Naomi. I'm okay,” she responded quietly.

It was then that I noticed a set of marks on her arm, just barely visible through her knitted cardigan.

“Is everything okay at home?” I asked, concerned.

I suppose she noticed my glance at her arm, given her response. “Oh, yeah. Just had a cooking accident. I'd rather not go into the details,” she said with a blush.

“Ugh, yeah, I tend to be clumsy when cooking too. I once covered myself entirely in flour,” I responded. As Isabelle gave the smallest of smiles, I said, “Oh! Brenna, this is Isabelle. Isabelle, this is Brenna. I don't know if you two have met yet.”

I glanced over at Brenna who was staring intently at Isabelle’s arm. Isabelle herself seemed shocked for a brief moment before settling back into her usual expression. I was not sure what that was about. Maybe they had history I didn't know about?

“Oh, hi,” Isabelle finally said after an awkward pause.

“Hello,” Brenna replied with an awkward wave.

“How do you guys know each other?” Isabelle asked hesitantly.

“Oh, uh, yeah, we totally met at a con. Naomi here was wearing a, uh, great Black Wings Kaminari cosplay,” Brenna answered before I could. I mentally facepalmed.

“Oh, that's nice, I guess. Didn't know you were into that stuff, Naomi,” Isabelle said.

Internally screaming, I replied, “Uh, I didn't really have anything else to do. Felt like trying it out, plus I got to put on a costume before Halloween.” It hurt to lie, but this was getting pretty awkward, and I couldn't just say ‘oh no, Brenna was just being silly’.

“I should get to class, though. I kinda forgot to finish my homework, so I need the five minutes before class to finish it. See ya!” I said quickly as I hurriedly walked through the halls to my classroom.

**Icarus**

Polite applause washed over me as I shook the hands of the Director and the Mayor.

I was in the PRT building, in a small auditorium on the third floor, set up for formal events, press releases, and the like. Just like the endless cubicles from when I had first visited, it was...surprisingly ordinary.

I'll admit, I cheated a little, putting the words of the Wards oath up on my HUD. I seriously doubted I
would have gotten it right otherwise, nervous as I was from the bright lights and camera lenses filling the room.

I stepped back from the mic, allowing the Mayor to give a canned-sounding speech about public safety. As he droned on, I scanned the crowd absentmindedly, trying not to think about the ever-irritating pain of my cracked ribs. 67 entities tracking, my mask helpfully said, its recently-repaired combat analysis and tracking systems giving me data even now. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with the vector information of the bored reporter tiredly walking to the back to get some coffee, but it was nice that I had the option.

None of those 67 people present in the room were my dad though. I knew he would probably be too busy, not to mention the risk it would cause my identity, but it still kinda hurt to not see him there. But there were far too many eyes on me for his presence to go unnoticed, so it was for the best.

That was what really surprised me. I'd been active for a few months, admittedly keeping a low profile, but after yesterday everything had blown up. The internet had gone crazy with rumors about me, and it had only gotten worse when I went to school and heard about the witchhunt that was being planned for any new attendees to Centralia. Lucky for me I already go there, I thought to myself with a smile.

I was snapped back into reality as the Mayor finished his pandering for reelection votes and stepped away. Some more clapping, and the reporters and such began filing out.

I took a deep breath and stepped away, exiting through a backstage door and letting myself relax.

Since we'd first returned from the fight against Imperium's gang, it had been a constant swarm of PRT people poking at me, miles of paperwork, security bullshit, guided tours, and that was before even getting into all the injuries I'd taken yesterday. And then having to be up the next morning for more pointless schoolwork, with barely enough time afterwards to rush back to the PRT and get changed into my costume. But this, a few seconds to lean against a wall and close my eyes...

“Ah, there you are,” an unfamiliar voice said. Of fucking course.

I opened my eyes to see a thin-looking man in a suit staring up at me.

“Uh. Hi?” I asked. I wasn't particularly tall, but I still had several inches on him. He had black hair and an immaculately-groomed goatee, everything about him screamed “maximum intensity” to me.

“Ugh. This always happens. I told them, let me have input, but they never listen and this is what I get,” he said, mostly to himself. Mostly.

“Can I, uh, help you?” I asked, glancing around the backstage area for help. The handful of staff back here were keeping their distance, it seemed.

He cringed at my question. “We'll need to get you voice lessons, ‘uh’ is the least heroic word I've ever heard.”

“Okay, uh, I'm going to walk away now,” I grumbled at him, heading out the door and into the wide hallway outside. I couldn't remember which way the elevator was, so I picked a random direction as I heard the strange man's footsteps behind me.

“And this? Your gait is like you just got hit by a truck. What kind—” he cut off as I spun around, tired of listening to the commentary on my walking.

“Okay, asshole. I don't know who you are, but the last thing I need is you telling me how to walk and talk.”
“Yes, you do!” he replied. “You've already botched your first impression, going into that ceremony looking like this,” he gestured at my entire body. “First impressions are everything, but it's okay, I can still make this work.”

I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to tranquilize the annoying little man. “Okay, if I listen to you for five minutes, will you go away afterwards?”

“Yes–”

“Okay, who are you and what do you want?”

“Getting better, almost sounding like a hero. Ben Kessel, Image consultant for our division. Just Ben is fine.” He pulled a business card out of a pocket and held it out to me.

“Image consultant?” I asked, ignoring his stupid business card.

“Yes. Image. PR. You are in the public eye now, more than ever. But you aren't a hero if the public doesn't believe you are a hero. And with you looking like some edgy teenage boy's wank fantasy, we aren't getting that.”

“Excuse me? I look fine,” I retorted angrily. “And I'll have you know I've been handling my ‘image’ just fine since before I even thought about joining the Wards.”

Ben laughed at me. Not laughed in general, his body language made that very clear. “You? As if. Half the city thinks you're a villain with a grudge against the Ravens, temporarily on ‘our side,’ the other half hasn't even heard of you before yesterday.”

“Oh, so this is about fucking merchandising? OK. “I don't really care. And just so you know, I would totally buy an Icarus action figure. I'd buy the Icarus posters, the Icarus T-shirts, collectible Icarus lunchbox, hell I'd even buy the Icarus comic books.” Boy that doesn't sound egotistical at all.

“Look, thanks for the...suggestions, Ben. But I'm not going to drop everything I've made just because some busybodies think I'm too, what, monochromatic, to be a hero? Yeah, I could dress myself up in sequins and sparkles and wear a princess tiara to battle, but I'm not about to do that for ratings, and I'm really not about to do that for you.”

Ben, esteemed ‘image consultant’, bristled at my suggestion of sequins and sparkles and tiaras. “Okay, but meet me halfway here. Seriously, a skull mask? Licensing issues aside--oh yes you bet I know it's an anime ripoff--name a hero that has a skull mask? Because I can name at least ten supervillains right now.”

I took a breath. “Okay, you're right, Ben. I'll see about a new mask. It's Tinkertech, so I'll have to consult the person who made it. Hey, Icarus. Yes me? Hey I love your ERIS mask, but you wouldn't happen to have one that's not a skull? Sure thing me, let me check in the back. Sorry, looks like we're all out of stock.” I made an apologetic shrug at Ben. “Sorry, I gave it my best shot.”

“Icarus, look, I'm not trying to get on your case--”

“Oh, you aren't? Because I've had a really busy weekend, I haven't had a proper rest since last Thursday, and you've come up to me and complained about my voice, my walking, my costume, and
my mask. I think we're done.” I spun around and walked away before he had a chance to respond. I made it all the way to the elevator without hearing Ben's footsteps. But I didn't feel safe until I was back in the Wards HQ.

The team was there, and they glanced up as I closed the door behind me. “What took so long?” Naomi asked as I collapsed upon a couch.

“Ugh. Some dude bugging me on my way back. Sorry.”

She grinned at me. “Let me guess. ‘Your mask looks evil and how do you fight in heels?’” Damn, she can do a pretty good imitation of him.

“Not the second bit, surprisingly. But the first, yeah, and a whole lot more. I believe he used the phrase ‘edgy teenager's wank fantasy’.”

Red Light glanced over at me. He had his costume on, except for the mask. He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I could see that.”

Oh God no.

Naomi suppressed a giggle, Eimyrja appeared to not even be paying attention, and Flashstep pointedly looked at anything but me. It then struck me that none of them were wearing their masks. Except for Naomi, it was the first time seeing any of their faces, given after the Imperium gang fight we didn't really have time for a full meet and greet.

“So. Given that you stuck around for the ceremony, I see we didn't scare you away,” Naomi said.

“I can't exactly back out now,” I replied, taking a deep breath and pulling my mask off. “I guess I never really said hi to everyone, after the fight.”

“Oh! That's right. Well, you already know me, so I'll let the others introduce themselves.”

“I'm Eimyrja,” Eimyrja said, rolling her eyes, “Lindsay, when not on the job.”

“I'm Red Light, like the game Red Light Green Light. You can call me Thomas,” said the lanky dark-skinned boy with a wink.

“Uh. Hi. I'm Flashstep, or, uh, Jordan. Umm, I meant to ask, is your mask from Fatality Crusade, by the way?” said the boy with the messy blonde hair and glasses. I simply nodded in response. I never got the chance to look at him closely before. His costume was an armored green bodysuit with multiple pouches at the side and back. A black bandanna which normally would be tied around the lower half of his face laid against his collarbone area.

“Okay, well, I'm Brenna I guess,” I replied nervously. I'd never been good at meeting people, and here I was meeting people who knew about my cape identity as well.

“You did some good work yesterday, by the way. We've been sorely lacking in mobile offense since they've been sending all the movers to the smaller areas. You're reckless, though, if you look at your injuries...”

I considered replying that I wasn't hurt that badly, but that probably wouldn't fly. “I guess. But I'm not going to get better, to get where I need to be, if I don't push myself.”

“Just don't forget that you're part of a team now. You don't have to do things solo anymore. Any one of us can back you up, as I'm sure you'll back us up in return. Between your teamwork with
Flashstep and your support of the Kaboom situation yesterday, I believe you'll fit in here.”

I blushed. “I'll admit, it's kinda nice knowing a team has my back. I guess I've just been used to going it alone.”

The door opened before anyone else could speak up, revealing a man wearing a navy blue jumpsuit with vertical white stripes. His chest had a stylized image of a vault door. He wore a mask the same color as the rest of his costume, and it only covered the upper portion of his face, leaving his chin bare. As ignorant as I had been of the heroes in Denver, I couldn't mistake Bunker, team leader of the Denver Protectorate. While focused on him, I could barely hear a sigh coming from someone else.

“Good day,” Bunker said, nodding, looking straight at me. “You must be Icarus. I've heard things about you. Some of it impressive, and some of it worrying. Your presence here has alleviated some of these worries, of course. It's nice to meet you.”

He crossed the room and extended his hand, which I shook after I stood up. He then glanced at Naomi, who I noticed had a surprisingly heated glare.

“Oh, um. Nice to meet you too,” I replied, wondering what Naomi was bothered about. “Dare I ask what these ‘worries’ were?” I said with a nervous laugh.

“It was nothing major. Just, between your dark costume taste and previous avoidance of us, we weren't sure if you were a hero or a villain. Obviously, that's all answered,” he replied.

“Oh, sorry about that,” I said, hoping he wouldn't catch the bitterness in my voice. “I guess I was more worried about the Ravens than my image.”

I wasn't expecting the concerned look on his face. “Yes, I can understand that. It's easy to forget, being in the public eye as long as I have, that such things would be the least of anyone's concern. As it is, though, you have done a fine job attacking their havens without support. I've met a few people who regarded you as a hero without question.”

I paused. “Um, I don't think Naomi has been anything but competent, and it's kinda rude to just walk in here and say that, no offense.”

“John,” Naomi spoke up before Bunker could respond. She seemed calm, but there was an undercurrent of frustration. “I'd appreciate if you left our private space. If you want to bring a Ward on one of your missions, you need to go through proper channels.”

Bunker looked like he wanted to say something, but instead, he turned around and headed through the door.

I turned towards the others, who were in various stages of irritation or anger. Even Lindsey was clenching her fists. Naomi, however, was a mix of being on the verge of tears and looking like she
wanted to hit something. Finally, she stood up, picked up a pillow, and threw it at the door with a yell.

“Asshole,” Thomas commented. “Stinking, putrid, slimy, dripping, monstrous asshole. Asshole spawning more putrid, slimy assholes.”

Naomi's expression cracked a bit, looking a bit more confused.

“That was a gross image,” she said.

Thomas shrugged, saying, “Better grossed out than angry.”

As unorthodox as the technique was, Naomi did calm down. She looked more tired than anything, sitting there.

I sat back down, picking up my mask and fiddling with it, “Well, that was weird,” I said, awkwardly glancing at Naomi, who awkwardly glanced at me in turn.”Is that normal?”

Lindsey, Jordan, and Thomas just kinda awkwardly glanced at each other. Awkward glances all over. Great.

Naomi sighed. “Pretty much, yeah. It used to be worse, before the Youth Guard warned him about his discriminating remarks.”

I sighed. “Are the rest of the Protectorate that bad? Between that PR asshole earlier and this, I'm starting to have second thoughts.”

“Thankfully not,” Naomi answered. “Cupid is probably the best of them to the point of getting in trouble with Bunker. Nothing overt happens, but Bunker does little things here and there to make her service as miserable as he can make it because of her disagreement with him. Jade stays out of it completely, and Umbra is, uh, Umbra. Chozo is weirdly loyal to Bunker, but he's never been an asshole to anyone.”

“I see. So, what, did you step on his puppy or something?”

There was an awkward pause. Naomi opened her mouth a couple times as if to speak, but didn't. Finally, she said, “No. He blames me for something far worse. I don't really want to talk about it.”

“Okay, sorry. If there's anything I can do to help?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I try not to antagonize him, and I ask everyone to avoid it as well. It isn't worth the trouble. This is also why the Wards and the Protectorate have so rarely worked together for the past three years, if you've been wondering.”

“Sounds good,” I said, not sure what else to say.

“So!” Thomas spoke up. I almost forgot the others were there, given they did nothing but sit there awkwardly through the whole exchange. “I think we should change the subject. We don't get to meet together without something going on. How's a movie sound?”

I couldn't say that I even knew what the name of the movie was. It was over before I even realized,
the others, besides Naomi, already making their ways out. I looked at the time, but it wasn't super late, so maybe I could finally get in some lab time before heading back to my apartment. I waited until the other three were out.

“Brenna,” Naomi spoke up as I stood up to leave. “Umm, do you mind waiting for a bit? I want to tell you something.”

“Oh, sure,” I replied, sitting back down.

“I know I said I didn't want to talk about it earlier, but it's probably going to come back at some point,” she said running a hand through her hair. She looked even more exhausted than earlier. “I don't want you to be surprised.”

“You don't have to tell me anything if you aren't comfortable,” I replied.

Naomi shook her head. “It's better if you hear it from me. I can't trust Bunker not to blab something stupid, no matter how many warnings he's gotten. Brenna, I'm transgender.”

“Oh.” I paused.

“Huh. So...why the hell is Tank Buster still a dude?”

“I didn't realize until after I already joined the Wards. My Aunt didn't want me risking my identity, so I've been keeping it secret from the public for now. I plan on coming out when I join the Protectorate, though, as well as changing my cape name. I have no idea what I was thinking when I chose ‘Tank Buster’.”

I laughed nervously, “Hey, at least you got to choose your uncomfortably-masculine cape name. Anyway, so Bunker is all up in arms about you not being a guy anymore?”

Naomi shook her head. “He fixates on it, but it goes deeper than that.” Her expression darkened, and she looked away. “I...let's just leave it at that for now, please.”

“That's fucked-up, Naomi. Just say the word and I'll break his kneecaps,” I said, mostly-joking. “Seriously, like, half my old friends from when I did cosplay were trans. Or, well, something. I didn't really ask.”

She sighed. “This goes deep, Brenna. Don't antagonize Bunker. I'm glad you're taking it well, though. Some people, they took some time to get used to the idea.”

“I mean...tomorrow a world-ending monstrosity could descend upon the city and kill us all. In the big picture, nobody should care what you have going on down there.”

“That's the Endbringers,” she said simply, closing her eyes. “Some day I'll have a suit built just for them.”

That caused my Tinker power to veer off course, going, pleasantly enough, into turning my left arm into a giant cannon. Which was certainly better than where it had been going earlier in the conversation. Why did it have to be bioaugmentation?

“I like your power armor,” I said, trying to take my mind off the subject. “I dunno if it's too heavy to fly with, but if you ever want some implants, maybe we could work out a trade.” Nervous laughter.

Naomi looked at me with something resembling bemusement. “I'm not so sure about receiving implants myself. No offense. I've been working on Torunn, anyway, which should be able to fly. Of course, I could maybe work on something for you. I've made some suits for others before.”

“Pfft, you know you want these guns,” I said, flexing my mechanical arm. “I wonder if I'll get roped
Naomi nodded. “Oh, definitely. Maintaining it is a fair amount of work, though. Tinker tech can't really be mass produced unless you're Dragon.”

I tried not to squee at the mention of Dragon. She was the best. The only cape memorabilia I'd ever bought was a collectible Dragon figure, she was just that awesome. Unfortunately, thinking about her caused my power to go off on a tangent into designing shoulder-mounted containment foam launchers. I guess my power had decided it was going to be annoying now.

“Hey,” I said. “My fucking Tinker power's going off the hook right now. I might go exercise until I'm too tired to think. I remember seeing a gym?”

“Oh, yeah! I was just going to suggest something similar,” Naomi replied. “I need to work out before it gets too late. Mind if I join you?”

“Oh, if you want, sure.”

The only clothes I had brought with me to the PRT HQ were my costume and my school uniform. Thankfully, the PRT kept spare exercise clothes it seemed, and after some impromptu modifications for my wings I was finally able to put my mind on something other than Tinker shit.

Most of my ‘exercise’ had been in the early hours of the morning when nobody else was around, in the run-down fitness center at my apartment. I couldn't help but wonder if, with the top-of-the-line equipment the PRT's gym had, it would have still taken the year and a half it took me to get past being a nerdy stick girl.

We worked separately for a while, although I couldn't help but be jealous of Naomi. I guess she'd been doing this for a lot longer, but still. I'd kill to have abs like her's.

“Hey, Brenna,” Naomi said as I was punching one of the bags repeatedly with my left hand. “Have you been professionally trained to fight, by the way?”

“For about five or six months, before I got my wings.” I replied. After that I figured there was no way I'd be able to take lessons without anyone noticing.

Naomi nodded. “Do you feel up to a spar? It'd be nice to see where you're at, and if I need to recommend you to anyone. We might have our tech, but more than anyone else besides maybe Thinkers and some Masters, it's really important for us to have good CQC skills.”

“CQC?” I asked.

“Oh, close quarters combat, sorry.”

“Oh, I see. Yeah, I'm fine with sparring if you are.”

“Yes! Come on,” she said, already walking over to a nearby mat. “Those wings of yours must have taken some getting used to in terms of your fighting style. How much do they weigh, anyway?”

“I got used to it pretty quick. Everything's around fifty pounds now, I think? It'd hard to tell with the stuff I can't take off. Not that I really take them off much anymore, it throws me off balance now.
Plus the phantom pains and all that.”

“Is that just your arm, or do you get pains from taking off your wings?”

“Both, yeah. That's why I keep them on even for school. I guess it makes sense, they're directly wired into my nervous system and they feel just as real as my other arm, or my legs, or anything else.”

“Wow, I couldn't imagine. I feel almost mundane with my tinker niche.”

“Yeah, but you're, like, immune to heat. That's so neat,” I replied jealously. “Don't even ask how much fun it was testing my jets without being heatproof.”

“Oh jeez, yeah. It's really weird. I kept freaking out my aunt when I stopped using oven mitts to take things out of the oven. I have to remind myself that it isn't normal so I just don't out my cape identity accidentally.”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah. That makes sense.” I tried not to think about the number of close calls I'd had with my wings on top of everything else.

“Anyway, we got distracted. Umm, I guess I'll just start with throwing a punch. I want to see how you block.”

I used to think I was pretty good at fighting, but the next half hour or so taught me otherwise. I held my own, of course, but Naomi was merciless, and she quickly adapted to my unusual form. I couldn't imagine how she managed to learn all of this on top of school and being the Ward leader with apparently minimal support. But then, I remembered hearing about Tank Buster a few years back, so she'd had plenty of time. I felt sore at the end, though I was happy to know that Naomi at least sweated a little from our spar.

“We should probably call it good,” she said, finally, as I slowly stood back up.

“Sure. Call it a draw?” I said jokingly.

Naomi laughed, then quickly pressed a hand against her mouth, clearly embarrassed. “Sorry. Umm, you're not bad, actually. You're just a little rough in some areas. I think you could benefit from training with Chozo. He's been fighting longer than most capes, and he regularly helps to train PRT officers on fighting capes. I did some of my training under him, and so did the others.”

“Okay, yeah,” I replied, grabbing a towel to get rid of the worst of my sweat, and trying to remember who Chozo was. One of the Protectorate, I knew, but which one? “I'll have to say hi, or whatever. See what he thinks.”

“Yeah. He'll definitely help you. He'll be gruff and be completely merciless, but you'll learn a lot.”

Sounds...fun. “Cool. I'll take all the help I can get at this point.”

“Good! Well, I think I'm done for tonight. I need to finish up some homework. I'm gonna head back to our floor since, uh, the showers here don't have privacy curtains. No offense, but—”

“That's fine,” I said, awkwardly. I couldn't help but picture that with a blush. I retreated to the locker room before she could respond.
“How about a story?” Allison asked, her words slightly slurred from the alcohol.

“Yeah!” Tom shouted loudly. “C’mon Harry, tell us a storyyy!”

I shrugged as I gazed blankly into the campfire. I'd moved out west for school a couple years ago, and when my older brother had suggested coming out for a camping trip, I'd eagerly agreed. I knew with Tom's job he didn't get many chances for a vacation, and it's not like there were any decent things to do back home in Brockton. It was going to be great, just the two of them, catching up.

Except Tom had decided to show up with his bimbo girlfriend.

“I–I dunno, not much goes on out here,” I replied hesitantly.

“Nah, man, fuck that, come on, ” Tom pleaded.

“Toooooooooooooom, your brother is boring, ” Allison said.

I rolled my eyes, thinking. Yeah, this could actually be fun. “Okay, fine...Either of you heard of Treant before?”

Tom and Allison shook their heads slowly.

“I thought not,” I said with a smirk. “Treant is...well, nobody's sure if it's a man or a creature. See, back home there's too many people for things like him to exist. Treant lives in the mountains. We're actually in the middle of his ‘territory’, so to speak.”

“So what, he's, like, Bigfoot?” Allison asked.

“BIGFOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOT!” Tom shouted into the forest around their campsite.

“Kind of, yeah. I'd never heard of him either, before moving out here. I don't think even the locals believe it, really.” I paused and took a sip of hot chocolate out of my thermos. I for one was planning on smugly flaunting my lack of a hangover in the morning.

“Nobody who's seen Treant has gotten a picture, or at least, nobody who survived. They first saw him back in the '80s, early '90s. People started telling the rangers, the cops, anyone who would listen, about a creature made of skulls and twigs, stalking them through the forest. They all thought it was a hoax, at least until people started going missing, that is.

“It was...'91, I think? The state had just sold off a block of land to some lumber company, and they were clearcutting. One morning, a bunch of loggers came down out of the mountains, every single one wide-eyed with fear and covered in blood. They said a creature attacked them, a...thing, that could form weapons out of the nature around it. The creature had pounced on them, and tore apart five of them before they even knew it was there. Cops drove up, thinking the same thing everyone else had thought, that it was just some hoax, but the logger's camp looks like a slaughterhouse. Blood all over, detached arms and guts all over, but no sign of a weapon or even footsteps from the attacker.

“Now this was before the Endbringers and all the other fucked-up shit we have nowadays. Cops think it's the work of a serial killer villain, so they call up one of the local heroes. There wasn't a Protectorate back then, not out here yet anyway. This cape's some kind of thinker, can't remember
what, but gets the impression that whatever did the slaughter did so because it was attacked. Makes no sense. Police and the capes do what they can to track the killer down, but eventually they give up. The mountains are too big, and they have no leads.

“Meanwhile, hikers and hunters are still going missing in the mountains, even rumors of a cape or two disappearing. Search and Rescue is working around the clock to find people. Sometimes they find corpses, but it’s weird. The bodies they find look like they’ve been out there for months, even if the guy was only missing for a week. They said it was like nature was trying to get rid of the evidence. There’s also more and more reports of this creature, just watching them from the trees. A whole urban legend is built up around this thing. They call it Treant.

“One day some hippy commune out in the woods, they’re living in a tree having free love and getting high, when Treant just walks into their camp. He’s got a big elk skull for a face, no eyes, but he’s staring them down. This goes on for several minutes, just staring at these hippies, before he wanders off.”

“I want some of what they’re having,” Allison interrupts, giggling.

I ignored her interruption, “Anyway, this starts happening too, some people go missing, some people get stared down. They start to notice a trend, though. The people going missing are just pigs, throwing trash on the side of trails, poaching, that sort of thing. So the joke is that Treant is some sort of disgruntled tree spirit or something, pissed off at people ruining his forest–”

“Pffft. Laaaaaaaame.” Allison interrupted again. “Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, sorry bro, but this sounds like some bad fable. Nice try with the scary story though,” Tom replied. He drained a beer bottle and threw it at a tree, cackling as it broke apart. “Oh no! The tree man’s gonna get me!”

“Dude! Somebody’s gonna get cut on that shit. Stop it.”

“Whatever. I’m gonna go to bed.” Tom staggered over to his tent, dragging Allison with him. I rolled my eyes. Yeah, I guess it is a little lame. Probably just something they make up to stop tourists from trashing everything. I sighed, and grabbed a flashlight and walked over to the tree, picking up the larger pieces of broken glass and tossing them in the campfire. I, for one, don’t need the legend of Treant not to be a dickhead.

It took a few minutes, but I got all the glass cleaned up, before pulling myself into my sleeping bag by the campfire. I’d always preferred sleeping under the stars. I stared up at the glimmering stars for a bit, trying to ignore the sounds of drunken rustling coming from the tent. As I fell asleep I couldn’t help but shake the feeling I was being watched.

“Real fuckin' funny, asshole,” my brother said the next morning as he staggered back to the campsite.

“What’s funny?” I asked as I continued packing the camping shit into the trunk of my car. Some trip this was.

“Oh, whatever. Look, I appreciate you trying, but your scary story was lame. Were you up all night making that?”
“Making...what? What the hell are you talking about, Tom?”

“Okay dude, your scarecrow doesn't make your story any less lame. It's morning, there's a nice breeze, why don't we go down to that lake we saw and fish, or something?”

“Tom. I didn't make any scarecrow.”

“Fine, Harry, I'll fucking play along. I was pissing over there,” he pointed off in the woods, “And saw your little Tree Man you made. Really funny, har dee har.”

I couldn't help but feel my pulse quicken. “Tom, I'm being serious.”

I grabbed the shovel I'd brought out of the car—better than nothing—and glanced over in the direction my brother had pointed. Nothing. I wandered into the trees, looking around, Tom following.

“Huh...it was just here,” Tom replied behind me.

Nothing, dammit Tom.

“Oh, I get it,” I said after a pause, turning to face my brother, “Cute, trying to freak me out with my own story.” Suddenly Tom's eyes went wide, and he stared at a spot just behind me. “Yeah, knock it off. You got me.”

“Harry, w-walk towards me, right now;” Tom stammered.

“God, okay, I get it, you didn't like the story. It was just something my roommate told me, okay?” I said. “Come on, let's just fucking go, I'm tired of dealing wit—”

I cut myself off. I could hear the rustling of branches behind me. There hadn't been any trees behind me. There was a noise like falling timber.

Before I had a chance to react, I was thrown to one side. I landed hard, my head glancing off a rock. Everything was going black.

What the fuck happened?

I groaned, and leaned forward, looking around me. My head hurt like a motherfucker, and I was lying in a pile of needles, still in the forest. The shovel I had put in the car was next to me, the handle mostly broken in half.

I could barely remember why I was out here. The last thing I remembered was packing the camping stuff up in the car, and my brother bitching about...something. But that didn't explain the dried blood on my scalp, or the broken shovel.


The campsite was in tatters. My roommate's tent, that I'd borrowed for my brother, was in shreds. The ground around it was wet, like someone had spilled. Spilled a lot. But that wasn't what caused
me to freeze in place.

A figure, probably eight or nine feet tall, made of tree branches, twigs, and moss. It turned to face me, slowly, creaking and groaning as it turned. It had no face, just an animal's antlered skull, empty black eyesockets staring at me. Vines around its waist encircled more skulls. I swallowed as I noticed some were human, chipped and worn with age.

Treant.

I glanced back at the tent.

“W-where are Tom and Allison?” I asked Treant.

It tilted its skull-head, as if curious that I had spoken. It didn't reply, but I got the mental impression of a shrug. After a second, it tilted its head towards the tent, then back to staring at me.

I took a deep breath, and sidestepped around the edge of the clearing, keeping the...thing in the center of my vision. I stopped when I had a view into the tent. It was Allison–correction–it was Allison's head. Oh God. I closed my eyes a moment later as I saw my brother's bloodied shirt. It fucking killed my brother.

It was a stupid, instinctive maneuver, I knew, as I felt myself brandish the half-broken shovel and rush towards the monster.

It raised its arm, and batted the shovel away easily, before I even got close. Then raised its other arm, vines reaching out to me, grabbing me by the wrists and swinging me into the side of a tree, my feet a yard off the ground.

I screamed as the vines constricted, razor-sharp and slicing into my wrists, hot blood pouring down my arms.

I struggled against the vines in vain as Treant walked towards me in the same slow, methodical fashion it had used when it first saw me. Even if it was nine feet tall, I was suspended from the vines high enough that we were eye-to-eye as it got closer.

It stopped when it was a foot away, ignoring my feeble kicks towards its torso, and leaned its skull-head towards me. Behind the empty eye sockets was a deep, unsettling cold blackness, nothing more. I glared at it through tear-stained eyes as it gazed silently at me. “ Why? What the fuck did they do to you?” I snarled.

It didn't move, but I got the same mental impression from before, this time it suggested a mission, a task it had taken upon itself. It stared at me for a long time, until I was feeling lightheaded from blood loss, blinking away the tears as I glared.

Eventually, Treant stepped back. The vines let go, and I crumpled to a heap at the base of the tree. I looked back up at it, only to see it ambling away into the forest. Within seconds, it blended into the trees. I could only make out the slightest of movements, and then, I couldn't make it out at all.

I glanced down at my wrists, and to my surprise where blood should have been pouring out, there were thick rings of lichen wrapping around my wrists. For some reason it struck me as some sort of natural bandage, keeping the rest of my blood from pouring out. It didn't want me dead, at least. Not like...

I cowered there, at the base of the tree, crying until I could cry no more.
I pulled myself together, worked up the courage to look at the two corpses in the ruined tent. The fabric was damp with mold. The bodies half buried in dead leaves. Mushrooms and mold on every inch of bare skin. They were returning to nature.
Blink

The school day felt like it was twice as slow as it normally was. Between missing out on all too much sleep between work and criminal stuff, I was struggling to keep my head up. And Mr. Jefferson's lecture on the history of photography certainly wasn't helping either.

I spent the last fifteen minutes of class in a daze, staring blankly at the clock. I knew I needed to get decent grades, but sometimes it was hard to focus with everything else going on. Finally, it was 3:15, and the bell rang. I hurriedly gathered up my stuff and escaped out the door, making my way straight outside to the student parking.

I drove away from the school, taking the route home that avoided the worst of the traffic, mostly through some side-roads and residential areas. My parents' house--no, my house--wasn't large by any means. It was nestled in an area on the west side of the city, slightly north of 6th Avenue. Still, it was large enough when there were four people living in it, and now far too large for just me. I couldn't say why I didn't give it up, given mom and papá only bought it six years ago. It could hardly hold much nostalgia.

The house had remained largely the same for the past three months. I only really used it for eating, sleeping, and storage at this point. Even Charlie, our golden retriever, I gave to Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez from church. I couldn't hope to attempt to care for him on top of everything. I could barely sleep between school, work, trying to stay fit, and criminal activities.

I teleported up to my room to save time and quickly threw off my school clothes in favor of something better fit for running. I was ashamed to admit even to myself how many days of my routine I'd missed, but I sure as heck wouldn't miss this one. After double checking I had my keyring and emergency cash, I teleported back down and headed out.

My routine first involved about a two mile run to the gym as a warm up. It wasn't exactly a normal time for that, but my schedule had me all over the place, so I had to make due. I kept my eyes and ears alert. I lived in a safe enough neighborhood, so I probably could've listened to music if I wanted, but my time living in the shitty eastern half of Denver as a small child ensured I could never do that comfortably.

The gym resembled any other that might be found dotted throughout the city. After doing a few stretches, I walked through the doors to see the smiling form of the lady who usually worked the desk. I could never remember her name, and she'd almost always forgotten her name tag.

“Heya Isabelle! Didn't see you Tuesday. You doing okay?” she said in her oddly booming voice.

“Hi, yeah, I'm okay. Just busy,” I said as I handed over my membership card.

“Just so you know, the punching bags aren't gonna be available today. A couple of ‘dudebros’ managed to break the chain off of both of them. We're still waiting for replacements.”

“How the–” I shook my head. “Never mind. I'm not sure I want to know. Thanks.”

Only now did I feel semi-comfortable in pulling out some earbuds. I knew if anyone tried anything, the employees would quickly step in, not to mention I was surrounded by gym equipment and I very much knew how to kick the asses of anyone who tried to mess with me.
Exercise felt oddly peaceful to me. As I used the various machines, working primarily on cardio but also on some arm strength, I almost relaxed. I felt somewhat disappointed when I finished my routine. I wiped off the sweat and put the earbuds away.

“Bye Isabelle!” the lady boomed at me as I left. I waved back in politeness, then broke into a jog the moment I was out the door. I could've showered before, but given I had to run back home anyway, I always opted for showering there. It wasn't long before my house came into view and I sprinted for the last stretch.

I entered my house and immediatelyteleported upstairs for a quick shower. I wasted no time in relaxing in the admittedly-nice hot water, and I managed to be out in five minutes. Once my hair was wrapped up, I flew into my parents bedroom and unlocked their big, old-looking chest. As far as I knew, they had it before I was even born. I had been a little disappointed when I found the key and found that they only kept some old suits and dresses in there.

Now, however, it served to keep my armor, gear, and cape phone. It might not be the best spot, but if someone knew enough to trace me back to this house, I had bigger problems.

The first thing I noticed was the indicator light blinking on the phone, and a new text message:

New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-1026): i dont no y the fuk u want sum cunt but here u go: 72nd & buckley. i here starveing artist cud be there to. thats bonus info. thx for $$

My heart raced. I did not expect the man I was referred to by Amanda to know anything, let alone to give me an address. A part of me thought it might be a trap, but it didn't matter. If there was a chance, I had to take it. A Raven cape actually being present complicated things, though. I paused, considering how I could go about this. I might be able to just take her and whatever goons she had by myself, but with the risk...

no. I shook my head.

I had an option. I didn't like it, given that they might even refuse to work with me, but I had to bet on her hating the Ravens more than distrusting me.

I opened the browser tab on the phone for the Parahumans Online Message Boards. The last few messages between her and myself appeared.

Private Message from xX-kaminarifan-Xx:

throwaway41236
I have another verified tip for you. It won't last long.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
cool. i'll head over tonight

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
ur info was good. i guess these girls had just been kidnapped. they were lucky.

Icarus had been the only one to actually use my tips. I eventually ended up becoming her source for some of her vigilante operations, even though she didn't know who I was. That would have to change tonight, though. Even so, I hesitated.
throwaway41236
Uh, hey. This is as much of a tip as it is a request. I need your help, and I'm going to be there for this one.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
i get to find out who u really are? sure. just give me location and time.

throwaway41236
You probably won't like the answer. And please, do not involve the other wards in this. I'm nervous enough about going with you, but I don't know if I can do this alone. It's at 72nd and Buckley. I'll meet you there.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
got it. i'll be there

I placed the phone back into the bag and retrieved my bodysuit and mask. A tiny part of me had considered making some decorative customizations at some point, but I always shook that away. I took no pride in my costume. I decided to get homework out of the way while I waited, until it was finally time to don my costume.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I certainly looked shady enough, even with my hair being free. The Kevlar on my chest was a recent addition after a close call with a knife. Even if I could move all over the place, I couldn't see everything coming towards me. My pants weren't heavily armored, but they were made of a strong leather. My heavy boots gave an inch to my height. The gear I carried in my tool belt grew over time as well. I carried two tasers, an extendable baton, a knife, basic first aid supplies, a smoke bomb, a flashbang, and emergency cash. My mask changed twice before I settled on its current form, which covered the top portion of my face.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know how Imperium managed to acquire military-grade equipment.

Given how dark it was outside already, I felt safe enough about teleporting onto the roof above. I took off immediately into the night sky.

The wind pulled at my hair as I observed from the roof of a shitty apartment complex in the nastier part of Arsenal. I ended up teleporting rapidly in place to reset my momentum so that my hair would stop getting in my face. I hated waiting and having to be patient. I wanted to storm in, but Jenna meant too much for me to be so reckless.

I observed the decrepit bar. The building was three stories, with the bottom one serving as some kind of seedy bar. The blinds were pulled across the windows, so I couldn't see inside at all. Four cars lined the side of the road nearby. Nothing had changed in the half hour or so that I waited.

Soft footsteps clicked behind me, and I turned to see Icarus standing before me. Her body language was tense, like she suspected she was walking into an ambush.

“You're late,” I said simply.
“Circled for a bit when I saw it was you, scoping it out. Still not convinced this isn't a trap,” the Ward said cautiously.

“If it was, would I be here alone? You wouldn't have landed if you thought I had company.”

“I guess,” Icarus replied hesitantly, then continued, “I suspected my source might have been a cape, but I wasn't expecting you, Blink.”

“Are you still in?”

“I wouldn't have landed if I wasn't. But don't think I'm letting my guard down around you.”

I shrugged. “I wouldn't expect you to, but enough of that.” I turned towards the bar. “Someone I know might be in there, in those fuckers' hands. My source claimed that Starving Artist could be there too. We need to neutralize everyone quickly and see to whoever they've got.”

“Starving Artist is here?” Icarus said, her demeanor changing noticeably. “Good. That bitch and I have unfinished business.”

“Whatever it is, settle it when we're done. I'm putting a lot of trust in you.”

I could see her roll her eyes behind her mask. “I'm not letting it get in the way. Not if there's innocents in there.”

I nodded. “Let's get to the roof. Quietly. Don't wanna spook them just yet.”

I flew over to the roof of the bar, Icarus gliding behind me. I was pleased to note that Icarus hardly made a sound as she landed. I walked around the roof to try to scan as much as I could with my secondary power.

“There's four people immediately below us, all standing. I think I feel the shape of beakers and buckets, which fit with Starving Artist being here. They aren't really moving much,” I whispered.

“I have thermal vision,” Icarus whispered back. “Besides the four on the third floor, there's two on the second floor, and five on the first floor. I think the two are lying down on the second floor, while four on the first floor are sitting at a table?”

“Right. Tinker gear. Anyway, my guess is Starving Artist will be on the third or first floor. Want to disable them on the third floor while I take the first? I don't want to give them a chance to do anything to the captives.”

“Sure,” Icarus responded as she began moving into position.

I flew over to a corner of the building on the ground floor and waited for Icarus's inevitably loud entrance. As soon as I heard the crash of breaking glass, I teleported into the room with my two tasers ready and took out two of the thugs before the others could react.

“Ah shit! Cape!” one of them shouted. “Fuck her up! She's alone!”

I pocketed a taser and brought out my baton as they drew their weapons of choice. The two in a booth on the other side of the room brought out a knife and a bat while the bartender withdrew a gun. Before he could aim it my way, I teleported behind him and swung my baton at his head. While he was reeling from the blow, I tasered him. The other two were already swinging at me as I finished, but I managed to teleport away before I got struck.
“She keeps fucking moving!” one of them shouted as I swung my baton at him. He blocked with his bat and the other tried to jump at me, but I had already teleported again. I struck him in the area of his right leg behind the knee cap, and he collapsed. I used my taser to disable the other thug before his friend could get up, and when that was done I tasered the other.

They were all simple thugs. Starving Artist must have been above. I teleported up to the second floor as Icarus flew down the stairs.

“Did you get her?” I asked.

“You didn't?” she responded.

Shit.

Icarus kicked down one of the doors, revealing its occupant lying on the bed. As I flew in and got a closer look, it felt like my heart skipped a beat. Three years, and Jenna didn't look very different from the best friend I ever had. Her long brown hair hanged slightly off the bed. Her deep brown eyes stared at the ceiling. Her face—I wish I could say it was as lovely as it was, but it was...marked. Even from my position, I could see the bruises and cuts. My feet hit the floor, and I ran over to her side.

“Jenna. Oh god, Jenna. Talk to me,” I whispered.

She didn't respond. While her eyes were pointed in my direction, it was as if she were looking past me at the wall. I pulled my mask off and threw it to the side.

“Jenna, it's me, Isabelle. I'm here. I've got you. Please, say something.”

She did not respond. She didn't even blink, and with horror I realized that I couldn't see any movement. I shakily grasped the right side of her face, and I found it to be warm. I slid down towards her neck to feel her pulse, but I felt nothing. I closed my eyes for a moment and reopened them, as if that would somehow show this wasn't reality. I touched my own face, and I found that I couldn't even cry. Did I even feel sad? Was I just empty now?

“I'm sorry,” I whispered. “I should have gotten here sooner. I'm sorry.”

I kissed her forehead and closed her eyelids. If nothing else, I had closure, even if I was too much of a failure to save her. I sensed movement behind me, and I realized that Icarus stood behind me. I did not want to think about how much she witnessed.

“Where is Starving Artist?” I asked, standing up without turning around.

“She was never here, at least not anytime recently...she wouldn't let one of her ‘canvasses’ die under her watch—we've got motion.” Icarus cut herself off and leapt out of the room. I heard the sound of a door being kicked open. “Blink, I need you in here!” she shouted from the room next door.

I teleported in to find Icarus standing in a room identical to the other. A girl who couldn't have been older than 15 was on the bed, thrashing about, froth coming from her mouth. “She's overdosing on whatever these fuckers had her juiced up on,” she said. “Hold her still and try not to get any saliva on you.”

I did so, looking at Icarus as she rifled through the pockets of her costume dress, muttering under her breath. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to keep her alive until help arrives. Just need to find...here we are. Hold her arm steady,” Icarus answered tersely as she pulled some clear tubing out of her dress. Two lengths, each with a
Icarus's own arm, the prosthetic, detached from her with a metal thunk, leaving a metal plate on her forearm with electrical connections and small valves hanging out, a pair which she pressed the tubes onto.

“A transfusion?” I asked as blood began to flow up one of the tubes. Several seconds later it flowed back out of the other tube and into the overdosing girl's arm.

“Not quite. More like...extreme dialysis. I'll spare you--fuck, I forgot how much filtering cape shit hurts,” She responded, wincing and clutching at her side with her remaining arm. “--spare you the details.”

“I see. You said ‘until help arrives’?”

“I called it in as soon as I noticed there was a survivor. PRT will be here in...four minutes, give or take. Should make yourself scarce, unless you want them to see you without a mask on.”

I touched my face, remembering that I had thrown off my mask only moments ago. *Fuck.*

“Fuck,” I said, finally. I sighed. “I guess my identity has been thrown out of the window. Would be just my luck that your tinker mask can take pictures.”

“Video too, actually,” Icarus replied, in an apologetic tone. She paused for a second, then shrugged and pulled her mask off, setting it next to her arm. “There. Now we're on the same level.”

“Brenna,” I said upon recognizing the girl. I thought I might have imagined things that day, our reactions to each other. I wasn't too surprised, in any case. Prosthetic arms weren't exactly common. “You didn't have to do that.”

“I didn't, no. But you would have figured out who I was anyway,” she said with a nervous laugh. “Just, do me a favor? Please don't make me regret it.”

“You won't,” I said, softly. “There's just one thing I want, now.”

She put her mask back on before replying, “Starving Artist? You're in a better position to get intel on her whereabouts than I am right now, but do me a favor and let me know if you find anything...you're not the only one who has a score to settle with her.”

I decided not to correct her on what I truly wanted. Perhaps I lied accidentally, given what just happened. Maybe it didn't set in, yet. I still felt empty. At the moment, dealing with Starving Artist was very low on the priority list, but I felt like I should care more. Maybe I would later.

“Only if you do the same,” I said simply, more to stop my rambling thoughts than anything.

“Sounds good. Sorry about your friend. I heard her name...Jenna?”

“Yes. Jenna Martinez.”

“Okay. I'll make sure she's taken care of properly.”

I touched Icarus's shoulder briefly, then I turned around, picked up my mask, and teleported away.

I was awake seconds before my alarm clock even went off. I stood up and walked over to the alarm
clock reading four o'clock to shut it off.

Jenna was dead. It wasn't hard to believe. I suspected that I might never find her when I began looking. I lost my best friend...and crush...three years ago. I could still remember our silly conversations and antics, how we got into trouble several times at church. I didn't really remember the Sunday when her parents came in and she didn't. Things were a blur for quite a while. I could remember talking to her brother, later. I remembered how he walked away for the last time to find her, never to return.

I shook off my memories. I had to get ready for work. My Sunday and Saturday mornings and early afternoons went to a little coffee shop off of West Colfax next to Casa Bonita. It was the only way I could stay in my parents' house and avoid getting sent to an orphanage or a foster home, if I didn't just end up in the streets. I wasn't willing to use crime money to support my life. After my quick routine, I was out the door by four thirty.

Lakewood was fairly peaceful at such an hour. Given it was a safer area, it was almost easy for a moment to forget about my personal worries, and even the big worries like the Endbringers. Even if my mother's car was slower than I was, driving it at this time was the best part of the day. I was always somewhat disappointed when I pulled into the parking lot.

Work was an activity that just ate a few hours and spit off a few meager tax-deducted dollars and funded my life as Isabelle. It was all repetitive. Even the jokes about how our tiny selection of coffee shop food being better than what you got at Casa Bonita were repetitive. Internally I went through a mental map of on-goings in the criminal underworld, wondering when Imperium would have another job for Blink...for me.

When one-fifteen hit and I headed out of my workplace for the day, I put all of those thoughts away, as it was time for someone far more important. Instead I thought of what I would even say to her, and all too soon I pulled into the parking lot of the St. Anthony Hospital. I gave a polite wave to the receptionist and headed straight down a path I had walked several times now.

As I opened the door, I was greeted by the smiling form of my sister, Jessica. Most people were always surprised to learn that we were, in fact, biological siblings from the same two parents, given our differences in skin tone, hair color, and even eye color. She just happened to take after our white mother in appearance, while I took after our Mexican father. Right now, however, she looked paler than she ever had before. Tubes were stuck everywhere, and a blanket covered her useless legs.

"Hey, sis," she greeted, weakly. Somehow it sounded weaker than her last greeting.

"Hey, Jess," I replied, putting on a smile that I knew she saw through.

"How have you been? It feels like you haven't been here in about a month."

"Oh, it's, uh, it's been a month, actually. I've been busy," I said, a little ashamed.

"Bleh. You shouldn't have to be so busy you can't see your own sister reasonably often. You're a teenager, for heaven's sake," she said, mildly frustrated, though certainly not at me. "Has school been going well? Work, too?"

"Yeah, and yeah. Just got off of my weekend job, and my other job is going pretty well, too. Grades are, uh, good enough."

Jessica sighed.

"Are you at least talking to people? Sorry, but you know I worry."
“Somewhat? Uh, a girl named Naomi started talking to me one day. We talk a little,” I said, so she wouldn't lecture me about making friends.

“A girl, huh?” Jess asked, grinning. “Is she cute?”

“What? God. Jess. I–wha–we just talk, that's all,” I replied, blushing, already wishing I'd taken the lecture. I was definitely not going to answer that question honestly. “Just because I'm gay doesn't mean you have to tease me about every girl I mention!”

Jess laughed briefly before making a pained noise.

“Are you okay, Jess? I'm sorry,” I said, concerned.

“Oh, I'm fine. It didn't hurt much, just surprised me was all.” she replied, smiling again. “And hey, if you weren't gay I'd just tease you about boys instead!”

I rolled my eyes, still blushing a little. I placed my hand on her shoulder almost without thinking.

“Hey,” she said softly. “I just had another surgery a couple days ago, thanks to the anonymous donor.”

I managed not to react to that. I'd been giving most of the money I'd earned from my criminal activities, once laundered of course, to the hospital. Many patients, not just my sister, had benefited, partially as a cautionary measure. Jess never talked about it, but her medical expenses were mind-blowing due to the nature of her injuries. I wasn't sure how they were so bad. I wasn't able to pay attention to the jargon that her doctor threw at me over three months ago.

“And its nice. Knowing someone has my back.” Jess continued, “But I don't know how long all this is going to keep me going. I have to know that you'll have some friends by your side when...”

“Don't talk like that,” I interrupted. “You're receiving some of the best medical care.”

“Right, I'm sorry,” Jess said, smiling sadly.

“Have you been up to anything?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Still just watching TV. Sometimes I talk with my nurse, Harold. Apparently, he is excellent at opera. He even showed me some videos. Oh, and hey, did you hear about the new Ward? I think her name was Icaruh or something.”

“Icarus, actually. I overhear a little bit too much about the Wards and who they might be at school,” I replied, a touch nervously.

“Ha, yeah, that sounds about right. So much gossip at Centralia, I remember. News says she fought against a new villain along with the Wards.”

“Uh huh. I don't really follow cape stuff. School and work keeps me pretty busy.”

Jess appeared thoughtful for a moment, looking me directly in my eyes. I got worried for a second, before she shook her head.

“Sorry, I kinda zoned out,” she said. “Is there anything on your mind, lately? Something you'd like to tell me?”

For a moment I mentally panicked, thinking she suspected something, but then I remembered there was something somewhat on my mind, so at least I wouldn't be lying directly, even if I was by
omission.

“I got a call from Jenna's parents. You know, from church?” I said quietly.

Jess's eyes widened as she replied, “Oh god, I would never forget. Did they find her?”

“Yeah. Her body.”

Jess winced as she moved her hand over to my shoulder. I wasn't sure I wanted to know how much that hurt for her to do.

“I'm sorry. I know how much she meant to you.”

I placed my hand over her own.

“Her parents and I... we have closure, if nothing else. I just wish...” I shook my head. “Why would the Protectorate let the Ravens be so active?”

“I wish I knew, sis. I don't really understand any of it. Capes, Endbringers...” she said, trailing off.

I sighed. “We don't really need to talk about this.”

We sat in silence for a minute, maybe more.

“Sorry, sis,” Jess said. “I think I'm about to fall asleep.”

“It's okay. I'll leave you alone,” I said as I lightly touched her shoulder. “Good night, sis.”

Her eyes were already closed as I stood up and walked towards the door. “I love you. I'm sorry,” I whispered, knowing she wouldn't hear.
Tank Buster

I was typing away on my laptop when I noticed movement in my peripheral. Brenna walked in, carrying a large black duffelbag.

“That looks awfully familiar,” I said, one eyebrow raised. That couldn't really be...

“Uh, yeah?” She set down the bag on the table and began pulling out large wads of cash. Yup. It is.

“Brenna,” I said, resisting the urge to facepalm. “You. Fucking. I don't even know where to start. You do realize you're a hero now, right?”

“Your point? What did you think I did with all that money?” she said, holding up a wad of cash.

“Whatever you did, it needs to stop. You need to turn that in.”

“Do you know how much it costs to get stuff implanted? I can't afford that on a Ward's pay,” she said as she continued to stack bills.

“You don't have to,” I said, resisting the urge to facepalm again. “You know how they cover all of our materials for Tinker stuff? I'm pretty sure that should cover the surgeries, given your niche.” I would have to confirm with the PRT, but it would be pretty stupid of them to not pay so she could...upgrade herself. I grimaced at the thought. I couldn't imagine having to modify my own body for my power.

“I don't think my guy will take PRT checks.”

I actually facepalmed that time. Normally I might be more patient, but I still had long day ahead of me. “I don't even want to think about where you got your implants installed in the first place. You're going to be using PRT surgeons from now on, and you're going to be turning that money in to the PRT.”

Brenna gave me the most astonished look I had ever seen on her. “My guy's vetted. We've worked together several times already, and I know he won't fuck with me with the price I'm paying. I can't say the same for whatever surgeon the PRT coughs up.”

“I can assure you'll be better off with any PRT surgeon than some guy in a back alley,” I said, deadpan.

“His name is Larry, not some guy, and I have his absolute loyalty in my hands,” she said, holding up the bag of money.

I stared at her for a few moments before finally replying, “Nope.”

“You're asking me to trust my life with some stranger.”

“This ‘stranger’ has been vetted far more thoroughly than you have the time or the resources to do with Larry. I can also assure you that they're more likely to have an actual medical license. Look, I know you have your reservations with the PRT, but you have to embrace our methods. That means
you go through the proper channels. If it helps, you can talk to the surgeon yourself.”

“No. I mean, you remember that first meeting I had with the Director? Where she was like ‘hey, let's make you detach your arm, and wings, because that's protocol’? If the organization that thinks that's okay is the one saying it's fine, that makes me the opposite of reassured. I'm not about to let someone I can't trust operate on me. I get that you think that's weird, but...look, forget about it, okay?”

I shook my head. I wasn't about to forget something like this. “I'll be honest. I don't like the Director. She's part of the reason I'm so damn busy.” It was probably for the best, however, given her...approach to matters. “I'm sorry you associate all of the PRT with her, but you can't just pick and choose how you involve yourself with us.”

Brenna sighed and paused for a moment. “Okay. How about this. I helped one of his family members a while back, so he owes me a favor. I can have him do it here. Not in his ‘back alley’ surgical center which happens to be more than fine, thank you very much. Use PRT money if he's down for it, I don't care. But...it's my body we're talking about here.”

I sighed and fiddled with my ponytail. When you put it like that... Brenna had a point. It was a reasonable compromise, but that would depend on the PRT.

“I'll talk to our surgical center. I'll have a chat with this 'Larry' at some point while I'm at it. I know you trust him, but I don't.” Admittedly, it was probably a dumb plan, but I was willing to risk myself to ensure my teammate would be safe, or at least as ‘safe’ as any cape could be.

“Okay, that's fine. I'll call him and have him come over,” Brenna said, whipping out her phone. As she started walking away, I noticed that she'd left the bag behind.

We were downstairs, browsing through the stupidly-large gift shop–more of a small mall–filling the bottom of the PRT building.

Tax dollars weren't enough to fund the heroes, so the PRT had turned to merchandising to cover expenses. Unlike the drab upstairs, the area here was lively and full of excitement, a stark contrast to the business-formal attitude in the rest of the building. Two floors of superhero action figures, posters, comic books, and other nonsense. Aside from a memorial to fallen capes in the center of the mall, it was divided into sections for the various Protectorate and Wards teams in the area. We were in the largest section by far, the one set aside for Denver and Colorado Springs heroes.

I glanced over at Brenna, who was trying a little too hard to be not interested in the new Icarus shelves. Despite my earlier frustration, I grinned.

“You see it too, huh? Pretty odd for a hero. Doesn't she look like a villain to you?” I said, my grin growing. If I was going to have work interrupted, I would at least be getting some teasing in.

“See what?” Brenna asked a little too quickly, becoming engrossed with a Cupid lunchbox.

I grabbed Brenna's wrist and pulled her over towards the Icarus section.

“The action figures I hear get scratched up way too easily, but the plushies might be good for you.”

“Oh my god, are there plushies?” she whispered excitedly, her eyes widening.

“Uh. I'm not completely sure where that came from,” I admitted, yawning. What the hell was that? Maybe I should have some coffee.

“It's fine, it's fine. But there are plushies, right?”

I thought she would be more excited about the attention itself implied by there being a section dedicated to her than the merchandise itself. Personally I wasn't exactly super prideful about my cape side, but then I had odd circumstances.

“Yeah.”

This time Brenna did the dragging, to my surprise. She, I could swear, squeed. More than one person gave us an odd look. I didn't expect her to be so...into herself.

“Oh my god, Naomi, look at this! Look. At. This! It has light-up eyes in the mask!” she said, tossing an action figure at me, which I caught easily.

I had to admit, I was impressed given the short period of time that Icarus had been with us. I pressed a button, and the lights in the eye sockets indeed lit up. The wings did nothing but sort of pathetically flap, but it couldn't have been easy getting these out so soon. Maybe Ben had designs waiting in his office for all of the independent hero-leaning capes, just in case?

“Does that girl really have an Icarus arm?” a man asked behind me. I tensed, my fist balling up for a moment before relaxing. Was I really so distracted that I let someone sneak up on me? I'd almost struck him in surprise. I could have hurt him. “Relax, kid.”

I resisted the urge to comment on that last part. “Yeah, my friend is, uh, pretty into Icarus.”

The man nodded. “There's not a lot of amputee capes out there. She's probably glad to have someone to look up to.”

“Yeah. Representation is good to have,” I said, somewhat bitterly. There weren't exactly a lot of transgender capes, or at least none that I knew of.

He looked around, as if checking to see if anyone was near. Then looking at Brenna he spoke up, “Would you stop jerking yourself off and introduce me to your girlfriend?”

Brenna set down whatever she had—apparently a miniature plush version of herself—and spun around, her eyes going wide as she saw him. “Larry! Naomi's not my...oh, whatever,” she said, rushing over to give him an excited hug. “How have you been?”

Oh, so this is him. Brenna's surgeon was tall, and looked to be in his 60s, with the look of a man who'd had a harder-than-anticipated life. His nose looked like it had been broken a time or two in the past, and under the tidy suit he was wearing, he had the stature and build of somebody who was confident they could hold their own in a fight.

“So who is your friend?” he asked, dodging her earlier question and looking down at me suspiciously. Given what he was here for, I didn't blame his suspicion.

“Oh, sorry!” Brenna exclaimed. She put on a sarcastically-haughty tone, “Naomi, this is Dr. Laurence Hendrickson, he cuts me up. Larry, this is Naomi, she's, umm...” she trailed off, clearly not sure what to say.
“I'm a concerned friend,” I answered for her, meeting his gaze calmly.

“Ah, yes. Icarus, does your 'concerned friend’ have a better spot to talk than a...gift shop?” Larry gestured around at the shelves of Wards merchandise. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course we wouldn't be talking here.

“Oh, yeah, um...I had to get some last-minute stuff ready in my lab. Maybe there?” Brenna asked.

“Are you sure that's--”

“Okay I'll meet you up there I just have to take care of a thing okay bye.” Brenna disappeared into the sea of products, making her way towards the shelves full of comic books faster than I had thought possible.

“--a good idea.” I finished my sentence.

Larry glanced at me and shrugged. “I see she's gotten more lively since I last saw her.”

“I think she's just happy to be fulfilling her lifelong dream of being a fan of herself,” I said sarcastically, walking towards one of the staff doors at the back of the shop. As we passed into the back hallways, I could just hear more excited Brenna sounds erupting from behind us, before they were cut off by the door closing. Dork , I thought with a smile.

We made our way silently through the back halls to an elevator. After a quick eye scan and an unnerving ride up the elevator, we arrived at the floor that had our workshops.

“Wait here,” I said as I opened the door to the workshops and stepped through, slamming it shut before he could take a look inside.

My work dominated much of the Tinker space that hadn't been reallocated to storage, as a consequence of being the only hero Tinker for at least a couple of years, not to mention my work took up a fair amount of space. My Tank Buster mech was still up here for some little modifications, though I normally kept it at ground level in the private garage. The Torunn mech stood taller, but still woefully incomplete. I sighed, frustration from it leaking into my mood again.

I dug through my area, looking for any sort of cloth. The best I found was a rag, though thankfully it was a...mostly clean one. It would have to do.

“Put this over your eyes.” I commanded curtly as I returned, shoving the rag towards him.

“Is a blindfold really necessary?”

“If Icarus is stupid enough to trust you, that's one thing, but she's not the only Tinker here. So you'll wear that until we get to her lab.” Yup, thinking about the Torunn mech turned me more into a bitch. Oh well.

The doctor rolled his eyes, but tied it over his eyes. I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the workshop and past the mechs. Why did I agree to this nonsense , I asked myself for the thousandth time.

Brenna's lab was where she did most of her small-scale work, and it was, of course, a huge mess. I pushed Larry towards the one available chair. “Okay,” I said, as I pulled myself up to sit on a spot of counter that wasn't covered in circuitry or scribbled notes.

He pulled the rag off and tossed it disdainfully on the floor, wiping his face on the arm of his suit
jacket. He looked around at the mess, his irritated look replaced with a wry smile. “Yes, this is certainly the Icarus I remember.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You say that like you know anything about her.”

He leaned back in his chair. “She's...very different, since I last saw her. But we're not here to discuss Icarus. You don't trust me.”

“That's correct,” I said simply, too tired to come up with a quip.

“And she doesn't trust your medical staff.”

I simply nodded.

“You'll excuse me for asking, but why are you so against the current arrangement?”

“I don't know the slightest thing about you beyond your name. That you've been taking illicit cash is hardly reassuring.”

He shrugged. “Money is money. Where my clients get their funding is none of my business.”

“And your clients? I don't expect you to name names, but I doubt they're all on the... legal side of the law.”

He smiled. “I couldn't possibly say. I don't ask those questions.”

I met his smile with a glare. “Bottom line, you're sketchy. How could I trust my teammate's life to someone with such...iffy intentions?”

“In my line of work, if someone makes a...mistake...like that, they get found in a dumpster by DPD three days later. I have no intention of being found in a dumpster. If you do any sort of digging, you'll find I have a positive reputation with all of the various factions in this lovely city.”

All of them? Even the Ravens? Still, there was a logic to it, even if I was still uncomfortable with the idea.

I sighed. “I figured as much. Still, Icarus needs to be going through the proper channels now that she's with us. At the very least, I convinced the PRT surgical center to let her bring in an...outside practitioner, so that she can work with you under supervision. This is the only way I'll feel even the slightest bit comfortable with this.”

“As long as they do not attempt any interference. I won't have as patient of mine harmed under my watch. And Icarus agreed to this, knowing there would be...observers?”

“She actually suggested it herself.”

That certainly surprised him. After a moment, he nodded. “Well then, that only leaves the matter of payment. I'm sure I don't have to explain why I cannot accept a check written out from the PRT?”

Before I had a chance to respond, there was the sound of a door opening and closing outside, and a second later Brenna walked in, carrying a suspicious number of gift shop bags. “Are you two getting along yet?” she asked, a smile on her face.

“Well enough. We just got to the awkward part where he won't take PRT money.”

“I mean, yeah. He'd lose, like 90% of his business if he did that,” Brenna said. “I mean the guy's
waiting room looks like the Birdcage.”

“I...see,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “You do see the problem with that, right? You're not ‘supplementing your income’ the way you have been anymore.”

“I don't see what the big deal is, Naomi. When you seize money, where does it go? Right back into the PRT. I feel like it's a bit hypocritical of you to lecture me on the ethics of using stolen drug money.”

I shook my head. “It's actually withheld for evidence for a time before being forfeited to the government. The point is that there's a process, and it's there for a reason. And even if you don't agree with it personally, you agreed to join the Wards with all that entails.”

“I have a suggestion,” Larry piped up. “Miss Naomi, I assume the PRT has ways of transferring funds...discreetly?”

“For fuck's sake,” I grumbled. I just knew the Director would have words with me later about this. “I'm sure something can be arranged. I'll call them up now.”

Icarus

It was one of the most uncomfortable sensations I'd ever felt.

I was on my stomach with nothing but my cape mask on, laying on the hard metal slab of an operating table with my back opened up. Everything felt...numb, for lack of a better term.

As uncomfortable as it was for me, I knew it was probably worse for Larry.

“I liked it better when I could knock you out all the way, Icarus,” he said, his voice muffled by the surgical mask he was wearing.

“You missed a screw there on the left,” I replied, ignoring his little dig. One of the PRT nurses was holding a camera above me, and a cord connected it to a port on my mask, letting me watch the whole operation from above myself.

“I was getting to that. Just be patient. If I had known you were going to be awake, I would have charged more for this...”

Even though I couldn't feel it, I winced as he yanked out one of my wing connections and set it aside. If I had been capable of operating on myself, I would have done it so much more gently.

“So how is the business going nowadays?” I asked, mostly out of curiosity. Only a little to resist the urge to critique his methods.

“It's great, most of my patients don't even complain constantly while I work.”

“Hey, I gotta use this body when you're done. I'm allowed to complain. Also, why did nobody ever tell me my spine was so ugly?”

“Everyone's spine is ugly, that's why people put skin on top of them. Are we leaving the old reinforcements in?”

“No, tear them out... not literally, please.”

I kept quiet as he spent the next few minutes unscrewing, cutting out, and otherwise removing the
old mounting points for my wings. The bits he removed were passed on to the PRT nurses and technicians, who were reassembling them to study later, or something. I didn't really care what they were doing with it, since it was old work I'd long-since designed a better version for.

“So,” Larry remarked. “You'll probably need to find someone else for your future work.”


“You know why. I have...a reputation to uphold.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked, wishing I was capable of seeing his face.

“That means my other clients will be justifiably worried that I'm helping out the wrong side. It's common sense. Not to mention, I know how much heroes make, and you can't afford me anymore.”

I sighed. “I mean, I guess. That still sucks, though. Where am I supposed to find a good doctor?” I saw him through the camera, looking pointedly at the operating theater full of PRT staff. “Okay, that was a dumb question.”

“I wasn't going to mention that, but...you're a hero now, Icarus. You have the proper channels for your needs now.”

I squinted. That sounds awfully familiar. I didn't say anything, though.

“...She makes a good point, you know. I'd recommend listening to her advice.”

“I just...I don't think she unders--” I cut myself off as he set down the screwdriver he was using–inside me–and looked into the lens of the camera above him.

“She set aside her morals and risked her civilian identity to make sure you weren't in danger, Icarus. Trust her.”

“Can you not set tools inside me, thanks,” I replied. He was right, I supposed.

Nobody spoke for a bit. There was little for me to direct, he knew what he was doing.

“Icarus,” he said after ten, maybe fifteen minutes. “You'll do fine.”

“Thanks,” I replied, although I didn't really feel it.

Being one of the good guys sucked sometimes.

I walked gingerly back into the Wards HQ, trying to keep my balance. Everything was still a little tingly, and to make things worse, I was wingless until my back healed up some.

Naomi was there, and she looked up in surprise as I wandered in. “Brenna!”

“Hey,” I replied, waving awkwardly.

“Should you be...up?”

“I'm fine. PRT nurses threw a fit, but I know my body better than them. I just need to take it a bit
easy.” I sat at the table, lifting the edge of my shirt enough to show off the stitches from replacing my filtration implant.

“Jesus, Brenna!” Naomi exclaimed, looking away with a bit of a blush.

I grinned. “Plus, thanks to this bad boy, I can now heal a bit faster, as a nice bonus. Nanobots.”

“Wait, nanobots? You've been a Ward for a week and you're making nanotech?”

I paused. “Um, well, no. But it's the easiest way to explain it. I'm not sure what they are, to be honest. But they're basically, like, amped-up white blood cells. Except not? They do more stuff. I don't really know how they work, just that they work.”

“I see,” Naomi said, returning to her laptop. Aww, no fun.

“Hey, that's Wards stuff, isn't it?” I said, peeking over her shoulder and looking at her screen, which had about ten windows of documents open on it. “Aren't you supposed to be off today?”

She rolled her eyes, not looking away from her screen. “Yeah. But I'm behind.”

“When's the last time you had time off of work?” I asked, worried. She didn't answer.

“Oh, fuck that.” I reached over—oh god my fucking shoulder ouch—and pushed the laptop shut.

“Hey!”

“No. Come on. You need to have fun or something.”

“Brenna, what the hell!”

“Naomi, you look like you haven't slept in days. It's your day off, enjoy it a little. The paperwork can wait.”

“This is—”

“I'm not taking no for an answer, let's, I dunno, go get lunch or something.”

“That's stupid, the PRT cafeteria has...” she trailed off. “It has...food...okay, fine. But it has to be quick.”

“Yes! Victory for Icarus!” I said. “Come on, we can even do Dragon if you want.”

“...What?”

“Oh my God, Naomi. Don't tell me you've never gone to Golden Royal Dragon,” I said, astonished. She didn't respond, just gave me a confused look.

“Oh, nope. You are not going back to that stupid paperwork until you've had Denver's best shitty Chinese food.”

I ignored her protests and hobbled over to my room, grabbed my phone and money, and returned. “Come on!”

The journey down to the ground floor was quick and uneventful, other than Naomi's nervous glances at her phone every five seconds, as if hoping for a call to come in so she could go back to being
boring. But it didn't happen, and for the second time that day we were back in the gift shop full of screaming children and...

“Dad?” I exclaimed.

“Brenna? What are you doing here?” my father said, startled, turning away from a table with Protectorate-themed puzzles piled high.

“I work here, what's your excuse?” I asked indignantly.

“I, uh,” he paused. “No reason.”

It was then I noticed the shopping bag he was holding, with the PRT logo proudly emblazoned across it.

“Oh, oh my god!” I exclaimed. “Were you shopping?”

“Your mother wanted a keepsake,” he said nervously. “I don't believe I've met your friend,” he said in a not-so-subtle attempt at changing the subject.

Oh! I'd completely forgotten Naomi existed. “This is Naomi, she's my...friend. Naomi, this is my dad.”

“Oh, it's nice to meet you, Senator Grovsmed,” she said, holding out her hand. Dad shook it with a clearly practiced motion.

Dad's eyes darted between Naomi and myself. “Your ‘friend’, ah. Nice to meet you.’ ”

“Dad, can you believe Naomi's never been to Golden Royal Dragon?” Brenna exclaimed.

“Really?” he said, surprise in his voice.

“Yeah, we're on the way to change that. Oh! You should come along!” I turned to face Naomi. “Can he come along?”

“Uh, I guess? I dunno. You're the one dragging me along.”

That was true...but, if Dad came along, Naomi wouldn't be able to slide back into doing Wards business as easily. My grin grew. “Yeah, let's do it! Dad, come have Dragon with us!”

“I, uh,” his eyes darted between Naomi and me again. “Ummm...”

“Is everything okay?” Naomi asked, eyebrow raised.

“Wait,” Suddenly it dawned on me. “Dad! No! I'm not a--I mean. No! Naomi's not my girlfriend.”

To my confusion, Naomi smiled wryly. “What would you call what happened last night, then?”

What.

Naomi burst out laughing. “I'm sorry, but the look on your face.”

“That's not very nice,” I replied. “Come on Dad, we're stealing your car.”

Dad glanced between the two of us with a bemused look. “Sure.”
“So how long have you lived in Denver, Naomi?” Dad asked as we sat down with our food. Around us, the wonderful decor of Golden Royal Dragon, in all its tacky, Americanized Chinese food splendor. There was even memorabilia signed by Dragon herself!

They’d both gotten a plate each, Naomi getting some noodle thing and Dad getting...a salad. I, for comparison, had two heaping plates, each with three different types of chicken. Variety was good for the soul, and calories were good for the wings.

“I moved here in 2005, so...huh. I guess it's been five years,” Naomi answered politely. She was clearly still worried about work.

“Ah. Where'd you move from?”

Naomi's hand paused with a fork-full of food halfway to her mouth. “Santa Fe,” she said, quietly. Dad nodded. “I'm sorry,” he said simply.

Santa Fe, New Mexico was devastated back in 2005 by Behemoth. A large nuclear power plant melted down during the fighting, irradiating much of the surrounding area.

I could still remember watching the devastation on TV. Grainy images from helicopters, an entire city leveled. Hundreds of thousands displaced, forced to walk in the desert heat down lonesome highways, just to escape the radiation. For a couple weeks after the attack, my family had hosted three refugees in our guest bedroom. They'd all said the aftermath was nearly as bad, if not worse, than Behemoth itself. All in all, it was a tragedy even worse than Madison in 2009.

It...explained why she lived with her aunt, at least.

I slid over and gave her a hug, wincing as I did so. “Jeez, Naomi. You never said anything.”

“It never came up. It's not something I'm exactly eager to talk about.”

“Yeah. I guess it has only been a week,” I replied.

“Just...can we talk about anything else?” Naomi pleaded.

“You've only known each other for a week?” Dad remarked between bites.

Oh. I did say that. “Uh, um, yeah.” I said nervously, glancing at Naomi. “We, um, ended up, um, we just bumped into each other at school! Yeah, that's it.”

Naomi set her fork down and sighed. “I'm too tired for this.”

I was fairly certain Dad figured it out, but thankfully he didn't press it. “Oh, Brenna,” he said, changing the subject. “Your mother says she'll be done in London within the next three weeks. She says she'll be able to stay for a couple weeks before flying out to New York.”

“Great,” I said, regretfully. “I'm going to enjoy having that conversation a second time. ‘Hey Mom, long time no see, I'm a Ward now. How was London?’...Huh, actually, Naomi, you might like my mom. She used to do dancing when she was younger, apparently.”

That got her out of the dumps. “Oh, neat! What styles did she like? I typically stick to more contemporary dancing, but I do have an appreciation for ballet and jazz.”
“Uh...I have no idea,” I said. *How was I expected to know that?*

Dad piped up. “Ballet actually. Before she got her second degree, she had a brief stint professionally with the Oslo Ballet.” He shrugged.

“I envy her. I wish I could go into dancing professionally,” Naomi said, gazing out the window with an expression I couldn't quite read.

I shrugged. “I don't know what I would have done. I guess I hadn't really thought of it.”

“Actually, I think I might have tried to become a doctor,” Naomi said wistfully.

“You woulda made a good doctor,” I said in between bites. I was already on my second plate. “Helping people and all that. Up your alley.”

“You think so? I'd like to think I try to make a difference, even if...” Naomi trailed off, deciding to take another bite of food.

“What makes you think you can't make a difference?” Dad asked Naomi. “Even if it's in little ways, everyone can make a difference in this world.”

Naomi paused, contemplating. She shook her head. “I can't be happy with a world where the Endbringers exist.”

Dad glanced at me for a brief moment before returning his attention to Naomi, a strange look on his face. “Christ, I was there when ‘Endbringer’ became a plural, and now it's a foregone conclusion that every few months millions will die. When you're my age, all of these tragedies start to blend together, become normal. If you think you can take them down...” He raised his soda cup towards Naomi. “Good luck.”

“I don't think I'm quite that strong, but...” Naomi raised her own soda cup. “I will for damn sure try to create the opening we need.”

I nodded and raised my own cup. “I'll be there with you.”

We ate in relative silence after that. By the time I'd finished my second plate, Naomi and Dad had almost finished their own singular plates. “Oh!” I exclaimed. “are you two ready for misfortune cookies?”

“You mean fortune cookies?” Naomi asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Nope! Misfortune cookies! It's a gimmick they do here. They’re fun!” I said. I jumped up and ran to the counter, grabbed three from the very bored-looking teenager there, and returned. I tossed one at each of them. “Here, open them up!”

Dad cracked his open with a shrug, and pulled the scrap of paper out from the cookie bits. “‘That which you love most will fall and break.’” He rolled his eyes and looked at me with a bemused expression. “These are silly.”

Naomi cracked hers open. “‘Your greatest strength will become your greatest weakness?’ Not sure what that would mean for me, but uh okay.”

I broke mine open, tossing a chunk of cookie in my mouth as I unfolded the paper inside, excited to read my misfortune.
Oh.

“Um, mine says ‘After presenting this coupon, you will have 20% off.’” I popped the rest of the cookie in my mouth and tossed the misfortune onto the pile of empty plates. “Whose idea was misfortune cookies, anyway.”

“That’s kinda fortunate. A bit of an ironic letdown,” Naomi said with a bemused look. “But anyway, this was nice and all, but I kinda have paperwork and...” she trailed off.

“Yeah. I guess. And I have to stress-test my new mounting points. Things feel a lot better, now that it’s been a couple hours since the surgery.”

“Surgery?” Dad asked wide-eyed.

Oh geez.

“Good news!” I exclaimed, walking back into the Wards HQ several hours later, my wings proudly back in place. “Between the nanobots and me just being magical, I should be good to go flying tomorrow!”

“Woo,” Lindsay said with the most-bored tone from where she was sitting. She didn't even look up from her book.

“No time to talk, reports,” Naomi said, mostly to herself. “Oh, Brenna. Did you ever get that post-action report for your last patrol? Jordan mentioned something happening in his.”

“Oh, uh. Sure,” I responded. “Can I get that to you once I write it up?” There were REPORTS? Fuck.

“Make sure you have it soon, please.”

“Yeah, uh, totally. Sure. Um, is there...” I paused, looking around for help. Lindsay was idly twirling a flame through her hair, still buried in her book. The boys where nowhere to be found. Only Naomi, and her fucking reports. “Uh, any chance you could help me with that? If you’re busy, we can totally do it another time.” Or never.

“Oh. Sure.” Naomi stood up and walked over to the console at the far end of the room. “You can do it here, or you can get a laptop issued, though that involves some, uh, hoops.” She clicked through a couple of menus before opening a program that just spawned endless windows full of forms.

“Thankfully Denver implemented paperless for these reports, so you can just fill it out here and submit through the little program. Let me know if you have questions.”


“Date. Today? Or when the patrol was?”

“Patrol.”

“Okay. That was...last night? Friday? What number is that?”
“Hover the mouse over the bottom-right corner of the screen without clicking. It will tell you the current date.”

“Okay.” I almost felt bad clicking it. Almost felt bed. “Like that?”

“Move over,” Naomi said grumpily. That was easier than expected. Mission accomplished: Get out of typing up reports.

I'll admit, I did feel bad for exaggerating it, but computers had never been my strong suit. If it didn't involve my mask or my arm's communications systems, I was just a regular person, and my normal skills in that department got me as far as how to watch movies on my computer. Even in school, I'd gotten out of typing assignments by having impeccable handwriting. Which had all gone out the window when I'd lost my arm, had to re-learn everything left-handed. My replacement arm was just different enough that everything I wrote with it had been...off.

It was vain and petty, but I didn't want Naomi to see how terrible I was at being a normal person.

“You should take some typing classes at some point, too. I'll make it go faster,” she said as she hovered over the bottom-right corner of the screen. “See, look. April 17th. So, the report should be dated for the 16th. Now, tell me what happened?”

I nodded. “Okay, well. I was out flying, and I had a message from one of my sources, about a Ravens compound. So I thought I'd check it–”

“Wait. Did you report that to anyone? You were patrolling the area with Flashstep, if I remember correctly. He didn't mention anything like that.”

“No, I thought I'd scout it out first, see if the source was accurate. They usually were, but I didn't want to waste anyone's time. Anyway. I, uh, did a check of the area, thermals showed a few thugs and some...victims. The situation didn't look too good, so there wasn't really time to–”

The sound of rapid typing paused, and Naomi looked at me. “There's always time for a quick ‘Icarus here, I'm moving in on a situation’. You should never enter a potentially dangerous situation without even a word to anyone else.”

“Like I said, there wasn't time. I was already too late for one of the victims as it was, okay?” I took a deep breath. “Anyway. Drop in through a window, say hi to some thugs. And some more downstairs. Went to check on the captives. There were two of them. One was already—one had already died. The other girl was on the way out. That was when I called it in to Jordan and the PRT, and tried to stabilize her.”

“How did you try to stabilize her?”

“My filtration implant has a bypass, connected to a valve in my arm. It's messy and hurts like hell but it filters the, uh, patient's blood basically instantly. Whatever the goons had given her, it should have killed her. I'm surprised she made it even with my help.”

“Huh, that's actually really neat,” she said. “Look, you did some good work yesterday saving that girl, but I know you can talk through your mask, even while flying. So I know you had time to tell someone you were going in.” Naomi paused. “I get that you're used to being a solo act, but you're part of a team. I know it's a pain, but if something happens, reporting in could save your life. You just joined, sure, but I don't want to see any teammate of mine get hurt.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Sorry. But it was all for nothing really, Starving Artist wasn't even there.”
“Shit. Did your source say she would be there?” Naomi asked, shock in her voice. I simply nodded. “She's one of the most dangerous villains out there. This was definitely a situation you needed to radio in. Do you...shit, going after the Ravens, you would know what she would do.”

“Yeah, Naomi. I'm familiar with Starving Artist and her abilities,” I said, a bit more bitterly than I intended. “I've spent the last two years training specifically to fight the Ravens, her included. I wasn't going to waste a chance to take her down.”

Naomi paused, silent for a moment. “May...I ask you a personal question?”

“Shoot.”

“How do you go after the Ravens like this?” she asked. I could see in her expression that it was less curiosity, and more genuine concern.

I sighed, and looked around the room. Lindsay was on the far side, still glued to her book. No sign of the others. Whatever. “You've lived in Denver long enough to know what the Ravens do with the girls they capture. I...I triggered two months in. Another month before I had a chance to escape. The first thing I invented was my filter, to cure the Heartbreak addiction... That's why I go after them. If it stops one more girl from going through what I went through, it's worth it.” I took a deep, shaky breath. “And you know what? You want to know why I never signed up to be a hero after I escaped? I did more damage to the Ravens in four months than the entire Protectorate did over the last two years.”

I looked over at Naomi as she wiped a finger across her eyes. “I couldn't imagine. The Protectorate doesn't want to go too hard on them on account of avoiding escalation and the possibility of an Endbringer attack, but...” she shook her head. “I've been suggesting for a while to the Director that they go too far, but I don't think she hears me.”

“Fuck that. And if someone thinks the Ravens are worth keeping around, fuck them. I won't rest until every one of them is dead or in the Birdcage.” I was interrupted by my phone vibrating. I pulled it out of my pocket and took a look. “I have to take this. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead,” Naomi said quietly. “I've got this from here.”

“Okay.” I walked towards the door to the HQ, unlocking my phone as I did. A new notification from the Parahumans Online app.

(PhO) New message from throwaway41236: hey. Fuck, I need your help again.
Awakening 1.7 - Consequences

Chapter by keira_irl

Blink

*I'm really getting sick of these early hour missions,* I thought as I flew towards yet another one of Imperium's factories in the northern part of the city.

To my surprise, as I got closer I saw that Imperium himself was waiting for me outside, a pair of his robots flanking him. He even managed to pull off standing outside with his typical pretentious attitude. I landed next to him, resisting the urge to yawn.

“Ah, Blink. Nice of you to join us,” Imperium stated, “I do appreciate your promptness, given the last-minute call.”

“What am I here for?” I asked, hoping to avoid ten minutes of Pompous Maximus Imperium conversation before he managed to get to the point.

“Ah, yes. Please Blink, follow me.” Imperium swiveled around and made his way towards the factory. The pair of robots, oddly enough, turned in tune with his motion. I followed behind, hovering in place just above the ground. One of his robots opened the door and we stepped inside.

The first thing that hit me was the heat. It felt like I was in an oven compared to the pleasant coolness of outside. Why my employer had been waiting in the fresh air became apparent, with sweat pouring down my face.

The second thing I noticed was the music. Over the sound of machinery echoing through the inside of the building, a strangely-catchy melody of a flute was barely audible. Even though I knew I didn't recognize the rambling tune, I felt like I knew exactly what the song would do next, and I almost felt compelled to hum along. Maybe if I wasn't so tired, I might have.

Imperium led me through the maze of machinery, the air around me becoming even hotter, the flute-playing becoming louder. We passed a squad of Imperium's robots carrying a huge ingot of some sort of metal, and I could feel the heat radiating off of it. We walked further and further into the factory. We climbed a set of stairs, and I looked down to see the orange glow of molten metal shining in some of the machines.

The heat was almost too hot for me to bear when we finally came upon an open doorway, and passed through into the relief of a room that wasn't full of molten metal. It was probably still a hundred degrees, but it felt like sitting in front of an air conditioner.

It was another room, much like the last but devoid of most of the machinery. We were up on a catwalk running along all four sides of the spacious area. Below us, I could see the source of the music. A woman wearing a kimono and a giant lampshade hat sat on a stool below, playing on a bamboo flute. The upper half of her face was covered in a mask made in a similar style to her hat. In front of her were a pair of giant shining ingots, similar to the ones I had seen earlier.

Imperium walked down a set of stairs, and I chose to teleport down. Together, we approached the woman. As we got closer, she stopped playing the flute and looked up at us. The sudden absence of her music left me feeling slightly empty inside, I could almost feel the tuneless melody continue in my head. It was...unnerving, to say the least.
“Woodwind,” Imperium intoned dramatically, “I see you have been making progress.”

“Your sweatshop has been more than adequate,” The woman, Woodwind I presumed, said with a smile. Even her voice had the same almost-hypnotic sound to it. I couldn't help but wonder how she kept from boiling in this heat.

“As we discussed, the Ravens have seen fit to test us after our recent...setback,” Imperium said, giving me a glance, “As such, they have seized one of my facilities. I would have it back with minimal damage to the property inside.”

That gave me pause. The Ravens and Imperium had been at odds for some time, but it seldom went beyond skirmishes in the streets.

“You understand my...obligations, yes?” Woodwind replied, her voice slipping into a minor key for a brief moment.

“Of course,” Imperium replied, gesturing towards me with a flourish. “That is why Blink, a friend to the Empire, will be working with you tonight.”

“Will we be fighting any of the Ravens' capes?” I asked, wanting to be prepared.

“Perhaps. If that is the case, I won't have any sizable fights break out. I suggest irritating them to the point that they don't want to be there. You two should have synergy for that.”

“Blink,” Woodwind said, looking at me. “I have heard of you. Perhaps this night will be more interesting than I had thought.”

“Woodwind, right? I can't say I know much about you.”

“I think after tonight we'll both know a lot more of each other,” Woodwind said with a smirk. “Imperium, will we have your machines by our side?”

I blushed. The fuck? Was this woman coming onto me?

“My army will be standing by to, ah, prove a point as they run out. I'm afraid they would cause too much damage inside.”

“Can you tell me about your power, Woodwind? We should form a plan before going in,” I said, trying to forget what Woodwind might or might not have insinuated.

Instead of answering me, she put the flute back up to her mouth, and began playing the same tuneless melody from before. This time, though, it felt more directed, as if commanding those listening. A few seconds later, the pair of giant metal ingots began to deform, and a pair of featureless humanoid figures pulled themselves out of the metal.

She stopped playing, and looked over at me, her eyes glinting behind her mask. “Is that a satisfactory demonstration, Blink?”

Creates figures–golems?–and apparently directs them with her music. I had so many questions. “Can you see through them? What about range? If they can scout, that would give us a lot of options.”

She shook her head. “How about I answer your questions on our journey. It is a bit warm in here.”

I nodded. “Are you okay with flying?”
I double checked my phone to make sure this was the correct address. Woodwind appeared as calm and mysterious as ever, although the vicelike grip of her hands on my arm suggested she wasn’t a fan of my flying.

We hovered over a large nondescript warehouse on the northern end of the city. Five cars sat along the front haphazardly, suggesting anywhere between ten to twenty were inside. Two goons stood outside watching the front. *Good thing they're too stupid to look up.*

I flew us down to the roof, and the sounds of smashing became apparent. It looked like Imperium wouldn’t have his warehouse fully intact after all. At the very least, it meant they would be distracted. We could move forward with our plans.

I teleported us into the building itself, landing on a catwalk. I nodded to Woodwind, and she immediately brought up her flute. The music began quietly at first, before filling the room. The sounds of smashing slowed and finally stopped, as a couple people began shouting.

“*To the front, now! Gather up!*” I heard someone shout. I smiled.

As the group gathered up, I noticed two women that stuck out from the rest of the thugs. One woman wore street clothes like the thugs, but she also wore a simple paper mask, and paper fluttered around her. That would be Papercut. As far as I knew, her powers involved telekinesis, but only with paper. I would have to watch out for her, given she could coat a much larger area than I could teleport through.

The other woman's face was scarred, and she wore an odd jacket, one with a fur lined hood and some decorative shoulder armor. Her hair was almost pure white, and her ‘mask’ was simply a pair of goggles. She went by Rewind, and I knew her power involved sending people back to their position within a few seconds ago through punching them. As long as I didn't let her hit me, she was about as much of a threat as any of the thugs.

The two parahumans stood a small distance from the rest, which suited me just fine. I hovered over the group, pulled a flashbang grenade from my belt, pulled out the pin, and dropped it right in the middle of the group. I teleported through the roof, waited for the bang, then went back in, preparing to charge the cape pair with my baton and taser extended. Unfortunately, while the goons were more or less disabled given the shouts and cries, Papercut managed to surround herself and Rewind with a swarm of paper, apparently blocking most of the flashbang's effects. The acrid stench of burning paper filled the air.

Her storm of paper shot straight up, and I flew away as it covered the ceiling above. I realized too late what she was doing, as paper flooded the rafters, rapidly making its way to where Woodwind was hiding. I flew directly to Woodwind, hissing as paper dug into the exposed skin on my face. Woodwind tried to erect a barrier with her golems, but winced as paper fluttered around her. I touched her, and flew us through the roof.

Papercut's swarm of paper might be irritating, but we didn't have to completely disable her. We just needed to drive them out.

“The original plan still stands. March a wall of golems so they get the picture that they should leave.”

I teleported back into the building as the music started back up. Paper flew everywhere, but it was wild, lacking any sort of aim. Woodwind's song echoed throughout the building, and as far as I
knew, she couldn't see through her paper, so we should have been as good as hidden.

Woodwind's music paused briefly as she spoke. “The unpowered are breaking rank. Papercut and Rewind are following. They are almost outside now.”

*Good.* I flew us outside and around the side to get a better look. The thugs were scrambling to get into cars, when Imperium's robots arrived, running with a surprising speed, and with drones weaving through and speeding ahead. I winced as gunshots rang out, the bangs echoing through the streets. A few of the robots and even a couple drones fell, but it wasn't enough for them. Several gun-wielding thugs were peppered with bursts of compressed air. Paper flew at the robots, but they ran through without care and tore into the cars before any of the thugs could speed away.

Rewind still punched at the golems, though there were too many for her to set them back enough. She finally turned to see the mess that was happening outside. In that moment, robots ran past her to stand at the entrance. The rest of the robots and drones abruptly stopped their attack and marched, or hovered, over to the front.

“I think the message is pretty clear,” I spoke up from above, looking down. “Fuck off.”

Myself and two thugs had stalked the escaping Ravens for the past hour or so, to ensure they did, in fact, fuck off. The thugs were nothing special, wearing street clothes with purple bandannas wrapped around their arms. They were armed with knives and guns, the latter of which I pointedly tried not to think about.

I checked my phone to confirm that we were on the edge of Raven territory. The defeated collection of thugs and two very-cross-looking parahumans had done nothing we could see, besides grudgingly walk away. At this point, we were probably good to stop and head back. There was no sense in pushing our luck.

We stood on a side-road in an only moderately-crummy area. Of course, the neighborhoods wouldn't become *bad* until you really went deep into Arsenal—into Ravens territory.

“Let's head back,” I ordered, and in response the thugs jumped. *Twitchy, much?* We turned around, and made our way back towards where we'd left our cars. There was a few minutes of blissful silence.

“Did you hear that?” one of the thugs said.

I tried to listen for something, but I didn't hear anything. I didn't respond to his question, simply continuing to walk forward.

“I think I heard it ag—”

The thug never got the chance to finish his sentence, as what appeared to be a giant bird, the size of which must have rivaled if not exceeded a car, swooped down and barreled towards us.

With reaction speed that surprised me, I teleported through the thing as it charged and swung my baton at it. It connected, but barely. I doubt my swing did much of anything as it slammed one of my thugs into a building. It turned and gained altitude and began circling me as I stood and watched. The thug who was slammed into the wall was groaning, letting me know he was alive if nothing else. The only thing I knew about them was that they had very limited experience with capes, and neither
of them were in a position to be one of Potion's 'trained' thugs, so I was basically alone against this...thing.

It had to have been Branwen, one of the heavy hitters from the Ravens. She could change into a bird that was like a crow or a raven in appearance, though the stories could never get her size straight. Perhaps the sizes varied, or maybe everyone just judged size differently when they were in mortal peril.

The bird swooped down at me again, but I dodged again. Branwen's wingspan had to be about twenty feet long, which proved to be an issue. I could only teleport about eight to ten feet, so I had to time my jumps right. Two, maybe three in order to escape. I rose into the air a little, keeping an eye on Branwen's circling form. She was faster, and she knew it, as she circled high above me, waiting.

I had no idea how I could beat her. My baton could only do so much to a giant bird that was known to have knocked around cars. Plus, the more I fought her, the more likely I was to make a mistake in my jumps, and she could hit really hard, given the still-reeling figure down below. That meant I had to get away, which could prove difficult.

I heard sudden gunshots below; one of the thugs was trying to shoot down Branwen with a fucking pistol at who knows how far away. I'd never fired a gun and even I could tell it was futile. All it did was catch her attention more.

Branwen span around, diving towards the thug the moment he stopped firing to reload and started to run away in a panic. I flew down to touch his shoulder to move him out of the way, but the idiot struck at me before I could. Due to Branwen's sheer speed, I had no choice but to move out of the way as she swooped down on us. Her talons gripped his shoulders and carried him up, before dropping him shortly after. I winced as I heard his scream. His momentum had dragged him along the asphalt.

A cloud of feathers obscured the alleyway, settling into cracks or being blown away. I was greeted with the nude form of Branwen. Jet black hair, close-cropped. Steely grey-blue eyes glaring at me. Her skin was covered in small bumps, like something underneath was trying to push its way out of her too-tight skin. She was small and slender, and if she hadn't just tried to hurt me, I might have admired her form.

I began to fly over, but with surprising speed she picked up the thug's gun and spare magazine off the ground, reloaded, and pointed it at me, smirking.

"What's faster? My finger, or your power?" Branwen asked.

I stopped, frozen, the threat very much evident. My teleporting was instantaneous, but I couldn't be sure if her powers didn't include some kind of enhanced mental abilities. And I wasn't about to risk finding out while staring down the barrel of her gun.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You fucked with our operations, we fuck with you in return," she said.

"Surely you didn't think Imperium would ignore you all fucking up his property."

"I wasn't talking about tonight. You and the wannabe hero whore. Two of our girls, gone."

"Your girls? Fuck you," I said, despite the threat of the pointed gun.

"I bet you would. Keep your fucking morals to yourself, and stay the fuck out of our business. Are
we clear, or do I need to repeat myself in Mexican?"

Surely she can insult me better than resorting to racism? “Fine,” I lied. Fuck Branwen, and fuck the Ravens. Fuck anyone who would take people away for...for such sick purposes. Fuck ignoring this shit. I wasn't about to piss her off by saying any of that, though.

“Good. And just so you know, if I see you anywhere near our shit again...” she lowered the pistol, pointing it at the thug groaning on the ground. She pulled the trigger.

I flinched at the spray of blood. Some of it landed on Branwen, dotting her almost-pale skin, but she didn't seem to care. I probably could've left before she pointed it back at me, but I was too shocked at the murder that happened so...casually...in front of me.

As the ringing of the single shot faded from my ears, she finished her sentence. “...that's going to be you.”

I barely noticed as she dropped the gun and stepped back. Her body exploded into black feathers, folding in upon itself until a black bird, darted away, from where her chest had been. And then she was gone.

I stared at the thug whose blood pooled beneath me. I would've been surprised at the sheer amount of blood had I not already seen it before. I could still see it...

Laughter filled the car as we traveled to church for the Christmas Eve service.

“...but I know he means well!” Papá joked, finishing the punchline. While it was admittedly a lame joke, we couldn't help but snicker. Jess looked like she was holding in more, though. I could hardly believe it when I glanced out the window and saw the approaching car inches away.

I blacked out, and when I came back I found myself in what felt more like a tomb than a vehicle. I could feel my body—sore more than anything—but I couldn't move much.

“Mom? Papá? Jess?” I shouted. I heard a groan next to me, but I couldn't be sure who it was.

Fuck, I needed to get out of here. I need to make sure they're okay. My felt my heartbeat quicken as I struggled and struggled to move, but the fucking thing had me trapped for what felt like ages. I wasn't sure what happened after, except that I felt something I couldn't quite describe.

I found my mind outside my body in a sense, and in a way I couldn't truly understand, made a 'pathway' to the outside. Suddenly, I was outside, and I turned to see the wreckage. I looked to the front and saw...

I closed my eyes, desperately hoping to see something different when I opened them. But no. There was blood. Endless amounts of it. It stained the area where my parents were. I tried to extend my hand to them, but a pair of hands grabbed me from behind...

“Hey, are you okay?” someone asked, shaking me from my memory.

I looked towards the source of the voice. The woman, standing on the opposite end of the street, looking at me. Fairly tall, with bright red hair and green eyes. At first, I thought I was looking at the face of Tundra. But, given her green costume and bow, the woman had to have been Cupid, a member of the Protectorate. Her power involved being able to sense emotion to some extent, though no one really knew how far besides Cupid herself. Nor did anyone besides her know just quite how adept she was at manipulating emotions using the same power.

Getting hit by her in my state, even a glancing hit? It would let her power in, and probably lead to
my capture.

“Wh-where did you come from?” I asked, too dazed to not say something stupid.

“What happened here?” Cupid asked, ignoring my question. I noticed she had an arrow knocked, ready to draw.

Right. So she's going to ask first, then shoot? I had no reason not to answer the question. Maybe it would result in the Protectorate actually doing something useful for once against the Ravens.

“We were attacked by Branwen. She...fuck. She shot him,” I took a shaky breath, trying my best not to lose my composure in front of a hero.

As I spoke, she seemed to relax a little. “Blink, right? I know you're still in a bit of shock, but I need to ask you some questions, is that okay?”

I felt like I wanted to sit down, but I instead relied on my power to keep myself steady. It was really strange that the hero only wanted to talk to me, out here in the open. Maybe she thought the murder was more important than the crimes I had committed. “Okay.”

She nodded. “Besides...him, are there any other dead? And did you know what way she went?”

“No, but,” I turned towards the other thug. “The guy over there probably needs some medical attention. As for Branwen...I'm sorry. I didn't see.”

“That's fine...I made sure he won't feel anything until an ambulance arrives. Are you okay?”

“Why do you care about that?”

“Because right now I don't see the supervillain Blink. I see a girl in over her head, who just saw someone get murdered. A scared girl.” She paused, her voice hardening a bit. “I should probably be apprehending you now, but I'm familiar enough with your powerset to know it's pointless to try.”

Cupid shrugged, sliding her bow onto her back, next to a quiver of obviously-tinkertech arrows. True, she'd most likely miss her first shot, but it would only take one good hit.

I sighed. “Did you have other questions?”

“No. You should probably get out of here before the rest of the Protectorate shows up. Unless you've had enough villainy for one lifetime.” She paused. “Nope? Thought I'd try. The option's there if you ever change your mind.”

“Right. Join up with Wards, who I've fought before. Not to mention the list of crimes I've committed. That wouldn't be awkward,” I joked bitterly, mostly to distract from my mood than anything.

“The offer has been made for villains with a worse history than yours,” she said, with an undertone I couldn't quite figure out. “Now get out of here, before some citizen sees me chatting with a supervillain and takes a picture. I do not want to deal with that.”

I didn't waste a second more, flying straight up before aiming west, towards home.

At some point, I had made it back home. I almost laughed at the thought of the hero trying to recruit
There was no way I was fucking giving up on Jess.

Right now, I just felt dirty. No blood on me, but I couldn't shake the feeling. I threw off my costume and headed into the shower.

I sat down, fine with just letting the hot water run down me for a bit.

I was startled by the feeling of ice cold water hitting me. I realized that at some point I must've closed my eyes. *Did I just take a nap?*

Sighing, I turned the water off and stepped out. Towel wrapped around me, I grabbed my cape phone from where I'd dropped my costume on the bathroom floor, and retreated to my room. I went into my PHO alt account, the one I used to talk to Icarus. I brought up the previous messages, and re-read them as I thought about what to say.

---

*xX-kaminarifan-Xx*

*hey i reached out to jennas family. it wasn't easy for them but at least they know*

*throwaway41236*

*thank you. It means a lot.*

*xX-kaminarifan-Xx*

*no prob. just fyi im not telling anyone u were involved unless u want me to*

*throwaway41236*

*it's best for both of us if my involvement isn't mentioned.*

*xX-kaminarifan-Xx*

*k. but this doesn't change anything. not pulling my punches even if were on the same side vs the ravens*

*throwaway41236*

*wouldn't expect anything less. You have responsibilities.*

*xX-kaminarifan-Xx*

*yea. its not personal. let me know if u have more info*

---

That exchange happened only last night. It was strange. I didn't really know Icarus...Brenna, but it didn't exactly feel great that we had to be on opposite sides. And how the heck could I get info to her now? I couldn't say for certain that I'd be able to escape Branwen were she to attack me again. If I were to die, what would that do to Jess?

I *could* stop going after the Ravens and just put all of my time into doing jobs. I didn't have a reason to chase them after Jenna, right?

Dammit.

*throwaway41236*

*hey. Fuck, I need your help again.*
I didn't have to wait long for a response.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
that didn't take long. what's up

throwaway41236
I just got attacked by Branwen. She... god, she shot someone right in front of me and threatened to kill me if she ever saw me again. I still want to help against those fucks, but I'm scared. I have a responsibility to someone still living.

Maybe my message was a little too personal, but I was still shaken up from what happened. I didn't think I could've worded it any differently without pouring over it for hours.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
fuck ok

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
does she kno were working together?

throwaway41236
yeah. Well, she used the words 'wannabe hero whore', I think.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
ok yeah. that's a yes.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
have a idea 4 a plan. dont want to go into details here. but we can use this 2 our favor

throwaway41236
are you thinking about meeting up for a plan?

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
uhhhhhhh sure i guess. ill have to be out of costume. u sure ur up for this?

throwaway41236
yes. I'm not letting this hang over me. I know a good spot to meet.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
k, ill head out send me the address. u hungry? can pick up food on the way.

throwaway41236
uh sure, as long as it isn't taco shame. Personal thing. And there's a park at W 2nd Pl and Van Gordon St.

xX-kaminarifan-Xx
o i know that park. crashed in the lake once. might take a bit to get there, no car and wings r kinda conspicuous. taking train
“This is the Federal Center Station. Stand clear, the doors are closing,” the robotic train voice chimed as the train slowed to a stop, waking me from my nap.

I stood up with my six bags of fast food, ignoring the stares from the other passengers as I got off. Like a girl with a robot arm and a few bags of greasy burgers and fries was an uncommon sight in Denver. Okay, maybe it was a little.

I stepped off the train, immediately regretting it. During the short half-hour ride out to Lakewood, far on the western side of Denver, I'd gotten used to the shitty train air conditioning. Even this late in the afternoon, it was hot. In April. Why couldn't we have moved to Canada instead?

I noticed Isabelle leaning against the railing by one of the ticket machines, arms crossed. It was the first good look I had of her out of costume, other than the brief moment I'd met her at school. I never noticed before, but her skin was slightly dark. Hispanic, maybe? Her hazel eyes stared at me as I approached, and her long black hair hung loose. She wore tight fitting jeans and a beige tank top.

“T ook you a while,” she said.

“Sorry, had to get a bite to eat,” I said, handing over a couple of my food bags. “I didn't know what you wanted, so I got you some of everything.”

“Uh, thank you,” she said. “This is...a lot.”

“Yeah, I have to eat a lot to keep my weight up,” I said as we started walking. To be perfectly honest, I was surprised I *only* had to eat as much as I did.

We walked side by side up the sidewalk. I couldn't help but notice Isabelle getting more and more tense.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“There's...well, there's quite a few stares,” she said quietly.

I looked around. “Oh, I guess,” I said, shrugging. “It's just because of the arm. You get used to it.”

Isabelle glanced at my prosthetic arm. “I guess I forgot.”

“I don't even really notice it anymore,” I said with a sigh. It's not like I was a Case-53, some monstrous abomination running around with, like, hooves. Plenty of people had prosthetic limbs, right?

Isabelle relaxed slightly, but I could tell there was still some tension as we made our way to the park. It was only a couple blocks from the light rail station, a small little square of grass surrounding a small lake with a fountain in the center of it. A swim in it actually sounded nice right about now, now that it wasn't January and it wasn't covered in ice.

We sat down at one of the benches running along a trail ringing the lake.

“Tell me what happened with Branwen,” I said as I tore open a bag full of fries, stuffing a few into my face.

She didn't respond for at least a minute. I couldn't completely follow her facial expressions. Was she reliving it? Finally she spoke, her voice flat. “We had just kicked some Ravens out of Imperium
territory. A couple thugs and I followed them to make sure they left. Branwen ambushed us,
knocking out the two thugs before she transformed and pointed a gun at me—"

"Where did she get the gun? She can't carry things when she transforms," I interrupted.

"Right, sorry. No, she picked it up from one of the thugs she took care of. But anyway, I guess word
about us working together got out. She threatened to kill me if I ever stepped foot in Ravens territory
again, and she...she shot the other thug in the head as an example."

I could see Isabelle's hands clench and unclench.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Isabelle shook her head. "I've had too much of that. Save it."

"Okay," I said, not sure what else to say to that. "Well, I got a plan."

Isabelle nodded. "Can we eat first, though? I haven't exactly eaten much today."

"Sure, that's fine," I said.

Isabelle wasted no time in digging in, eating with a speed that surprised even me. I wasn't even sure
if she'd stop as we ate in silence, but she only made it most of the way through the second bag. She
leaned her head back, probably contemplating who-knows-what as I worked on finishing up my
own food. At some point she had brought one of her legs up, placing her hands on her knee.

"This is weird," she finally said, not moving.

"Yeah," I said, nodding.

"So what's the plan?"

I shrugged. "How do you feel about being bait?"

Isabelle turned her head towards me. "Way to word it like that. I hope there's more to this."

"It's pretty simple. I know how Branwen works. She thinks of herself as a predator, a hunter." I
paused for a second. "She won't be able to pass up an opportunity to get you, even if it means
chasing you. Keep to the air, and none of the other Ravens will be able to follow. That's where I
come in."

"Uh huh. Your plan is for me to lead her in so you can attack her?"

"I did say it was simple, right? I've spent a lot of time studying the Ravens. How they operate, how
they think, how they fight. I've avoided direct confrontation so far, so beyond the word of a couple
thugs, they don't really know how I fight. I can beat her."

"No one else involved? What if something goes wrong? What if you're wrong?" Isabelle asked. I
was almost insulted by how skeptical she was.

"Do you want me to call the Protectorate?" I asked sarcastically.

Isabelle shrugged. "Could play it off as randomly coming across me trying to get away from her."

"Maybe. If it comes to that, I can call them in," I said, sighing. "But it won't come to that." I was not
about to let someone else take down Branwen.
“As long as there's a contingency. If I'm going to risk my life, I want some certainty. I'm not about to let down...” she paused. “Speaking of the Protectorate, do you think they'll just take her in after you capture her? They...haven't exactly been very hard on the Ravens.”

I paused. “They'll have no choice but to take her in, and with what she's done...it'll be the Birdcage. Too much for that stupid ‘three strikes’ rule. Branwen will face justice.”

“She better. If she doesn't...” Isabelle took a deep breath and muttered, “I should probably figure out some contingency plans.”

“She will. I'll make sure of it.”

“When is this going down?” Isabelle asked abruptly.

“Whenever works for you. Oh, hold on, I have something for you,” I said, slipping my backpack and digging through it. A small mint tin that rattled as I tossed it at her. “Here. This will allow you to communicate directly with me. Certainly quicker than PHO messages.”

“It won't, uh, ‘bond’ with me, will it?” she asked, looking nervously between the tin and my arm.

“Do you want it to?” I asked excitedly. “I mean, this was just based off an old design for my mask, before I implanted connections to communicate directly. It's still pretty neat I think, even if it's older. If you want something newer, I totally understand.”

“Uh, no thanks,” she said, even more nervously. “My sister once read me this story...ugh, cybernetics have kinda creeped me out since then. No offense.”

“It's fine, I get it,” I replied sadly. “Anyway, this doesn't do any implantation or permanent, uh, stuff. It's just an earpiece, basically. Just put it on, it'll do the rest. It'll detect when you want to talk, and transmit your voice. Don't worry about speaking loudly or not, it'll pick you up.”

“Alright, thanks. Does it have a range limit?”

“A few miles? I dunno. Haven't really been able to test it,” I replied sarcastically.

“We'll test it out a little before I start dancing in Arsenal.”

“Sure, of course.”

“If that's everything...” Isabelle trailed off, already standing up.

“Yeah, no. I have to get back downtown. I...sorta left in a rush, and...yeah. I'll see you around, Blink,” I said, standing up as well.

Isabelle placed her hand on my shoulder. “Yeah. See you later, Icarus.”
Icarus

“Thank you, again, for helping me move,” I said to Lindsay as I pulled another one of the boxes out of the back of her car. We were both off today, and with my apartment lease expiring soon, I didn't know if I'd have time to move later. It wasn't like I'd been home much anyway. Probably three or four days? It had been before the meeting with Blink. Even worse, apparently I had left the window open, too, and a swarm of moths had taken residence in my closet.

“Seriously, a scythe?” my teammate asked as she grabbed her own box from the rusted-out sedan presently dripping oil onto the gray concrete of the PRT's parking garage.

“Like I said, it was a costume piece, from before I triggered,” I said with a shrug.

“And you don't use stuff like this in combat?”

“I mean, it's nothing compared to what I can make now. Just last night I designed a napalm module for my arm. Don't worry,” I said quickly once I saw her expression. “It was silly, and I adapted it into a confoam launcher. I couldn't get back to sleep unless I made something.”

That last part was a lie, if I was honest. Another nightmare. Even after two years, I still couldn't bring myself to fall back asleep after them. Not if it meant reliving it again.

“Brenna?” Lindsay asked. I blinked, and looked over at her. “Stop being a nutjob. I don't care if you turn your arm into a flamethrower.”

“I...sorry,” I said, taking a deep breath. We made our way over to the elevator, and after the doors opened I set my box down in the gap before running back to help Lindsay grab the last of the boxes. Six smallish boxes. And a scythe. Everything that had been at the apartment, except for some furniture I supposed the next tenant could have. Or however that worked.

The elevator ride up was, as always, smooth and uneventful. On the other end, the same method—a box to block the elevator doors, and a couple trips through the wide hallways leading to the Wards HQ, back and forth to get everything tossed in my room.

On second thought, it was probably a bit rude to block one of the building's elevators, especially during the lunch rush, when twenty floor's worth of PRT staff descended upon the cafeteria. All that thought did though, was remind my grumbling stomach that I hadn't eaten in a couple hours. I'm not THAT hungry. Not for PRT food.

Instead, I distracted myself by getting unpacked into the room. With how little I had, it didn't take long. The drab PRT-issue walls got covered in posters; my clothes, spare costume, and all my old cosplay stuff got thrown in the closet. My laptop got put on the desk, next to the bonsai Mom had brought home from when she'd visited Japan a few years back.

There was a knock at the door. I opened the door to find Jordan, still in his Flashstep costume.

“Hey, what's up?” I asked, stepping back to let him in. “How was patrol?”

Instead of responding, Jordan's mouth opened wide in surprise.
“Are you okay?” I asked, a little concerned.

“That's so cool! That Fatality Crusade poster is so rare! And is that a real bonsai tree? Shit!”

I blushed. I'd never had anyone react so enthusiastically to my interests. “Uh yeah. I got the poster from the 2007 premiere, and my mom brought the tree from Japan on one of her business trips.”

“She went to Japan? Neat. I wish I could see it, even if...” he trailed off awkwardly.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Oh! I almost forgot. Uh, Ben wants us in his office. He says its important.”

Ugh. “Uh, right now? Give me a second to get ready.”

“Okay.” He said, not moving for a second. I raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh!” he exclaimed, before disappearing.

I closed the door before throwing off my sweaty moving clothes in favor of my Icarus costume. I looked at my mask briefly before placing it on with an always–satisfying click.

Flashstep gave me a small wave as I stepped out of my room.

“Do you know what this is about?” I asked as we walked down the corridor and onto the elevator.

He shrugged. “I dunno. Just said it was important.”

“Of course,” I said, exasperated.

We didn't talk the rest of the way to Ben the Asshole PR Guy's office down on the third floor, though I noticed Flashstep glancing at me occasionally.

“Come in,” Ben said before Flashstep had the chance to even knock. “Have a seat.”

Before we even made it halfway to the chairs sitting across from his cluttered desk, he continued, “I understand you two have an...appreciation for ‘anime’ and the like. You are going to the next convention in Denver this Saturday. For obvious reasons, I'm not about to ask the other Wards. This is an opportunity for some PR, to show our heroes in public outside of patrols.”

“Okay. Uh, is there anything we have to do there?” Flashstep said.

“We will need you to attend some Q&A, where two of my staff will be there to assist you. Other than that, you will need to attend and participate in the...activities,” Ben said, grumbling at the end.

“Cool! That's cool with you, Icarus, right?” he said, turning towards me with a hopeful expression.

“Yes! Yes yes yes! I mean, yeah, it's cool. Totally cool,” I said, in a totally-chill way.

“No shenanigans, Flashstep. I better not be dealing with any ‘surprises’ after...” he trailed off in a tone that suggested something like that had happened before.

“Uh, yes sir, I mean no sir,” Flashstep said nervously.

“That is all. Please go away,” Ben said, exasperated somehow. I couldn't imagine why.

I could barely contain my excitement as we walked out the door. The moment Flashstep shut Ben's
“Yes! Oh my god yes!” I shouted, hugging Flashstep in excitement, who somehow became stiff as a board.

I realized what I did and stepped back, blushing. I couldn't help but notice the blush on Flashstep.

“Go away!” I could hear Ben shout from within his office.

“How are you supposed to move in this thing?” I complained, my voice muffled by the black bandanna over my face. “Seriously, it's impossible to breathe in this thing.”

“It was your idea,” Flashstep said, doing a twirl in my costume.

“I was joking!”

“If you didn't want me calling your bluff, you shouldn't have made it in the first place,” he said smugly.

I made a pouting face I knew he couldn't see behind my “mask”.

“Seriously, though, are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. I just...your costume wasn't designed with boobs in mind, okay?” Armored bodysuits didn't have as much give as one would think. The more irritating pain was from my wings—more specifically, the lack thereof.

I'd cannibalized some of my old testing equipment, to make a “harness” of sorts for Jordan to wear under my costume, that my wings could attach to. He wasn't about to do any flying, but if you didn't look too closely they looked okay, and I'd even wired a battery and a handheld remote-control to snap them open and shut in case he wanted to show off. He'd turned down my offer to amputate his arm, and instead we'd managed to put together a “sleeve” that almost looked right. It wasn't my best work, but to be fair it had been awhile since I'd made something without the help of my Tinker power.

Around us, the summer Rocky Mountain Cape Convention was in full swing. Vendors of all sorts, with various people acting as speakers and presenters on all sorts of topics. Because Jordan and I were there for “outreach”, we got to attend the con for free.

Seriously. We were essentially getting paid to go to a con. Who said being a hero didn't come with perks?

I noticed a boy wearing a Legend t-shirt glance at Flashstep before saying, “Meh, seen better.”

Excuse me?

“I'll have you know that that is the real thing!” I blurted out.

“Wait, you're a girl? Why are you going as Flashstep?”

“Because I'm going as Icarus,” Flashstep blurted out, twirling again as he did so.
The boy stood there with a confused look. “Wait, am I seriously meeting the Wards costume swapping, or is this some weird joke?”

“Yes,” Flashstep said, nodding.

“Flashstep, Icarus,” I heard someone say behind me. I turned away from the confused boy only to find myself face to face with an even more exasperated Ben the Asshole PR Guy.

“Oh, I thought you weren't going to be here?” Flashstep asked.

“Someone called off,” Ben said, angrily. “Follow me. Now.”

We followed Ben, who was almost stomping, over to what I assumed was the room for official PRT stuff.

As soon as we were inside, he turned around. “What. Are. You. Two. Doing? I said no shenanigans! No shenanigans! How hard is that to understand?”

“Shenanigans?” I said, cocking my head, grinning.

“If it weren’t for the fact that we had no time, I would you be telling you to change right now. As it is, I expect you to be on your best behavior during the Q&A. Understand?”

“But hey, we're pulling it off, aren't we?” I said.

“No. Just...no. We're going to start off the Q&A by explaining it as some kind of joke, and you two are going to answer your own questions as you really are.”

“Okay,” Flashstep said glumly.


“You aren't here to cosplay. You are here to represent the Wards, and you are turning it into a joke. There will be repercussions, I can promise you that.”

Jeez. Someone really woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Did he even have the power to make repercussions?

“The room is opening in two minutes. Go to the back, and wait for my assistant to signal you over to the panel.”

We headed to the back as asked. Flashstep touched one of the chairs along the way.

I see how it is, making a cool entrance for yourself when I can’t right now.

We found a couple of boxes to wait on. Flashstep somehow managed to exaggerate sitting down, appearing daintily. Someone was really enjoying himself. One of Ben's office drones leaned against a wall, tapping away at his phone.

I peeked through a break in the curtain and found Ben fussing with his suit while holding a mirror in front of him.

The con-goers streamed in like a flood all of a sudden, a mass of boys and the occasional girl in all sorts of costumes. I smiled upon noticing a couple Icarus cosplays, though they could use some work at a quick glance. It then struck me that one of them was wearing a prosthetic arm stylized similar to my own, though it was on the other arm.
I supposed that was part of being a hero. It felt odd, having someone look up to me because of...similarities.

Conversation buzzed through the crowd as they sat down, though it didn't take long before everyone found seats. I noticed Ben step forward, and while I couldn't see his face, I could tell his body posture changed entirely. He raised his hands and everyone went silent.

“Greetings to you all, and thank you for attending the April 2010 Wards QA panel. My name is Ben Kessel, and as the head of the PRT Public Relations department, I am pleased to introduce our two heroes who will be here today, with a slight twist.”

His assistant pointed at us and waved. We took that as the signal. As Flashstep disappeared, I walked over to the panel.

“Say hello to Flashstep and our newest Ward, Icarus!”

*What the fuck. He's...not being an asshole?*

Flashstep and I waved as a chorus of applause sounded from the crowd. *This might actually be fun.* Several in the crowd seemed confused, probably given Flashstep's entrance wearing my costume. The rest probably figured it out already.

“Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll leave this up to the two heroes. You may ask your questions.”

Numerous hands went up, and one of Ben's office drones selected one seemingly at random.

A boy wearing an Alexandria t-shirt stood up. “This question is for Flashstep. Can you tag anything with your power?”

“No exactly,” Flashstep said, confusing everyone in the room. “I can tag any solids, whether it be a lamp post or a single speck of dust. I can’t tag any gasses or liquids.”

A girl with a blue hat, that faintly reminded me of some superhero, but I couldn't remember who, stood up. “Are you two wearing each other's costumes?”

“Yes,” I said. “Did you have another question?”

“Oh uh...How are you liking life in the Wards so far?”

“It's nice, actually. A lot of changes to get used to, compared to running solo. Having a teammate to watch my back is nice, and, well, as a Tinker I have a lot more access to tools and materials. Not gonna lie though, the PRT cafeteria will give you powers if you don't have them already.”

Flashstep nodded. “My own changed after eating that goop.”

I was pleased to hear the brief laughter before more hands shot up.

The girl with the missing arm and Icarus cosplay stood up. “I've gotta say, I love the representation we see in the Wards and Protectorate. Makes me feel a bit better.” I smiled as she took a deep breath. “Umm, Icarus, do you ever intend on making some prosthetics for other people?”

I shrugged at that. “It's something I've considered, but Tinkertech requires a lot of maintenance, and even most another Tinkers would have trouble due to my...niche, if you want to call it that? I mean, Having my arm back is great, but I spend hours doing maintenance on it. When you add on the wings...let's just say I don't have much of a social life anymore.” I laughed, a little nervously.
A larger boy in what might have been a Myrddin cosplay based on the...robe stood up. “Hey Icarus, do you have any tips on cosplaying you?”

“Oh, yes!” Now it was time to get even with Jordan for him enjoying this so much. I leaped up, and grabbed Flashstep, who just so happened to be wearing my costume. The next few minutes were spent with me pointing out various details and things while Flashstep stood there awkwardly.

Finally, I showed a little mercy, and let him sit down, “…and that's all I can really think of right now. If I think of anything else, it'll probably end up on PHO or something.” I took a deep breath and sat, ignoring the strange look from Ben.

A guy in a surprisingly good Eidolon costume stood up. “Icarus. Before you joined the Wards, you basically went after the Ravens the whole time. Why did you target them specifically?”

“Because they're disgusting?” I said, a little angrier than I intended. “I grew up in Denver, I've lived here basically my whole life. Next question, please?” I wasn't too confident in my ability to get through that without getting too personal.

A girl, in an extremely good Mouse Protector costume spoke next. “Are either of you dating anyone? Oooh, are you dating each other? That would be so cute!”

“I'm a little busy,” Flashstep spoke up. “Maybe someday.”

“Same,” I said. “Being a Ward makes that sorta thing difficult. Obviously, we're all trying to have a normal life outside of cape stuff, and, well, that's another person you'll end up telling your secret.”

A guy stood up, wearing some kind of cowboy hat and a duster. I could see some weirdly overdesigned boots through the crowd, and he had a lasso hanging at the side. “Flashstep, have you ever considered adding more tools to your belt? Your ninja theme is pretty cool, but I think you could play to it more.”

“I've thought about it. I've been talking to a Tinker who might have something for me soon.”

A girl wearing a Legend t-shirt and colorful armbands stood up. “You wear that Icarus costume very well, Flashstep. Have you ever thought about being a girl before?”

What.

Flashstep cocked his head. “I'm not transgender, if that's what you're asking. I just like this costume. It's cozy.”

A guy wearing a Cupid shirt with a little adorable bow on his back stood up. “Did you deliberately name yourself after someone who died flying? How would you describe your flying skill?”

I laughed. “I actually didn't choose the name. After I first started going out, the Denver Post ran a bit on me and decided to call me Icarus. I hadn't even thought of a cape name at that point, so I just stuck with it. As far as my flying skills go, well, I've had almost a year of practice, even if I've only been active recently.”

An...extremely androgynous small person wearing a hat with the Triumvirate-symbol spoke up next. “Flashstep, what's it like working with a vigilante?”

“I wouldn't know. Icarus helped us out just before joining, but I wouldn't really consider that enough to really answer. Did you have another question?”
“Uh, okay. Do you have any embarrassing stories?”

“Yes,” Flashstep said, nodding. “I don’t actually have to share them, do I?”

“Please?”

The rest of the audience nodded.

Flashstep sighed, his posture slumping in an exaggerated fashion. “In the heat of battle, sometimes miscalculations happen. There’s so much movement from so many sources. Well, I wanted to get behind a mean thug, and when I say mean this guy was freaking six-foot-six or something. I threw a tagged token above him, but, well, I accidentally fell on top of him rather than behind him. He was so surprised that we all fell down, and knocked down a couple other thugs along the way. We...well, we all had to untangle ourselves from each other. I couldn't look any of them in the eyes later when we were moving them to prison vans.”

I could feel the audience cringing. Honestly, I was kinda cringing myself.

A kid with a mop for hair saved the day with a question. “Icarus, you're the newest Ward. Any pranks they play on the newbies?”

I smiled, although the audience couldn't see it behind the bandanna Flashstep used for a mask. “If there are, I haven't found out yet. Of course, I had a pretty unusual first day, so...” I trailed off with a laugh.

A blonde-haired girl in a dress had the next question. “Icarus, is Tank Buster as big in person as he looks under the armor?”

“Uh,” I paused. I was not about to risk outing Naomi. “I wouldn't know. TB never takes the armor off. Your guess is as good as mine,” I said in a fairly sarcastic tone.

The questions continued for some time, but eventually we found ourselves watching the crowd filter their way out of the room.

Ben came up, looking almost normal. His scathing anger must have cooled. “That could have been worse,” he said flatly.

“Thanks,” Flashstep said in response. I nodded. Coming from Ben, that was probably the highest praise one could expect.

“Okay. Go away now,” Ben said, back to his usual cheery self.

“Cool. Hey, Flashstep, wanna go check out the vendor hall?”

“Race you there,” he said, and a second later he disappeared.

Asshole.

“...I'm just saying, he makes a good point. Even without beef, the bell peppers are still bell peppers and beef.” I said from my spot curled up on the couch.

“Can you two please shush about bell peppers? I think I'm losing brain cells over this,” Naomi said
from her curled up position on the other side of the couch. She was typing away at a laptop *as always*.

“I mean, Brenna, Naomi is right. You're making an awfully big deal about an anime that only aired one episode before...yeah,” Jordan said, still wearing my costume. I was still wearing his, but...

“One episode? You're off tonight, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, cool. Naomi, plug your ears for a second...So, fun fact. On *Earth Aleph* Cowboy Bebop ran for twenty-six episodes. And guess who scored a bootleg copy of the whole series when she first started beating up thugs and taking their money.”

Naomi focused very intently on whatever boring stuff she had going on.


“Woo! Okay, I'm gonna go get into something that isn't crushing me, and then we can start watching,” I said excitedly. “Oh, this is going to be so great!”

Without waiting to hear his response, I ran back into my room and peeled myself out of Jordan's costume, breathing a sigh of relief as I could suddenly breathe again. A quick moment to get into my pajamas and grab my laptop, and I made my way back out.

It only took a few seconds to get my laptop's screen pulled up on the big wall TV we had in the headquarters. I turned to see Naomi looking at me.

“For someone who claims to be bad at computers, you seem fairly competent when it comes to anime.”

I shrugged. “In my defense, this is literally the only thing I know how to do. I had to call up an old friend to help me download the actual episodes onto my RAM.”

Naomi looked at me blankly before returning to her *paperwork*. The best anime of all time, better than even Fatality Crusade, and she was doing *paperwork*.

Jordan was already sitting on the couch, and I plopped next to him after starting the video. “Oh, this is gonna be fun! It'll be my first rewatch, I can't wait to see everything I missed the first time around.”

Jordan didn't respond, and I was too focused on the screen to look at him.

Even with the degraded video quality—reducing filesize was apparently a necessity when sending things through Professor Haywire's portal, and TV shows weren't a huge priority—it was amazing. I found myself glued to the screen, idly leaning against Jordan as we watched.

I smiled smugly as I noticed that Naomi was trying very hard to pretend not to be watching the anime with us. Our eyes met at one point, and I saw her smile for once before she quickly looked back at her laptop.

We got five episodes in before my phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket.

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-2150): good to go, I'm heading out now*

“Everything okay, Brenna?” Jordan asked, “You just got really tense.”
“Yeah,” I said with a shrug. “I just have a contact that might have some information for us, I'm gonna go check it out.” I'd been practicing the lie enough that it came easily. I extracted myself from his warmth somewhat regretfully. “Where'd you put my costume?”

“Oh, uh, it's on my bedroom floor.”

“Oh?” Naomi said with a smirk, paying way too much attention to us.

I didn’t deem that worthy of a response, instead running over to Jordan's little cubby and getting changed. It took a minute or so to get my wings back on, but then I was ready to go.

“Icarus,” Naomi said seriously. “I'll be suiting up, ready to move if you find something worth investigating. Radio us the situation. That's an order.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. Could I tell her? Or at least drop a hint to expect a call?...No. If Tank Buster were to show up, Blink would call it off, and I'd lose my chance. I nodded. “I don't think much will happen, though, but thanks for watching my back. I'll let you know if things turn hairy.”

“I'll suit up too,” Jordan added.

Naomi nodded at that. “Remember that we have your back. You aren't a solo hero.”

“Okay, cool. Your costume's on my bedroom floor, Jordan,” I said, shooting him finger guns. Which was admittedly a lot cooler when one of your arms was actually a gun.

Not wanting to say anything else, I clipped my mask into place and made my way out the HQ. By the time I made it to the elevator, it had initialized.

As the elevator made its way silently to the roof, I began a hardware diagnostic, the first step of my familiar pre-mission routine.

*Initiating full hardware diagnostic check...complete*
*ACESO Mk 3 Blood Filtration System - nominal*
*ACHILLES Mobility Enhancement System - nominal*
*ERIS Mk 2 Radio/Navigation/Combat Interface - nominal*
*ICARUS Mk 3 Biomechanical Flight Apparatus - nominal, fuel and power subsystems at 100%*
*XIAOLONG Mk 5 Weaponized Forearm Replacement - nominal, 3/3 installed weapon modules fully armed*

*Current system time is 24 Apr 2010, 11:42:26 PM*
*Transmitting encrypted geolocation telemetry to den.internal.protectorate.gov port 2947*

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped out onto the roof. A reinforced landing pad dominated most of the space, but that wasn't were I headed. I walked over to the ledge, looking down at the cars far below, their headlights tiny dots in the darkness, like ants from this height.

I took a deep breath. No going back.

A combination of mental connections and eye-tracking hardware made navigating my HUD's many menus simple. In only a few seconds, a new message flashed onto the lenses of my mask.

*Geolocation telemetry service halted. Connection to den.internal.protectorate.gov terminated.*

I jumped.
I stepped back into the Wards floor the feet of my zero-suit making loud thunking sounds, nodding to Flashstep who sat in a chair now fully costumed. I hoped I was over-reacting, suiting up already, but the way Brenna tensed up... I was worried. I couldn't say why, but I wanted to be sure we could respond at a moment's notice. I sat down on the couch, intent on continuing my work, but I kept an eye on the tracker and an ear on the comms. Icarus was still around—

Warning: Dropped connection from DEN/WARD/ICARUS not replaced with new connection. Press any key to dismiss this alert.

“What the fuck?” I exclaimed. Flashstep jumped up.

“What's going on?” he asked.

“Either Icarus's location tracker just stopped working, or else she disabled it personally.”

Why would she do that?

I thought back to her mood whiplash earlier.

“What? Why?”

“I don't know,” I said, closing the laptop and setting it aside. “But I'm intent on finding out. Let's go.”

I didn't waste any time in heading for the elevator. Flashstep didn't say anything, but I could see him shaking. He was scared. Honestly, I was scared too. I had a really bad feeling about this, and I desperately hoped I would be wrong.

I thumbed the button for my suit's comms. “PRT Dispatch, this is Tank Buster. You have security cameras on the roofs, correct?”

“TB, this is Dispatch speaking. That is correct,” the familiar voice of my aunt replied. I'd forgotten she was working tonight. “What's going on?”

“Icarus left the building from just now. Tell me what direction she went.”

There was a pause. Too long. We were in the garage and almost to my bike.

“I'm gonna have you ride with me, Flashstep. It'll be better than your usual method of transportation, at least until we find something,” I said.
Flashstep nodded.

The radio buzzed, “We have confirmed Icarus left the PRT headquarters bearing zero-nine-zero.”

_Due east._

“Copy that. Flashstep and myself are suited up and heading after her.” I said as we seated ourselves. I noted Flashstep awkwardly held the back of the seat. I rolled my eyes. “Just hold onto me.”

“Oka–AAAAA!”

I lurched forward, just quickly enough to interrupt Flashstep as we rolled out into the night.

**Blink**

The streets of Denver lay beneath me as I flew through the cool night air.

Once when I was younger, I wished that I could fly like the big superheroes like Alexandria and Focal Point. Now that I could, I just about regretted that wish as if it was somehow to blame. There was no joy. It didn't help that I couldn't even feel any wind.

I'd wondered if we were all just cursed somehow, having all these fantastic powers as a result of trauma. What had made Branwen, the cape that I was looking for? For that matter, what made Brenna the way she was? And what made me? I didn't know anymore.

I was shaken out of my thoughts by a nearby shriek.

Branwen had noticed my intrusion fairly quickly, and was all too eager to do away with subtlety this time around, it seemed. To my left, a massive crow with razor-sharp talons, big enough to easily skewer a person. She opened her beak and let out an almost-alien sounding screech.

She charged me, her beak clacking open and shut with bone-shattering strength as she closed the gap between us, but my ability to move in any direction and ignore all momentum gave me an advantage she didn't have. I could only go so far so quickly, so I had to make this as brief as I could. I didn't want to be on the receiving end of her horrifyingly long and sharp-looking claws. I couldn't help but notice her beak curved a little more than I remembered from last time. I winced at the thought of it.

Most striking, however, were her eyes. Dark and beady, but I could practically feel the malevolence. _Hunt. Chase. Kill._ I had no doubt that the moment I gave her the chance, I would be shredded.

I was not going to leave Jess alone in this world. I kept myself steady, waiting for the right moment. I teleported up and to the left, avoiding both her wingspan and her claws. Branwen couldn't correct in time, speeding right past me.

Despite what Icarus said before, I wasn't too sure Branwen would follow me so mindlessly. I needed to make a ploy, rather than immediately flee. As she started to veer around, I charged her myself, baton extended.

I swiped my baton at her. There was no force to it, but it was only for the ruse, so that didn't matter.

It connected, but as I tried to move away, her claws raked across my shoulder, slicing easily through my costume and digging into flesh.

I yelled out, clutching the wound. My shoulder was bleeding, but the wound wasn't deep. It stung more than anything.
Branwen charged me again, but thankfully I was able to dodge without harm, and this time I opted to fly towards where Icarus should be waiting.

I glanced back at Branwen, who had veered and seemed to be staring at my wound as she circled me. I could almost sense...excitement from the bird. Something between a caw and a shriek that almost made me want to cover my ears with how loud it was.

Blood dripped from the talon that raked me. I struggled to focus my mind. I was not about to let Jess down. Or Icarus. I pressed forward, gaining speed.

I couldn't access my phone, but I'd made sure I knew the appropriate landmarks, and we planned for a position that would be easy to recognize. One of countless disused or abandoned factories, in this case a block of them next to the highway, northwest of Arsenal—Northwest of the Ravens.

Maintaining a lead was difficult, and Branwen caught up, slowly but surely. Dammit. I didn't want to have to dodge another charge, given I pushing my luck.

I looked down at the streets that I passed. A beep sounded in my ear, from the earpiece Brenna had given me. From our testing, the day after we'd met, I knew it meant she was close.

As discretely as I could, I whispered, "I'm almost there, get ready."

"Affirmative," Icarus answered a moment later, her voice uncomfortably clear in my ear.

As I flew close to the meeting area, I slowed down a little and faced Branwen, taking my arm off my shoulder to grab my baton. She continued on her path, intent on charging me, extending herself as far as she could, probably to counter my movements.

She never got a chance, as a sudden roar of jets sounded, with Icarus dropping down from above, fist slamming into Branwen's back. Branwen fell, her momentum carrying her forward until she slammed into the smokestack of an abandoned factory building. The impact thundered throughout the area, sounds of breaking brickwork and metal giving way clearly audible. A shower of feathers, three or four feet long, floated towards the ground.

Without so much as a glance at me, Icarus chased after, slamming another iron punch into Branwen before she could recover.

Branwen struck out at Icarus with her claws with a shriek, but only dealt a glancing blow as Icarus flew back up. I didn't see any blood, so it might have just hit armor, but I couldn't be sure. Either way, Icarus didn't seem too concerned.

Below, I could see Branwen rapidly shift to her human form and back, returning as a slightly-smaller crow. Still massive, but somehow more...sleek? She leaped up, black wings pushing her through the air as she followed Icarus up, managing to dodge as the hero dropped back down into a freefall.

Branwen dropped down after her, and thrust her beak at Icarus. The hero grabbed her beak with a metal hand, and I could almost hear a crunch as she she squeezed down, the tip of Branwen's beak crumpling. Branwen began convulsing, furious caws echoing through the empty streets, and managed to strike Icarus with a wing, freeing herself from the Ward's grasp. The hero was able to slow her landing, but still hit the ground pretty heavily. I had moved to catch her, but she was too close to the ground for me to reach. I couldn't help but wince at the sound of the impact.

"I'm good, just stay back," she said through the comms.

_Dammit Brenna, you better be fine._
I blinked back as Icarus flew back up, her costume covered in brick dust, but otherwise seemingly unharmed. Branwen had landed on the roof, recovering from the brief shock, but dove off the building even as Icarus flew at her, lifting off before she could hit the ground. Icarus gave chase, heading back up into the sky until she was a couple hundred feet above the ground. She stopped there, floating in place with the roar of jets and the beating of metal wings keeping her stable and hovering.

Branwen circled her, and the hero turned, facing Branwen at all times. Eventually Branwen charged again, swerving away as she reached Icarus. She repeated this motion a couple times, clearly messing with her.

Finally, Branwen didn't swerve on her next charge, slamming into Icarus. Obvious though the tactic might have been, Icarus still mistimed whatever Branwen was doing and suffered a blow for it, massive talons grabbing her and flinging her towards the ground. This time, Branwen pushed the advantage, and as Icarus hit the ground, she landed next to Icarus and grabbed the hero in her ruined beak. Thankfully, I was close enough to touch Icarus before Branwen could bite down all the way.

“Let go of me, I'm fine,” Icarus said in a hard tone as I used my power to blink her away. I obliged, and she flew back off, the rest of her words coming from the earpiece. “And stay back, I can handle her myself.”

I didn't respond. I flew back to watch with uncertainty. Icarus seemed way too confident, especially given she suffered blows already. It was subtle, but I could see the stiffness and pained body language. At the rate she was going, the battle couldn't last much longer. I resolved to fly her out if things turned for the worse, no matter what she said.

Branwen, clearly irritated by this point, dove down from above to charge me, only to be intercepted by Icarus, who fired some sort of gun out of her arm. Her shot ripped into one of Branwen's wings, causing her to spin out and hit the roof of one of the industrial complexes, a several story-high building below us.

Branwen shifted back into her human form, exploding into a puff of feathers, and immediately shifted back, feathers roughly ripping their way through her skin...only to get hit by a blast of containment foam Icarus shot at her from her arm.

The foam spread rapidly, encasing Branwen's feet in the thick, sticky substance. She struggled to get free, cawing with passionate hatred, but her struggles only succeeded in getting a wing caught in the expanding foam.

An explosion of feathers, and she tried to escape as a human this time, but the foam was still stuck to her legs, and she could not pull free. There was a pop as Icarus shut off her engines and dropped the ten or so feet to the roof, landing in front of the captured Raven. I could see Branwen say something, but my ears were still ringing from the engine sounds and gunshot, so I couldn't hear from where I was.

“Nice! You got her–” I started to say, but she cut me off.

“Yeah. I can get it from here, Blink. Thanks for your help,” Icarus replied over the radio. She sounded...off, somehow, like her voice lacked something. Some emotion I couldn't name.

Concerned but not wanting to be seen when the PRT showed up, I flew off but stayed in the area, hiding nearby where I could still see. Branwen was as good as captured...but something didn't feel right. The way Icarus stood over Branwen felt wrong. She seemed nothing like the girl I shared a meal with at the park just earlier in the week.
From their body language alone I could tell they were having a conversation. I couldn't tell what, but something Branwen said to Icarus apparently struck a nerve, and the Ward threw a punch, hitting her in the ribs. I could almost feel the rage. I couldn't stay back. Not with how this all felt.

Even though I'd been completely silent, Icarus spun to face me before I traveled more than ten feet. “Stay back, Blink. It's fine.”

I stopped in place, but I did not move back. “You didn't need to hit her. She's already subdued. She'll be in the Birdcage before long.”

“Isabelle. Stay the fuck back,” she snarled over the radio. “You don't know what she's done—to me, to others, to your fucking dead friend. A punch is the least she deserves.” I could feel the glare from Icarus even from my distant position as she stared me down, fifty yards away.

Finally, she broke off eye contact with me, turning back to face Branwen, pulling her mask off and letting it drop to her feet, the sharp clatter of metal hitting concrete cutting through the night breeze.

“Icarus. Brenna.” She didn't answer. She couldn't, with her mask off, I realized. Not unless I got close enough to yell at her.

“Fuck you,” I said, knowing she couldn't hear me. How dare she mention Jenna in such a way? Still, I didn't move, as if rooted to where I ‘stood’ in the air.

Icarus had said that her and Branwen had history. I couldn't help but wonder if the only reason she went after the Ravens—if the only reason she helped me—was so she could engage in some vendetta...I didn't want to think that. Icarus was just wound up, and needed to take it out. Given what Branwen had done, I had to admit she probably deserved a punch or two before being shipped off.

Icarus threw another punch, causing Branwen to fall back, legs still pinned by foam. More yelling from Icarus as she glared down at the fallen Raven—without her mask I could see the tears rolling down her face as she shouted.

*What did she do to you?*

Branwen was silent, staring up at her. Then I saw a panel on Icarus's arm move open.

No. She couldn't. She wouldn't. It was more spray, I'm sure. It wasn't the shotgun module I saw earlier. No.

I flew forward towards her, scared with the possibility that I was wrong, that Icarus would...

I was only a few yards away when the sounds of repeated gunfire thundered through the area as Brenna's arm jerked with the recoil.

Branwen reacted with something between a gasp and a shout, blood preventing her from anything coherent. Blood sprayed from the multiple wounds in her chest.

I was no medic, but it was obvious there was no returning from that. I looked back at Branwen's eyes, which already seemed devoid of life.

I floated just over to the side, two feet away from...

The vigilante who helped me despite my history.

The cute girl in the park.
The murderer standing in a rapidly-growing pool of blood.

What. The. \textit{Fuck}?

I looked over at Icarus, who had stepped back from the blood.

I couldn't say how I felt.

I was angry, for being \textit{used} in murder. Was all this a revenge fantasy after all?

I was sad, as Icarus felt \textit{this} was what she had to do. Branwen was down. She was by all accounts going to the Birdcage. There was no reason for this, except from whatever Icarus felt.

I was then empty, again. I put my trust in her, and she had betrayed me. I wasn't sure I could trust any of our previous interactions. \textit{God dammit. Why did you have to do this, Brenna? What happened to you?}

I was close enough now to hear her whisper as she looked down at Branwen's corpse. “Now we're even.” She didn't look over at me, I wasn't sure if she knew I was there, or cared.

Icarus pulled her mask out of the pool of blood, left there from when she had dropped it. She didn't put it back on, just stepped away, her heeled costume boots making splashing sounds as she crossed the rooftop. She sat against a rusted-out air conditioner and stared at the bloody lenses of the skull mask with a blank look. I floated over, my mess of emotions preventing me from just leaving without saying anything.

“Was it worth it?” I asked, quietly, my voice shaking as I pulled my own mask off.

Icarus didn't respond at first, still looking down at her blood-soaked mask. Finally she looked up, her tear-filled eyes meeting mine, a look I couldn't quite place. “I'm sorry I got you involved.”

“Yeah,” I said after a pause. “Fuck you.”

I wanted to say more. Instead, I turned and flew off.

\textbf{Tank Buster}

“We've been driving for about an hour now,” Flashstep complained.

I ignored him, focusing on driving and listening in on police radio. There wasn't anything going on so far.

“...someone called in about a giant bird flying northwest over off of...Chambers and 60th. Think we should call the PRT?”

“Nah, there's sightings all the time around here. Let it–”

I turned out the radio chatter now, bringing the motorcycle to a stop.

“What is it?” Flashstep asked.

I checked the map on my phone. It could mean nothing, but the street was very close to our location. It was better than mindlessly driving around.

“Might be nothing, but let's check it out anyway.”
Flashstep nodded, and I sped away again down the quiet streets. A minute later, we were there.

There was nothing around the intersection besides some hobos sleeping at a bus shelter, so I drove roughly northwest.

A few minutes passed, with no sightings. It was a big area to cover, and the idea had been a long shot at best—I froze, as a four-foot long feather drifted down to land on top of a parked car.

Branwen was certainly around, then.

We continued our way through Arsenal, occasionally spotting more and more feathers as time went on. Slummy residential complexes became worn-down industrial buildings as we made our way through the neighborhood...

At the very least, if this had nothing to do with Icarus, Branwen was never up to anything good.

The radio crackled. “Wards, this is PRT Dispatch. Status update?”

“This is Tank Buster. Flashstep and I are investigating a Branwen sighting.”

“Copy that. Do you need Protectorate assistance?”

“No. At least, not yet. I'll radio in if it's needed.”

“Copy that.”

Gunshots thundered through the area suddenly—nearby. I thought I could hear something else, but I wasn't sure.

“Shit. Flashstep, hand me a token.”

He nodded, handing me one after a pause. I took hold of the token and, using assistance from my helmet's display, threw it up towards the roof of the nearest building.

“Pretty sure I got it. Flashstep, check from up high, but be careful. I don't want you getting shot.”

Flashstep nodded and disappeared. I continued forward quickly, but cautiously, keeping my senses on alert.

“TB! Please look up!” Flashstep said into the radio, panicked. He was standing on the lip of the rooftop, waving down at me.

“What's going on,” I asked as I looked up at him.

“Get on top of the building over there,” he said, pointing at the abandoned industrial building across the street and down a short ways.

It looked worse for wear, even moreso than its neighbors, I noticed as I rushed over. Huge black feathers littered the area around it. I looked around before spotting an old truck. With my power armor, I could leap up on top of it. From there, I leaped onto an overhang, and I climbed the rest of the way up the tiered structure, until I was perhaps forty feet above the ground.

I finally reached the roof, and I could hardly believe my eyes.

Brenna sat in a almost a fetal position, staring at her mask. Beside her was a naked body, the skin of her face and shoulders covered in goosebumps and tiny bloody pinpricks. The body of a woman
surrounded by her feathers, lying in a pool of blood.

_Branwen_.

Between multiple gunshot wounds, the frozen look in the woman's eyes, and the stench of human waste, it was obvious she was dead. It wasn't the first time I'd seen a dead body, but I knew, just like the others, that the image would haunt me.

I had to activate my mask's air filter. I never could stand the stench of the recently diseased.

I didn't want to believe that Brenna was a murderer, but she was the only one here. And I knew that she had a weapon module capable of leaving those wounds.

It struck me that my hands were shaking. I took a deep breath to steady myself. It didn't work

“Brenna...”

I felt like I couldn't use her cape name with her mask off. I couldn't say why.

“Brenna, what happened here?”
Brenna didn't respond. She just stared at her mask with the same expression, one I couldn't hope to identify. Shock? Horror? Fear? No. It was that, but it was something more.
“Brenna...”

I trailed off. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to feel. What should I say? What can I say? Brenna murdered someone. Dammit, she had only been with us for two weeks, but already it felt like she'd become a part of us. She'd fought with us, shared in our jokes. I'd seen how she interacted with Jordan. I'd even felt myself growing closer to her than the others...

But there she was.

Blood.

Murder.

What do you even do?

Tears rolled down Brenna's face. What was she feeling?

Did it even matter?

I was startled by the crackle of the radio.

“Tank Buster, this is Dispatch. We noticed you've been stopped for a while. What's the situation?”

I couldn't remain frozen. I let my training kick in.

“Stand by,” I said, as I turned to face my friend.

“You have the option to put on your mask or to drop it,” I ordered, shakily.

Brenna looked up at me briefly before looking back down. She dropped the mask.

“Get down on the ground. Hands behind your head.”

She did so, expression unchanging the whole time. It was as if she was in a daze. Did she know what was happening at this point? Did I?

As I brought out the handcuffs, it occurred to me that Brenna could just pop off her prosthetic arm. She didn't seem in any sort of condition to be trying to escape, though–

I felt something grab my wrist, and I turned to see Flashstep.

“Wh–what are you doing?” Flashstep asked.

“What do you think?” I said bitterly. “I'm arresting a murderer.”

“But...there's no way she did it. How could you arrest our friend?”

“I...”

I dropped the handcuffs.Fuck, no, I need to pick them up. I needed to...

...I...I didn't know. I...

I pulled my helmet off. Dropped it to the ground. I...

“Brenna...” Flashstep trailed off. “Hey, speak to us? Please?”
He was kneeling down next to Brenna. When did that happen?

“I should have said something,” Brenna finally said, weakly.

“Is this why you turned off your tracking? As part of a plan for...this?” I said, wincing at how accusatory I sounded.

“No...yes...I didn’t...it wasn’t supposed to go this far. I was going to foam her, and...and call it in.”

“Why couldn't you have fucking called us before?” I half shouted, half sobbed. I didn't even notice the tears until now.

“Because I didn't want you here!” Brenna shouted, standing up angrily. She walked a few steps away, towards the ledge of the building. “She didn't kidnap you. She didn't cause you to fucking trigger and turn you into a monster. It wasn't your fucking fight, Naomi.”

“You're not a monster,” I said quietly. “But... Goddammit, Brenna.” I found myself shouting. “How many times do you I have to tell you that you don't have to fight solo?” I felt the urge to hit something, anything! “Dammit. You might not give a shit about us, but we sure as hell care about you!”

Brenna shook her head, and sat down on the ledge of the roof, her legs hanging over. There was a pop and her wings fell off her back, clattering to the ground. I stared into the empty sockets. Her arm fell off a second later, resting next to her, motors winding down. “If that were true, then you would know why it had to be me,” she said quietly.

With a command and a hiss, I stepped back out of my armor. I winced as my bare feet touched the chilly concrete. I walked over to the ledge and sat down next to Brenna. I felt a tap on my shoulder as Jordan walked over to sit on the other side.

“I guess it's only been two weeks,” I said after a pause. “Isn't really enough time to get to know someone.”

“I know you're pretty cool, Brenna,” Jordan added quietly.

“I thought I could handle it,” she said. “Lured her in, took her down...it was all going well...but...” Brenna paused, swallowed. “I fucking shot her. Killed her. And you know what? It felt good. What the fuck does that make me?”

“Human, I guess?” I said, almost without thinking. “Fuck, I don't even really blame you. Not after what you told me.”

Brenna didn't respond. She looked towards the ground. I wasn't sure what else to say, so I placed my hand on her shoulder.

Dammit.

She took a deep, shaky breath. “I guess this...this is it. I know you have to...Birdcage...” she trailed off. “Without my arm and wings there's not much I can do.”

*I hope I don't regret this.*

I looked directly at Flashstep. Our eyes met.

Flashstep nodded.
“Brenna. You were out doing some late night patrolling. Branwen attacked you using lethal force. You fought back to save your life,” I said.

“You don’t have to do this, Naomi,” Brenna said, almost angrily.

“Letting you go to the Birdcage won’t solve anything. Dammit, Brenna, I know enough to know...you’re no monster. That–” I pointed at the body. Between the blood and feathers, she barely looked human. “Was a monster. The things she and the others did...still do...no. I don’t think we should go off and kill them, not unless they get a kill order. But if you just let us help you...please. Brenna.”

“If it got out...you know you’d both be complicit,” she said, looking at me, then at Flashstep. “It’d be us three, enjoying Dragon’s cooking in the Birdcage.”


“Okay,” Brenna said quietly.

I nodded. “Okay, I’m going to go call it in.”

I carefully stood back up and walked back to my suit. I glanced over at the body before entering my suit.

“Dispatch, this is Tank Buster. There was an altercation with one casualty. It’s Branwen.”

“...Understood. We're sending support.”

“I guess all we have to do is wait,” I said. “Brenna...it might be best if you put your, uh, limbs back on.”

Brenna nodded. I noticed Flashstep reach over to help as I turned away.

Am I doing the right thing?

I couldn’t say. Most of the time, right and wrong seemed...

Actually, no, that would’ve been a lie. It was murky everywhere in this world. Even the way we approach villains...

I shook off my thoughts. I needed to focus on salvaging this situation. I turned back to Brenna, who was reattaching a wing with Flashstep’s help. She sighed as it clasped into place.

“Brenna. Your mask does video feed, right? You should wipe today. All of it. Your tracking turning off was a bug that you’re going to fix, a new tinker with untested equipment.”

Brenna nodded.

“And both of you, remember what happened. Brenna was attacked. She fought back. We were too late to help her end it non-lethally.”

Brenna and Flashstep both nodded. I picked up Brenna’s mask and handed it off. She hesitated for a moment before taking it.

She put the mask on, seemingly oblivious to the blood covering the outside of it. I could see her eyes darting frantically behind the lenses. Even now, seeing her with that same look all us Tinkers got
when we were working, she felt different.

I turned away, looking out across the city.

Arsenal was a lot more beautiful in the darkness, when you couldn't see the husks of run-down buildings, or the husks of run-down, tired people with no better options. It was oddly quiet, with only the sounds of crickets chirping in the weeds far below.

The silence was broken by the distinctive sound of PRT sirens, and soon the flashing white and green lights were here, reflecting off the buildings across from us.

I stepped to the edge, looking down at the vehicles. Three PRT vans, and out of one stepped a pair of capes. Bunker and Umbra.

Bunker looked up at me as he approached, his hand going to his ear.

“Tank Buster, this is Bunker. I've been briefed on the situation. Is the body on the roof?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

It always unnerved me how dark Bunker's forcefields were. I'd always thought of forcefields as glowing, but his didn't give off any light. I could barely see the supporting ‘beams’ form, followed by the staircase. After only a few seconds of formation, Bunker and Umbra were walking up.

And then he was here, looking over us. I could see his eyes darting behind his mask. He looked at me, then his eyes shot to Branwen's corpse, then to Icarus and Flashstep. Icarus had taken her mask off again, and was holding it in one hand, not really paying attention.

Umbra followed, not looking at any of us. Around her, her ‘spirits’ circled, only half-formed, barely visible clouds of glowing mist. She didn't seem aware of them, but then again, it was Umbra.

“Any injuries?” Bunker asked, looking directly at Icarus and Flashstep.

Flashstep glanced at Brenna.

“Nothing that needs immediate attention,” I said.

Bunker nodded. “What happened?”

“I...I was meeting a source, for information,” Brenna said quietly. “It was supposed to be quick. I was on my way back, when...” she shuddered, and looked down. It almost looked like she was about to start crying again.

“Icarus was ambushed by Branwen. We...found her in shock. We were too late to help her. She had to save herself however she could,” I finished for her.

“I see,” Bunker said, looking back at Branwen's corpse. “There was no mention of Icarus over the comms.”

“My mask has been acting up,” she said. “A bug with the telemetry subsystem. I didn't think it would be needed for...for a quick flight across town.”

Bunker gazed at Icarus for an uncomfortable second.

“You know no one's going to actually believe that,” Bunker finally said.
“Wha–” I shouldn't have been surprised, given who Bunker was.

“I wasn't finished,” Bunker interrupted. “No one will believe, but in this instance you are incredibly lucky, because no one is going to want to press the issue.” He paused, and gave me that same look that Flashstep had shared with me. “We've been dancing around putting a kill order on her for the past few months. With how that fucking bird carved a bloody swath through Denver.... Too bold.”

What.

“You--you're just going to cover this up?” I said.

“It wouldn't be the first time. Of course, the Director will have to be convinced. She won't be too happy.”

“Why would you do this for us?” I asked. It...didn't seem like Bunker.

“I'm not doing this for you, Henry,” Bunker said angrily. “And I don't need to explain myself. The bottom line is Icarus tasted enough vengeance, judging by how she's shivering there.” He shook his head slowly. “There won't be a next time.”

I had to bite my tongue at the use of my deadname. It wasn't a time I could call him out, and we both knew it.

“You know what has to happen now,” he continued. “Umbra, stand guard.” Without any further ado, Bunker turned, and strode back down his staircase.

Umbra stepped forward, the mist around her coalescing into a pair of misty figures, one that looked like a teenage boy, and a dog. Nathan and Juno. Each was connected to Umbra by a faint line of energy.

_Poor pup. He didn't have to go that way._

“Hey, Naomi,” she said quietly after a moment, in that strange voice of hers. “Long time no see.”

“You too, Emma. How's the Protectorate been?” God, it felt weird talking to her like this. But at least she was trying, even if the timing was...bad.

“It's been...fine,” Umbra replied.

I simply nodded. Before I had a chance to say anything further, a pair of armored PRT officers appeared at the top of the staircase. One had her helmet off, and the other carried a confoam sprayer.

The unhelmeted officer's eyes went a little wide when she saw Branwen's corpse, and she said something quietly into the earpiece she wore. The fact that it wasn't on one of the channels my comms suite had access to was telling.

She gave me an apologetic smile. “Tank Buster, I've been ordered to relay to you that Director Meyer has been briefed, and is expecting you two in her office once we get back downtown,” she said in a tone that implied _good luck_. “My team will take the suspect into custody.”

I simply nodded. “Icarus.” She looked up from where she was sitting. I walked over, kneeling next to her and speaking quietly. “This...might be difficult, but stay calm, okay? It's all SOP for the situation. Mask on, and get up.”

She complied, not saying anything.
I stepped to the side with Flashstep, watching the PRT officers as they approached Icarus, who had just placed her mask on.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may–”

I tuned out the officer, already having memorized both versions. A part of me said that it was wrong, to be a part of a cover-up.

But she was my friend. She wasn't a monster. The Ravens...they did this to her. No, that didn't excuse her actions.

What it did mean, was that she could be helped. She could still be a hero.

I glanced over at Flashstep, whose eyes were closed as if in thought.

“–have the right to remain masked and keep your identity. You–”

Knowing him, he wouldn't have to justify it as hard. I couldn't help but think of their earlier moments. Those two were growing close. How would this affect it?

_Hah. Here am I thinking about everyone's relationships with all this going on._

I watched as they led Icarus over towards Bunker's stairs. She was slumped, walking with the barest amount of energy possible.

_Hang in there._

I turned around and leaped off the edge, landing on the ground heavily, the weight of my power armor causing the ground to tremble. Flashstep was already waiting for me at my motorcycle, as I made my way over to it.

I shoved through the door, greeted with the sight of Bunker and Director Meyer already sitting. The Director's gaze was intense. It felt like her heterochromatic eyes were gazing through my helmet, unhindered by the mirrored glass of my visor. Neither said anything as I took my seat, the door softly clicking shut as I did. With a slight hiss, I took my helmet off. I guess I forgot to disable the filter.

I sighed internally. The Director was probably waiting for me to speak so she could interrupt.

“Direct–”

“Tank Buster, why the fuck did your newest team member, who hasn't even gotten so much as a fucking paycheck yet, go out by herself with the express purpose of starting a war with the Ravens?” she asked.

_Shit._ Never had I seen her this angry before. Usually she was much more...restrained.

Based on what Bunker had said earlier on the roof, there was no way she was buying the excuse we were going to bring up. As much as I wanted to fudge events or keep some things secret, our best option would be to hand over every ounce of information.

I had to trust Bunker would be right, as hard as it was to put ‘trust’ and ‘Bunker’ in the same thought. That this would be covered up.
“She said she was checking out a source—”

“Horseshit.”

“Obviously,” I hissed. “I ordered Flashstep to suit up and go on standby along with me in case she needed us, but she turned off tracking.”

“And you. Didn't. Think. To tell anyone? That the vigilante you vouched for had gone rogue?”

I winced.

“When I asked Dispatch which direction Icarus went, I thought it was implied.”

“The Protectorate, and by extension the Wards, exist solely under the purview of the PRT. That you failed to adequately communicate a rogue agent speaks volumes about you, Tank Buster,” she spat.

She had a point. I let my emotions take over, and I forgot simple protocols.

A part of me wondered why I should stick my neck out with someone I only knew for two weeks.

Yet in those two weeks...

“You seem judgmental for someone who consistently fails to communicate with said Wards, Director,” Bunker spoke out.

...Holy shit, John.

Director Meyer slammed her fist on the table.

“If the Wards require more babying, that is a completely separate issue. We're discussing the fucking mess Tank Buster's Ward just made.”

“Branwen was on her way to having a kill order placed on her,” Bunker said.

“This—”

“Except time and again you shot that down. It's been discussed for months. Every single damn person agreed that she needed to be put down for the massacre she's gleefully perpetrated. How in the hell did you not predict this outcome?”

Once again, I had to grudgingly acknowledge that Bunker was team leader for a reason. As much as I...hated was the wrong word. I didn't hate him. Even if Tim...No. This was not the place to relieve that memory.

“Be that as—”

Bunker interrupted again. “How well do you think it would go? Newest Ward murders villain after only two weeks? Personally, I would prefer the headline ‘Villain dies in shootout with PRT’, or something of the like.”

“You want to cover this up,” the Director said flatly.

He smiled. “You know it's the best option.”

“Just let Icarus and Tank Buster off the hook. Free of consequences.”
“No. Heavily restrict Icarus, and deal with Tank Buster's incompetence however you want to. The details can be worked out.”

I was wondering when he'd go back to form. Still, for now he was on my side. Director Meyer paused for a moment, contemplating.

“We are still going to have a war on our hands. One that our fucking Wards started. The Ravens, just like anyone with a fucking ounce of common sense, will see right through this. There will be blood in the streets.”

“That was always going to be inevitable when you forced us to ignore the Ravens until they grew to be...this. You were too fucking busy trying to keep some form of balance that you ignored what was really going on. I'm ashamed that I haven't said this before. This is on you as much as it is on Icarus, or Tank Buster, or me.”

“Your insubordination aside, you still want to let Icarus be free to murder again?”

“I saw the look in Icarus's eyes. In her posture. I've seen it before. I've seen this before. Put her in a room with Cupid, and then tell me that she'll kill again.”

Nobody said anything for a moment.

“Tank Buster,” the Director said, not breaking her glare at Bunker. “Can you control her? Will this happen again?”

“Control?” I said. I didn't like how she used that word. “It won't happen again. I will watch her, and make sure she's never alone in costume.”

“Good,” she replied flatly, standing and pulling something out of her pocket. A voice recorder. “Because if it happens again, you'll both have your heads on the chopping block alongside her. This all still has to be run through Washington, in any case.”

“I understand. I'll accept that risk,” I said.

Bunker didn't respond to the Director, opting to glare instead as he stood up. I stood up as well. Seemed the meeting was about over.

Whatever happened next...was out of my hands.

**Icarus**

“...Icarus?”

I blinked.

“Do you understand your rights?” the PRT officer asked.

I felt myself nod.

“Okay. Turn around, hands behind your back.”

I nodded, facing away. An involuntary shudder ran through my body as she tightened the handcuffs onto my wrists.

_Brenna, what have you done?_
I was glad I couldn't see Naomi or Jordan. I was led off the roof and down the unnatural staircase Bunker had made. Umbra followed, the misty figure of a man and a dog right behind me.

Bunker looked at me from where he stood, at the back of a PRT van with its double doors open. His brown eyes looked almost sad, behind his mask.

I was pushed into the van, and seated on one of the hard metal benches inside. The guy with the foam launcher got in as well, sitting across from me.

The doors slammed shut, and the vehicle began moving.

Normally, I would have had the background noise of a radio to distract me. Whether it was air traffic control, police bands, or more recently the PRT channels, I almost always had noise in my ears.

But I'd disabled my mask. No HUD readouts, no targeting vectors, no biometrics, and no radio chatter.

It had been a long time since I'd felt this alone.

For what felt like the millionth time that night, I cried quietly, not even able to wipe away the tears with my hands bound.

Fuck. Why did you do it? She was...she surrendered. It was done. And you fucking killed her anyway.

And you enjoyed it.

“Icarus, let's go.”

I looked up.

The van had stopped. The doors were open. I was led out. The PRT building's basement. A squad of armored PRT troops, in a semicircle around the van. Four of them stepped forward.

They took me to the elevator. One of the troops lifted their helmet to place their eye in the retina scanner. They pushed a button.

“Floor Eight,” the automated voice called out.

Floor Eight - Holding cells, interrogation, legal affairs.

A few seconds later the doors opened again, and they pushed me forward.

The other side was a drab lobby-like room, with every surface a smooth metal. A gruff, no-nonsense-looking PRT uniform stood, gesturing towards an open door. “Take her to 2-A,” he said.

One of the guards escorting me spoke up. “2-A? That's–”

“Coming straight from Sharktooth,” the jailer replied, using the radio callsign for the Director. “You wanna be the one to fuck with her tonight?”

The guard paused. “2-A. Let's go.”

They pushed me through the door. A hallway, both sides lined in a series of steel doors with screens embedded next to them. Past those. Through another door.
Another hallway, but this one was lined with small cells with bars for walls. Six in total, they all seemed to be empty.

“Ho-lee shit!”

I was wrong. All but one were empty.

I ignored Kaboom, as the guards unlocked a barred door across from his cell and pushed me in. One of them grabbed at my wrists, and a moment later my hands fell forward, freed of their restraints.

“Face away from the other prisoner,” the guard said. I nodded, facing the stainless steel wall.

Another guard stepped forward, in their hands a generic-looking black mask. A featureless black oval with two wide holes for the eyes, and an elastic band to fasten it with. They didn't have to elaborate. I raised by hands, unclipped my mask, and handed it to them, putting on the replacement.

They placed their hands around my right arm. I nodded, and mentally released it from my body. A few drops of blood fell to the ground from my arm, from a valve not closing at the right time. I'd have to fix that next time I was in my workshop.

*If you ever get that chance again.*

Someone grabbed my wings. “No, not those,” I said in response, stepping away. “Please.”

“Icarus—”

“No,” I turned around to face the one who had grabbed me. “The mask, I get. And my arm, sure. But you can't just pull me apart like this.”

I didn't even notice, but I'd wrapped my wings around myself protectively.

“Icarus, you need to comply, or this isn't going to be pleasant.”

I shook my head. “You don't know what—”

A blast of electricity hit me, running its way through my body. I fell to the ground, convulsing. Someone turned me over so I was laying on my stomach, and I felt a boot get planted into my back as I lay there twitching.

“Take them off, prisoner,” the guard repeated.

“F–Fuck you,” I stammered out.

The second tasing hurt more, and lasted longer. I heard more than felt myself crying out, every muscle and motor in my body firing haphazardly without my control. The same hands yanked at the base of my wings as my body shuddered, the mounting bracket clamps firing randomly. They managed to get one off, and my kicking and one-armed swinging couldn't get them off my back. At least I still had one left.

I heard the click and loud crackle of a taser. “I don't want to do this a third time, Icarus.”

I popped the clamps, and my last wing was torn away from me.

I lay there, unable to control my limbs as I continued to twitch. The sound of steel striking steel as the jail cell door slammed shut. The march of heavy footsteps walking away.
I coughed, wincing at the metallic taste of blood. From the limited sense I had of my filtration implant, I knew the double-tasing has not been kind to it. I just had to hope it would return to normal, once...

Sometime later, I pulled to a seated position on the floor, and looked around.

Steel floor, a toilet, a flat elevated surface that I thought was a bed? Three solid walls, one made of bars.

I looked across from me, at Kaboom, in an identical cell.

He was staring at me with a smirk, dressed in only a pair of sweatpants with “Villain” stamped across them.

“Oi. Birdie. Ave a little too much fun?”

“F-fuck you,” I stammered.

“Nah. I do a lotta things, birdie, but jailbait aint one of them. But, hey. Juicy details. Didja murder someone? Tell me it was Blink, would ya? Little fucking bitch cunt's the reason I'm in this shithole.”

I shook my head.

“Hmm. Oh! Yeah. You hate those Raven fucks, don't ya?”

I didn't respond. I stared at the floor.

“Ahh! Yes. Or no? Dunno what ‘look at ground’ means. Heh, my people skills aint too great. Can you blink or somethin? One for yeah, two for nah?”

I ignored him. I just wanted quiet. No, not quiet. I didn't want these thoughts.

“I'm so. Fuckin. Bored. Birdie, please. I get enough silent treatment from the guards!”

I almost wanted to humor him so I could just avoid...


I clutched my head with one hand, wincing when my other hand didn't move.

Right. They took it. My arm. My wings. Pieces of my body, they just ripped out.

“Oh. Huh. You one of them who can't handle their first? Ugh. Bet it sucks. Never knew what that was like, shuttin' down 'cause of that. Didn't even realized I killed the dude at first.”

I heard footsteps approaching, but I didn't bother to look up.

“Ah, Cupid! My favorite hero! Heroing stuff going good? Yeah?”

The footsteps paused in front of my cell, and I heard the door slide open with a thunk.

“Oh no. Don't you ignore me too! Come on!”

“Icarus,” I heard Cupid say. “Stand up.”

I nearly fell, but I felt someone clasp my arm
roughly, pulling me up. A PRT officer, accompanying Cupid.

Cupid turned around, walking away. The officer pulled my arm around my back and pushed me forward. I managed to catch myself.

“Heh. Good luck, birdie! You quiet, boring cunt.”

I didn't even look up, only paying enough attention to know where I was putting my feet. It felt like forever and all at once before I found us walking into a room.

This time I looked up. The room was bare except for a single cold metal table in the middle, with two similarly cold metal chairs. A one-way mirror dominated one wall.

Interrogation room. Of course.

Cupid pulled out one of the chairs and motioned me into it. The officer turned me around and pushed me down, as if I was too much of a monster to seat myself.

“Hands on the table,” the officer said, before having the decency to wince at their wording.

I placed my hand on the table. The officer quickly handcuffed it to a ring embedded in the table before walking out the door, slamming it behind him.

Neither of us said anything. I could feel Cupid staring at me. I couldn't look back at her.

My thoughts drifted back to the files I'd been given when I joined, to help me learn about my teammates... *Cupid - Assigned to Protectorate DEN (21). Power allows complete knowledge of emotions and sensations within a radius. Provoking a significant change in said emotions allows her to manipulate them artificially in the immediate future.*

She could feel what was in my head. She could feel what I did—and how I felt after I'd killed Branwen.

God, I wanted to throw up.

“I apologize for how you've been treated,” Cupid finally said, softly. She glared at the mirror. “Please, tell me what happened.”

“I...” I coughed. “I was on my way to check out a source—”

“No. The truth, please. I can't help you if you lie.”

“Oh...okay. I...I was waiting where I knew Branwen would be flying. I ambushed her. We fought and...I...” I trailed off. I couldn't say it.

“Take your time. I know this isn't easy.”

I took a deep breath. I just needed to get this over with.

“I beat her. I had her on the ground, foamed. She couldn't escape. I...I was gonna call it in. That was my plan. But—” I turned towards a wall. “She said...something. And I—and I lost control. I shot her. Fuck, I shot her. So many times. So much blood. I—”

I was almost shouting, my breathing speeding up rapidly. I felt a sharp pressure on my hand, and my breathing stabilized. I...I still felt as I did, but calmer. Just a tad calmer.
“Was there anything more?” Cupid asked.

I shook my head.

“You sure? You don't want to say what you missed earlier.”

*Shit*. Blink. I couldn't, no. Not after–

“No, never-mind. It wasn't important,” Cupid said. I resisted the urge to sigh in relief.

Cupid stood up. “I'll be back. I won't be long, okay?”

I didn't bother looking at her. I stared at the table, listening as the door open and shut, leaving me alone.

When would they ship me to the Birdcage?

It was what I deserved. Slumming away in that inescapable prison, trapped with all the other thugs and murderers. And worse. Or was there worse than me?

Yes. I could admit that much. I killed someone worse than me. Didn't make me any better, though.

I recalled the conversation Dad and I had had, the night before I joined the Wards. He had been hopeful. Proud. He'd never say it, but I knew he was relieved, that his only child had become a hero instead of just another nameless runaway...

I could hear the words now. *Senator, we need you to come down to the PRT to answer some questions. It's about your daughter.*

The door opened, suddenly, shaking me out of my thoughts. I still didn't look up until I heard a thunk on the table. I looked up and found a box on the table. Naomi, unmasked and outside of her power armor, walked over with a key.

“Naomi...” I started to say as the handcuffs fell.

“Here,” Naomi said, pulling out my other arm from the box.

“What's going on?” I asked as Naomi helped me put my arm back on.

“Brenna,” Naomi said, placing her hands on my shoulders. “We're almost through this. Just keep hanging on. Please?”

I nodded and stood up. Naomi pulled one of my wings out. While I could have put them on myself, I accepted her help in aligning the mounting brackets and slotting them into place. I wasn't sure what was happening, but at least I felt...not whole. But at least I was in fewer pieces. Almost subconsciously, I wrapped my wings around myself, enveloping me in a blanket of cold titanium ‘feathers’. As I hugged myself, I felt a short tug on my arm.

“The Director wants to see us. This won't be pleasant, fair warning.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. Naomi lead me out of the chamber and through the hallways. I was thankful when we reached the elevator without passing Kaboom.

“Why did I get my limbs back?” I asked, quietly. “Aren't I going to the Birdcage?”

“What? No. No, of course not. I told you we would get through this. Not in the way I originally
intended, but, well, I guess you can thank Bunker after this.”

I couldn't help but notice how Naomi said his name with distaste, briefly glaring before settling into...I wasn't sure. Tired, I could tell that much.

I guessed it must have been late. Or early.

Naomi finally lead us through a door—the same door I originally met the Director in, I realized.

Bunker's eyes reached my own the moment I walked in. The same eyes I saw when I was being lead into the van. The Director's mismatched eyes were angry, and I felt like if it was up to her alone, I wouldn't be here.

Naomi sat down, and I followed her lead, sitting right next to her. Bunker and the Director were silent, looking right at me.

“Wha—”

She cut me off. “First of all, you fucked over everyone with your little stunt. If it were up to me alone, I'd ship you off to the Birdcage without a second thought. Because of you, there will be blood in the streets. Everything that goes down after tonight is on your head.

“Unfortunately, I've been forced to admit this is not the best option. Even Washington agrees. You might be technically cleared, but make no mistake. You are not free. We will be tracking you at all times. If you ever, and I mean even once remove or disable the tracking, you will go away. One way or another.

“You will not go out alone. Even out of costume. Tank Buster volunteered to be with you most times. Another Ward will suffice if needed. Additionally, Tank Buster and Torque will monitor as you disable or remove every potentially lethal part of your arsenal within the workshop located in Glenwood Springs.

“That is all I have for you. I have other matters that require my attention, matters I had to put down because of this,” the Director finally finished as she stood up and stormed out of the room.

“Could have been worse,” Naomi commented after the door slammed shut.

“The Director left out a couple things,” Bunker said.

Bunker paused as if expecting me to respond before continuing, “Officially, Branwen died in a shootout with the PRT. You were never involved. I can't stress enough how inadvisable it would be to speak about this to anyone outside of the people in this room, the Director, and your fellow Wards.”

“I didn't plan on it,” I said.

“Good. I--” Bunker paused. “I've seen many go down a dark road, one way or another. You remind me of someone I once knew. They, too, were driven by vengeance. They killed, like you did, but they never stopped there. I hope for your own sake that you don't make the same mistake.”

Bunker stood up and walked out the room without another word.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked over at Naomi.

“Hey,” she said softly. “You should probably get cleaned up.”
Were they really letting me go?

“Brenna...”

How was I not on the way to the Birdcage? All the people that could die–
I felt a pull on my shoulder. Naomi’s worried eyes gazed into my own.

“Come on,” Naomi said, leading me away.

The Ravens would not let this go. The Director suggested as much.

Would I be staring one down again? A metaphorical gun in my hands, pointed?

I found myself in the Wards quarters, Naomi leading me over to where the showers were.

Naomi. She would be in danger, wouldn’t she? Her and Jordan.

“Brenna,” Naomi said. “Don’t make me wash you myself.”

“I can handle it,” I said.

I imagined Naomi sitting on a chair, eagerly waiting for Starving Artist...

“Brenna,” Naomi said, clutching my shoulder. “You’re shaking.”

It wasn’t Naomi in that chair. It had been me.


What? I looked around, realizing I had slumped back into Naomi, who was struggling to remain standing. I tried to catch myself, but I only succeeded in slumping the other way towards the ground.

“Shit. I’ll call someone over. Just–”

“No. Don’t. Please don’t,” I begged.

“Brenna, you just fell over. Were you hurt somewhere?”

I coughed. “When they tased me...”

“Who tased you?” Naomi asked, as realization set in.

“Guard. They wanted my wings...wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Dammit. They went too far. Your implants. Were they damaged in any way?” Naomi paused.

“Now isn’t the time, but you really should speak to the Youth Guard. They went way too far if that’s what happened.”

“Not sure...something’s wrong but...” I shook my head as I trailed off.

“One of your implants regulates your immune system, right? That’s...we need to get you checked out straight away.”

“No. I...not now. It won’t kill me. I know that much.”

I couldn’t go anywhere near the PRT. Not now.
Naomi sighed. “Okay. But you at least need to wash up. I don't think that's something you should delay,” she said, nervously looking at one of the blood splotches on my costume.

Oh.

With a yell, I tore at my costume. Naomi stepped back in shock, but I ignored her in favor of getting...of getting Branwen off of me. Finally free of it, I quickly stood up to head into the shower room. Only, I quickly became too light headed, and I found myself on the floor again.

“Brenna!” Naomi shouted from behind me.

I began pulling myself back up, slowly this time. Naomi offered me support, and this time I let her help me back up. The dizziness threatened to make me collapse again were it not for her.

“I really feel like you should get it checked out somehow,” Naomi mumbled as she lead me over to one of the stalls, the one with a bathtub.

Naomi eased me into the tub slowly. I heard the sudden rush of water.

“I...sorry. I saw it by mistake,” Naomi said. She was pointedly looking away. “I'd only ever seen drawings of it in reports until now.”

Oh. The tattoo. The disgusting raven imagery Starving Artist fucking left on my inner thigh. My mark. My shame.

“You gotta mark your property somehow,” I said bitterly. I covered it with my hand, even if Naomi wasn't looking. It wasn't enough to hide it entirely, I could still see some feathers, painted into my skin in prismatic, shimmering black Tinkertech ink.

Naomi didn't respond. She stared into the wall for so long I thought she might have fallen asleep. I turned off the water before it overflowed. I peeled off my undergarments and set them on the floor. It didn't matter to me if she saw. The tattoo was the worst part.

I scrubbed on myself with my hands. I winced as the one made of metal dug in slightly, but that didn't matter. I had to get it off.

“This might be easier,” Naomi said, holding out a loofah and a bar of soap. She was still facing the other way, as if she hadn't already seen the worst of me.

“You've already seen it. You don't need to do that for my benefit.”

“It's...for mine, too.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be. It's...I'm just stupid, is all.”

I nodded, scrubbing at my arms, and my face, and legs, everywhere that had been exposed during during the killing. I saved my prosthetic arm for last.

It was something I normally resisted, but right now...I put my mind on autopilot, going through the Tinker-powered motions of maintaining my arm. I wiped the blood off, using the loofah to get at the joints. With well-practiced motions I released the panels, revealing the insides. I worked methodically, cleaning the mechanisms inside of the grit and dust that had collected since the last time I'd done it. Soapy water was sufficient for most of it. A finger to rub away the gunshot residue
from the shotgun module. A quick dunking underwater followed by a cycling of all the actuators. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

I shook it dry as best I could. A quick test. All the motion worked, albeit a little Shakily, but that was my fault more than anything. I pulsed the tranquilizer, and it popped out of my arm, a dart sliding into place in the firing tube. The taser module sparked properly, the electrodes making that telltale crackling sound that made me want to curl up into a ball. A click as the shotgun armed—

*I cut my engines to idle, landing on the concrete roof with a thud.*

Target lock maintained. 1/2 tracked entities target locked

*I watched Branwen struggle to escape, feathers pushing out of her skin as she transformed once more. A second later, she was back, glaring at me with her legs and one arm caught in the foam.*

“When I'm done with you you're going to beg for her to take you back, whore!” Branwen screeched at me furiously.

*I didn't respond. There was no need to—*

“Nice! You got her—” Isabelle's voice sounded in my ears.

“Yeah. I can get it from here, Blink. Thanks for your help,” I said, without thinking. She didn't matter. Only capturing Branwen.

*I turned my attention back to the villain.*

“You won't be doing anything more, Branwen. You're done,” I told her.

She laughed, a harsh, grating sound on my ears. “And here I thought you forgot about your stupid fucking ‘promise’. You don't have the fucking balls to do it.”

*I didn't say anything.*

“Or do you? Shoot me, then, you useless cumrag. Prove you're good for more than getting—”

*I cut her off with my fist. Part of me knew she was trying to get under my skin. The rest of me didn't care that she was succeeding.*

My mask lit up. The point on my HUD that was Blink, or more specifically the radio I'd given her, was moving. I spun to face her. “Stay back, Blink. It's fine.”

“You didn't need to hit her. She's already subdued. She'll be in the Birdcage before long,” Isabelle said.

“Isabelle. Stay the fuck back.”

Warning: Override of IFF on ERIS Mk1 activated. Secondary target enabled. 2/2 tracked entities target locked.

“You don't know what she's done—to me, to others, to your fucking dead friend. A punch is the least she deserves.”

It was a distraction. I didn't need the mask. I ripped it off, letting it fall to the ground. Isabelle didn't matter.
Branwen looked up at me, her eyes filled with hatred. Gleeful hatred. She was enjoying this, somehow.

“Look at that, you've got claws now. I'm going to enjoy dragging you back to my nest.”

Something in me broke.

I hit her again, a punch throwing her back into the foam, pinning her naked body back. “You made me this!” I screamed. “You fucking monster. Why? Why!”

She didn’t say anything, just looked up at me. “Answer me, you bitch!” I shouted again, my vision blurring.

Branwen mocked me now, with her silence. Her judgment. After all this, when her fate was all but sealed, she couldn’t even give me a simple answer...no.

She'd get the Birdcage. She'd be shipped off under close guard, to live the rest of her days under a mountain.

But that wasn't enough.

I could remember it all, now. Those same beady eyes, staring at me as she jabbed a needle into me. Her words to the henchmen as my eyes closed, dragging me into the van...Later, when I'd woken up...she had been the first person I saw. The one who explained, almost smugly, what the rest of my short, wretched life would be. She'd been the one to drag me, kicking and screaming, into a room. When it began. Later, she'd been the one to hand me over to Starving Artist.

She was responsible for it all.

She'd killed Brenna, and left behind...this.

I promised her, after the first time, that I would find her and kill her. She'd laughed, and called me a whore.

A click as the shotgun armed.

I met her gaze. Even after two years, her eyes hadn't changed. They hadn't changed a bit since the day she’d kidnapped me.

My arm bucked back, once, twice...six shots, all into her chest.

Just like she'd murdered me. I just hadn't figured it out until now.

I looked down at her as she gargled away her last words. For the first time in two years...I was free. I was—

I was interrupted from the memory by a sharp pain. I looked down. A cut, right down my thigh, slicing through the tattoo. A sharp edge on one of my arm's mechanisms. The bathwater already pink, turning darker.

I hadn't even realized I'd cut myself.

Not that it would make a difference. I'd tried, before. It would just heal, like it did before, back into the same raven, trapped in neverending flight on my skin. Starving Artist had called it her favorite tattoo so far.
“Naomi,” I said shakily, pressing a hand over the cut in a useless attempt to quell the bloodstream. Without my implant working...I was worried.

“Huh? What's wrong?”

“I'm...I'm bleeding.”

She turned to look at me, her eyes widening as she saw the blood. “Brenna! What—” she cut herself off, grabbing a towel and handing it to me. “Get out, press that on the wound.”

I nodded, standing and pressing it onto my thigh, trying not to sway. Every muscle in my body hurt, from the fight, from the PRT guard's tasing, from this...I was suddenly aware of how tired I was.

Naomi led me out of the bathroom, leaving dripping wet bloodstained footprints on the tile. Through the common area and back to my bedroom. I thought I heard someone say my name in alarm, but I wasn't paying attention. I was just trying to keep steady as I walked. Naomi responded to them anyway, saying something about medical.

“I don't need a doctor, I just need to rest,” I said.

“No doctor, don't worry,” Naomi said hurriedly, helping me onto my bed. “Just keep putting pressure on that cut, okay?”

I nodded, yawning and suppressing a sneeze. Was I coming down with something? It had been so long since I was sick.

I closed my eyes.

“Brenna, stay awake for me, okay?”

“Okay,” I replied, yawning again. It had to have been three in the morning, at this point. I wasn't going to sleep, I was just resting my eyes for a moment.

At some point I drifted off.
I didn't understand what I was doing, but comprehension was not necessary.

Around me beakers filled with chemical solutions, some boiling, some resting, awaiting my work. I wandered the small, dimly-lit room—one of many I could call my studio—and combined, separated, mixed, creating my art.

It didn’t help that Bloodletter insisted I devote time to synthesizing mundane filth. It wasn’t art, not like what I made; it was boring, ordinary, chemical reactions in the body without purpose or reason. It was an infuriating waste of my talents.

I felt myself grow frustrated at the thought of such waste, the chemicals in my body reacting, goading me into anger. That won’t do, no. A sip from one of several vials at my waist, and anger was replaced with bliss, my senses overloaded in all possible ways. The effect only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to take away the distracting thoughts.

I had just gotten back into my work when I was interrupted by a knock at the door. A sip of a different vial to quell the fury at the interruption, and I put my mask—really a decorated respirator—in place, walking to the door to open it. “What is it?” I said, my voice altered slightly by the respirator.

The goon stationed outside, one of Bloodletter's men, gestured down the hall. “Apologies for the disturbance, ma'am, but Papercut is here.” It was a different person guarding me every week, keeping curious ‘clients’ away from my work. I didn’t recognize this one. Not that it mattered. They were forbidden from trying my art, not that I’d turn away additional canvasses to work with, but Bloodletter's rules meant they were worthless to me.

“Why? What does she want?”

“I believe she is here to pick up your most recent batch, ma'am.”

“Oh.” I shut the door and returned to work. A pointless distraction. Another sip to restore a clear mind. I was close, now, to the breakthrough that I needed. The mixture was close, it reacted correctly most of the time, but the times the canvass's body rejected it were still...not ideal. I dipped my finger into a beaker, ignoring the hot sizzle it made, and touched it to my tongue. In its purest form the effects were instant.

I sighed as the reaction propagated through my body, a fuzziness and comfort, like being wrapped in a universe of warm blankets on a cold morning. The first stage was what I’d wanted, to put the user into the right state of mind. Already my body and mind buzzed in anticipation of the second stage.

Another knock at the door distracted me, ruined the effect, ruined the test. Do these uncultured swines comprehend leaving me alone? In my rage I threw a flask at the door, shattering it. A chug of the bliss vial brought me back to normal.

I pulled the door open, ignoring the broken glass and sizzling wood of the door. “I am working.” I said shortly, “Oh, it's you.”

Papercut stepped into the lab. “Hey. Bloodletter sent me to grab your latest,” She was tall, much taller than I was, a simple, clean mask made of paper, and today the rest of her ‘costume’ was a dark-
looking dress. She had only joined the Ravens a few months after I had, and I had to admit she seemed like she could be a good friend. Too bad I didn't have time for friends.

I closed the door behind her, rolling my eyes and taking my mask off. “Yes, ten kilograms of the mundane.” I grabbed several plastic-wrapped bricks of white powder off of a shelf and set them on an empty spot of table. “I have a batch of Heartbreak nearly ready if you would wait a minute.”

Heartbreak was one of my signature creations. A single drop on the skin would erase inhibitions and manifest desire. One of the side effects was being able to feel your heartbeat, and any partner’s, like beats of a drum reverberating through your body. And the only downside was that it was highly addictive. Well, that was only a downside for the buyer, really. I knew Bloodletter gave it to most of the rejected canvasses used in that side of the business. A waste, perhaps, but most of the ‘clients’ had a better experience that way. A painless, beautiful, experience.

“Sure, I can hang out for a bit,” Papercut replied, putting on a pair of gloves to pick up the drugs. That was my fault, I supposed. I’d accidentally left them in a spilled pool of Heartbreak once, and she’d picked them up bare-handed. We’d avoided talking about it since.

“It's been six months, it was a one-time mistake,” I said, idly mixing some chemicals together.

“No offense, Alex, but I'd rather not take the chance,” she replied, tossing the drug bricks into a backpack.

I took a sip from a flask, something to counter the tinge of embarrassment and light excitement. Calm. “You are the only one who calls me by that name, you know. Everyone else calls me Starving Artist even when I'm out of costume.”

“Would you like me to stop? If it makes you uncomfortable...”

“No, I don’t mind. Names are meaningless, anyway. I may be an artist, yes, but I am certainly not starving. What does it matter?” I took a different beaker I’d been mixing to a burner and let it heat. Just burn off the impurities and it will be done. A sip from a vial to keep my mind sharp.

“Christ, Alex, how often are you taking that stuff now?” Papercut asked, looking pointedly at the vials and flasks I kept on my belt.

“When I need to. The body and mind are weak and impure by themselves. I can only create when I have cleansed myself, my mind, of distractions.”

She paused. “When was the last time you were sober? You’re going to kill yourself if you keep this up.”

“Kill myself? Maybe once my work as done, but I can't— I won't allow my body to let go until I have created all I can create. And to answer your question, I tried some sleep a few months ago to see if it would inspire a creation. It didn't.” Just wasted sixteen hours of precious time. Idiotic idea. I took a sip.

The beaker had boiled off the impurities, and I grabbed it off of the burner bare-handed, carefully pouring its contents into smaller vials. Papercut coughed and covered her mouth as some of the fumes drifted her way. “The fumes don't do anything, don't worry.”

“Like I said, not taking chances,” my teammate responded. No matter. I waited for the vials of Heartbreak to cool off. They were clear when I made them, but the color grew in as they cooled until they were a light pink. I grabbed some eyedroppers from the drawer—running low, I see—and capped them on top of the vials, handing them on to Papercut.
“I need more,” I said, watching as she inspected the lids for even the slightest stray drop.

“More?”

“The cute little eyedroppers. And the small vials. And the triangle flasks. And I’ve had to waste time mixing my own reagents from scratch.” I watched as one of her sheets scratched away at another. “You know I could just go with you, instead of relaying everything.”

“Yeah right, Alex. I am not letting you go shopping at a lab supply warehouse. Even if you’d be as giddy as a kid in a candy store.”

“Why not? I wouldn't need to waste your time with this.” I found myself clenching a fist, and took a drink of bliss to quell the irritation.

“Because you would go crazy, buy everything, blow what little cover we have, and the PRT would come in and shut the place down. Do you know how hard it is to find a shop that will supply us? No.” I took a sip of excitement to counteract the disappointment, saying nothing in response. Papercut took the opportunity to keep talking. “So are you ready to go?”

“Go? Go where?” I said, leaning towards her.

“Bloodletter called everyone in, did you not hear?”

“Oh, that. There's no need for me to be there.” Branwen getting herself killed by the PRT was not my problem. She'd never even touched MY drugs. So easily satisfied with the mundane.

“He said everyone, and told me to make sure you in particular were there.”

“I have work to do, Papercut.” I took a sip of satisfaction to clear my mind. “I'm close to a breakthrough. It will make everything I've made before pale in comparison.”

“Don't care, Alex. You don't want to make trouble with the boss.”

I took another sip from the vial still in my hand, Papercut raising an eyebrow at me as I did. “Fine.” I said. “Give me a few minutes to get things ready. I'll meet you upstairs.” I was engrossed enough in my work that I didn't hear her leave. I set some things to simmer while I was gone, and grabbed the remainder of my costume out of a cabinet.

It was simple, a green and black armored bodysuit, matching green gloves and boots, and the respirator I used as a mask to hide my face. A belt across my chest with various vials and jars hanging off of it. A pair of paintcans, one empty, one filled with a few additional flasks and beakers. Even with only the green, my costume meant that I was probably the most colorful member of the Ravens besides Spellbound, not that I went out into the field very often.

I took a moment to refill my belt vials from my stocks, then made my way outside, wincing as I noticed the inside of the door had been completely eaten away. That's what you get for throwing things at it. I grabbed the guard outside the door. “Have that door replaced. Don't touch anything aside from the door. Wear gloves when you touch the door.”

I didn't wait to hear his response, instead walking down the hall and up the narrow staircase that led out of the basement. Papercut was waiting for me at the front door of the small house we'd taken over. That was one of the frustrations, having to move every time the PRT got hints as to where I was working. They'd do anything to hinder the progress I was making. A sip from the vial of content.
“Ready?” Papercut asked, wrinkling her nose as one of the ‘clients’ came down the stairs leading to the second floor, stinking of alcohol. _So unrefined._

“I suppose, since you insist on dragging me along. Must I?”

“Yes. Let’s go.” She held the dingy screen door open for me as she stepped out into the evening sun. _Ugh. What a waste of my time._

I rolled my eyes as I collapsed into one of the plush chairs. “You said everyone was going to be here, Papercut,” I said, pointedly glancing at the room, empty except for us two. “Why isn’t everyone here.”

“We’re a bit early. I thought I would have to spend ten minutes arguing with you to get you to come,” she replied, taking a seat next to me.

I took a sip. “I see.” I glanced around the room, bored. It was a plain conference room, like something out of a stock photo. A handful of chairs surrounding an oval-shaped table, the center of which had a boring logo of a stylized “A”. Through a wide window you could barely see the downtown skyline. The walls were lined with corporate-looking pictures of stock photo men pretending to do construction work.

It was all a cover, of course. Anderson Construction was one of many wholly-owned subsidiaries of the Ravens, providing a convenient way to launder money. I’d been told it somehow turned a profit even without our help, which always seemed surprising considering the fact that the entire corporate office consisted of hired thugs. I’d never understood why we needed to have these silly meetings in conference rooms, but that was Bloodletter's way of running things. I took another irritated taste of the calming serum.

The door opened, and Rewind stepped in. She was...an interesting one. She wore a white jacket with armored leather shoulders, and her “mask” was simply an opaque pair of goggles obscuring her eyes, but not the ragged scars across the rest of her face. I’d offered a serum to help heal them but she’d declined. Her loss, if she wanted to look like a part-time punching bag.

Her and Papercut began talking about something mundane, so I took a swig of something to make the time go by faster. By the time I was done dissolving internally into bliss a couple more had arrived.

Spellbound, a villain with the power to hex people by writing down ‘spells’ in a tome that she kept with her at all times. She was one of the old guard, a member of the Ravens for nearly seven years. Faint swirls of red-tinted light twirled around her, casting her reddish-purple costume in a strange light. I knew the feathers adorning her costume were white, but her...special effects gave them a shifting tinge of color. Certainly one of the teammates that worried me, her power being such a wildcard.

Black Witch entered via a crack in the window. That earned her an eye roll and an irritated flask-sip. Having the power to transform into a sentient cloud of gas didn't mean it wasn't tacky to do it all the time. Almost as tacky was her costume. An all-black Victorian dress, her mask similarly out of time. She carried a scythe of all things. She didn't talk much, and I was fairly certain none of the others had ever even seen her without a mask, I certainly hadn't.
A few minutes passed before Bloodletter arrived. The leader of the Ravens was almost inhumanly tall, with a maroon costume that left his weathered face exposed. Not that that was what would give his disguise away, when his fingers had been transformed into footlong, articulated claws made of a bone as hard as steel. As always, they were wet with the blood that slowly trickled down his bare arms from a series of open wounds that would never heal. The same effect he could inflict on others. He sat at the head of the table, his claws forming into a neat pyramid in front of him.

We were all silent for a time, everyone's eyes facing the empty seat at Bloodletter's right, until he spoke, his deep gravelly voice grating to the ears. Not enough to warrant another sip. “We all know why I've called this meeting. Branwen is dead,” he paused, his eyes panning between us all in turn. “Supposedly, this is the PRT's doing. I don't believe that for a second...start talking.”

“Supposedly? You think it was someone else?” Rewind asked.

“Suddenly there's a shootout with the PRT in our territory? Suspicious,” Spellbound said.

“There are two options,” Bloodletter cut in, his gestures sending flecks of blood across the table. “Either they are covering for one of their own...or they are taking credit for a third party.”

“Third party? You thinking it could have been Imperium?” Rewind asked, “He had that humiliation by the Wards a couple weeks ago, maybe they wanted to prove they're still serious?”

“And murdering someone over territory is the answer?” Spellbound said incredulously, “Seems excessive.”

“Tundra,” Bloodletter growled. “Maybe someone paid her to take one of us out.”

“Better for the PRT not to touch any of this if it were Tundra,” I said, taking a sip of calm. “A lot harder for them this way.”

Spellbound nodded. “…And Woodwind is out, she's with Imperium now, and he seems the least likely. That goes for Blink too.”

“Unless Blink had a job to knock us up some, but went too far. She's escalated recently, fighting the heroes and us directly,” Papercut said. “I liked her better when it was just petty theft.”

“Blink,” Bloodletter said, considering. “Keep her in mind as a suspect.”

“Perhaps we should consider the Protectorate, or even the Wards,” I said, taking another sip. “Would coincide with the PRT response.”

Bloodletter nodded, “Then of our two remaining suspects—” He stopped, interrupted by the door slamming open.

A person—a cape, standing in the doorway. Her costume was old-fashioned in style, dating back to the golden age of heroes. It was made of a greenish scale-like material, and the whole thing had a motif, a cross between a snake and a dragon. Her mask was green as well, an elaborate dragon's head to match the rest of it. I didn't recognize her, but a quick glance at my teammates suggested some of them did. Black Witch, Spellbound, and Bloodletter. The rest were as startled as I.

I took an eager sip of serum of inspiration. There was only one person it could be...I was not going to miss this. Basilisk, a notably powerful Thinker. One of the Ravens' founders twenty years ago. She who hadn't been seen in the last six, standing in this room.

She shut the door behind her as quickly as she'd opened it, not breaking eye contact with Bloodletter
for a second. She didn't speak, just stared.

Bloodletter met her gaze calmly. “Basilisk. I didn't—”

“When I put you in charge,” Basilisk interrupted, almost snarling with barely-quelled rage. “It was not so I could learn about Branwen's death from the morning fucking news.”

Bloodletter stood from his seat, spreading his arms in an apologetic gesture that splattered the table again. “I've been managing the situation. We were just discussing retaliation, as a matter of fact.”

She stepped around the table, stalking briskly forwards until she was in Bloodletter's face. He had over a foot on her but she made it seem like she was the one looking down on him. “You've managed the situation poorly enough that I've had to step in from retirement. Sit down, and let the grown-up handle it.”

Oh shit.

People had been decapitated for saying less-rude things to the boss. He stared her down, his claws digging angry gouges into his own hip, but said nothing.

“Don't even try it, Bloodletter. Sit down or I will put you down, I don't care how many protein bars you eat.”

After a few more seconds of eye contact, Bloodletter took a deep breath and sat back down, still saying nothing. He glared over at Basilisk, who had moved to lean on the back of Branwen's empty seat. I didn't think he was aware of the gouges he was slowly digging into the conference table with his claws. I could see a smirk behind the contours of her mask as she turned to face the rest of the table, speaking in a slightly less angry tone.

“Black Witch, Spellbound, it's good to finally see you in person again, after all these years of phone calls and birthday cards. I wish it was under better circumstances. As for you three,” she gestured collectively to myself, Rewind, and Papercut. “I'm sure we'll be good friends, otherwise you wouldn't have ever made it to this room. Now, out of curiosity, who are you blaming Branwen's murder on?”

“We were still discussing.” Spellbound said. “We were briefly considering Blink, but—”

She waved him off, and he remained still. “No! Not at all, why would you ever think that? Nevermind, it doesn't matter. Black Witch, the location I gave you, was it who I thought?”

“Yes. Top floor, like you said, it was her.”

“See, even after six years living under a rock, I still got it. And that's not even something my power could help with. And she's gone?” Black Witch only nodded in response. Basilisk paused for a second, then nodded to herself. “It's Icarus.” She said, assured of herself.

“Icarus?” Papercut asked. “But isn't she a Ward? They wouldn't sanction murder.”

“Quite the Thinker, you are,” Basilisk said, dripping with sarcasm. “It's a cover-up. She's had a hate-on for us since the beginning...that fucking wannabe vigilante killed Branwen, and the PRT has decided they'd rather sweep that under the rug.”

Bloodletter finally spoke for the first time since Basilisk had taken over. “If we go against her—and the PRT—in retaliation, we have to be sure. We can't risk escalation over a false lead. How do you know this, Basilisk?”
“I don't fucking kiss and tell, Bloodletter. It was her.”

Bloodletter growled, “Be that as it may—”

“Jesus, you've gotten uppity, haven't you?” She said, tilting her head. “I know my shit. Their word against ours doesn't mean shit when you're villains.” A trace of a smirk behind her mask. “By this time tomorrow I'll have more than enough evidence to convince even the dumbest of you.”

“Why don't we let the problem take care of itself, then?” Papercut interrupted. “I mean, call the PRT out. If you're getting evidence, leak it, force them to take action. The bird goes away, heroes take a massive PR hit, that sounds like a win to us.”

Basilisk shook her head, “No. As satisfying as it would be to watch them tear themselves apart...I want more. A year in prison and a reassignment to a quarantine zone isn't enough... We deal with this, one way or another. Kill Icarus, and kill anyone who helped her.” She looked around the table, the piercing blue-gray eyes behind her mask staring at each of them in turn. One by one, we nodded in agreement.

“ Well then ,” she said, her voice rising in pitch. “Since we're all in agreement, let's make a plan.”
Tank Buster

I shot up halfway, the tune of the alarm startling me. I fell back down, the sudden tiredness that hit me leaving me feeling heavy.

Two hours. All the sleep I got.

I reluctantly threw off my covers and stepped out. I wanted to shower, but deodorant would have to suffice.

I was out of my door in five minutes. Brenna looked up at me from her curled up position on one of the chairs.

“You're up. How...” I paused. After everything last night, asking her how she was would probably be a bad idea. “How are your implants doing?” I asked dumbly instead.

“Starting to come back, I think,” she said weakly, pulling the blanket around her tighter. “I think I'm going to have to get hands-on to get full functionality, though.”

I winced. “Back under the knife so soon?”

“It's not like I have much of a choice, is it?” she asked, a hint of bitterness in her voice. “It comes with the territory of being Icarus, I guess.”

“Sorry,” I said, unsure of what else I could say. I yawned.

“Don't be sorry, you're not the one who tased me,” she said with a shrug. “or... it doesn't matter. What... what do we do now?”

“Well, today we gotta go to Glenwood Springs. The Director doesn't want to wait a single moment. They're expecting us pretty early.”

“Oh,” she said with a faint smile. “I... are we going in cape mode?”

I shook my head. “Two Wards leaving town after all this? No, we're going in civilian form. They're lending us an under-cover vehicle.”

She nodded, and made her way into her room to get dressed. I headed to the kitchen and found some snacks. Might as well have something in our stomachs.

I yawned again. Why did we have to leave so damn early again?

Brenna stumbled back outside, now fully-dressed and making a beeline for the kitchen. “God I'm so fucking hungry right now Naomi,” she said, almost feverishly.

“We don’t—” I started to say as Brenna smacked a bag of chips out of my hands. “—have much time. If we need more, we can stop at a gas station real quick.”

“I like food,” she said with her mouth full.
“Yeah,” I said, deadpan. Brenna had devoured most of my snacks already. “Me too.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” she said sheepishly, blushing. “But yeah, we should totally stop somewhere.”

I sighed, shaking my head with a small smile. “Let's head out.”

I headed for the door, double checking I had my IDs. I looked back at Brenna, who was busy fussing with her backpack. She saw me looking and finished, jogging to catch up.

The hallways were quiet even for a Sunday morning. People were around, heading through hallways even. But everything was hushed and tense. I noticed stares directed at Brenna, at Icarus, and with the way she hugged herself, she felt them too. The cover-up might have only been known to a few, but it didn't take too much for people to suspect.

I noticed a couple of PRT officers in full gear walking by. The morning after, and the Director was already taking steps.

“Naomi?” I heard someone call from behind us. I turned and saw Jennifer looking at me with worry.

“Hey,” I said, yawning. I really needed to catch up on sleep at some point.

“Can we, uh–” she glanced at Brenna nervously. “–talk in private?”

“Don't have much time, but alright,” I said. “Meet me in the garage, Brenna?”

Jennifer walked away without another word, and I followed. I looked back at Brenna, who gave us a small wave before heading off. Jennifer stopped at an out-of-the-way bit of hallway before turning back to me.

“Waiting for me?” I asked.

Jennifer shook her head. “I just happened to be walking by. Had to stay a little longer.”

“Oh. What is it, then?” I asked, probably a bit too grumpily given Jennifer's wince. Whoops. “Sorry, I'm just...tired.”

Jennifer shook her head. “I don't blame you. Did you even sleep?”

“A little, I got a few hours,” I lied.

“I never expected a call like that. You holding up okay?”

“I'm fine. Worried about Brenna, and how this situation might...escalate.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you did just see someone die...” she trailed off.

I shook my head. “Have you forgotten? I've seen plenty of death before.”

Jennifer flinched at my...nonchalant way of saying that. Whatever.

I continued, “I only saw the aftermath this time. Nothing special, really. It was the situation that...” I trailed off and pressed a hand to my forehead. Damn head started to throb. “I'm fine. Or as fine as I can be.”

Jennifer sighed and pulled me into a surprise hug. I froze briefly before returning it. She was usually prickly when it came to this sort of thing.
“Are you okay, Jennifer?” I asked. This was unusual.

“This damn world. I got my badge with the hope that I'd improve things. Sat in some backwater until I came here, and all I do is sit by the radio all night.”

“Hey,” I said, before backing up. “It's an important job. Don't worry about such things.” As if I didn't feel the same way even as a superhero.

Jennifer shook her head. “Sorry, you're the last person I should be shoving my own troubles onto. I just meant to check up on you.”

“We're family,” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah. That we are,” she said, smiling just a little. “I'll get going now. Good night. Er, rather, have a—”

“Good night,” I said, smiling back. Jennifer yawned and headed off...in the same direction I was going.

Right. We were both heading for the garage. Little was more awkward than saying bye and walking in the same direction.

I shook my head, resisting the urge to laugh.

**Icarus**

“Naomi, you'll be fine,” I said, glancing her way and giving her a reassuring smile as she drove.

We were headed west, over the mountains to Glenwood Springs, where Torque was assigned, our PRT-issued unmarked black SUV carrying us there in only ten times as long as it would have taken me to fly.

“You don't understand,” Naomi replied, gripping the steering wheel a bit too firmly. “I haven't seen Torque since I first joined the Wards. He's doesn't know about, you know.”

“So?” I asked. “I mean, besides Bunker, has anyone given you any shit about being trans? I mean, from what I've heard, the guy will be happy to at least have company. Being the only cape in town has gotta suck.”

We came around a bend, and there was Glenwood Springs, tiny compared to Denver, nestled in a valley. A three hour trip, between and under countless beautiful tree-lined mountains.

It would have been a wonderful day trip if it were under better circumstances. As it was, the sinking feeling in my stomach wouldn't go away.

“It's...different,” Naomi responded simply, as she pulled off the highway at the next exit. “I'm just worried he'll just see me as trans and not, you know, myself.”

“I don't think that's gonna happen, Naomi,” I said, giving her a reassuring smile.

She didn't respond to that, and I was too busy looking out the window to say much. A lot less hustle and bustle than I was used to, certainly. It was nice...but a bit discomfiting. I had the feeling that if I was assigned here, I'd have busybodies complaining about my the noise of my jets every time I stepped out of the headquarters.
Naomi drove us down the streets, across a bridge over a river, and eventually pulled into a parking lot behind a nondescript-looking brick building. It was mostly empty, only filled with a couple cars and a handful of light-green trucks with government plates. Naomi parked us, and we got out wordlessly.

At the back of the building, there was a glass door with the Protectorate and PRT logos etched onto it, next to a wide garage door that was speckled with patches of missing paint and rust. I suppressed a smile at the welcome mat in front of the door. Compared to the twenty-story gleaming skyscraper in Denver, this was adorable.

Naomi opened the door, stepping inside with me following on her heels. Inside was a small reception area that looked more like the waiting room for a doctor's office, with an empty reception desk and outdated copies of Cape Weekly piled-up between faded-purple chairs. A couple doors were set behind the desk, one closed, the other opening into a narrow hallway from which I could hear tinny speakers blaring music.

We stood there for a bit, but nobody showed up. I gave Naomi a look. “They knew we were coming, right?”

“They should have...” she trailed off as the other door opened, and a woman best described as ‘circular’ stepped out, plopping herself down on the chair behind the receptionist's desk.

“Can I help you?” she asked. “If you're here for the school project, he's not doing any more interviews for that stupid paper.”

“Uh, no. We're from Denver?” Naomi said, digging a PRT-issued ID badge out of her pocket and showing it to the woman.

I would have pulled mine out, but it had been sitting on my desk in the Wards HQ since I got it. It wasn't like I needed it, what with my wings and arm.

The woman barely glanced at our badges. “We weren't supposed to have an inspection for another two months...and they don't send interns,” she said suspiciously, eyeing us both in turn.

“We aren't interns,” Naomi said flatly. “And Torque is expecting us.”

“Nobody said...ugh. Hold on.” She got up, and waddled down the hallway, disappearing through one of the doors. A moment later the radio stopped, and a man wearing grease-covered coveralls and a domino mask appeared, heading our way while wiping his hands off on a towel.

“Sorry, lost track of time!” he said with a smile. His eyes darted, just for a second to my hand, peeking out under my jacket, then back to me. “You must be Icarus,” he said, offering a handshake. “I thought Tank Buster was coming with you?”

“Hey Andrew,” Naomi said nervously. “Long time no see.”

He glanced at her. Then his eyes widened a bit. “Oh! That's a change. Well come on back, I'll give you the tour,” he said, and then he started walking back down the hall, waving for us to follow. I gave Naomi an I told you so look before following Torque. Naomi followed behind, looking about nervously.

“So I hear you're the leader of the Wards over there now aren't ya, TB? How's that been working out?” Torque asked as we followed him into a large workshop/garage area. Inside there was a huge assortment of oversized vehicles, all painted in a red-and-gold color scheme.
Naomi sighed. “It's...a process. More work than I expected, though I'm pretty sure I'm not even supposed to be doing some of it.”

He laughed, a little too-loudly to seem normal. “Hah, I remember that from my Ward days. Being team leader was the worst three months of it. Hey, before I spend all day awkwardly calling you Tank all day, do you have a new name? Same for you if you're sharing, Icarus.”

“I'm Naomi.”

“Brenna,” I said a bit nervously. “And you were Andrew, right?”

“That I am, Brenna,” he said. “Hey, are either of you hungry? A friend of mine dropped off some elk steaks the other day, and I'd hate for them to go bad.”

“Oh, that would be amazing,” I said quickly. Even with the snacks we'd picked up along the way, I was still starving.

“Well, I'll go fire up the grill then, in the meantime feel free to get started,” he said, gesturing around us at his workshop. “I imagine there's plenty of room.”

“Okay, sure,” I replied, sitting down at one of his workbenches. Torque wandered off, and Naomi dragged a chair over, yawning. “Are you going to be okay driving home?” I asked as I mentally deployed my shotgun and locked it into place.

She simply shrugged. “If we need to stay the night, that's fine. I can expense it if we need to get a hotel.”

I nodded, and set to work getting everything I needed.

Honestly, it sucked. I felt like I was taking out a part of myself—a part of my body. But it wasn't like I really had a choice in the matter...and it was for the best.

Every time I even thought of the shotgun module, I could hear the gunfire, feel the recoil. I could see the slight widening of Branwen's eyes as my shots tore through her chest.

“Brenna?” Naomi asked me, concerned.

“I'm fine,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Sorry, just...can't get it out of my head.”

“Hey,” she said softly. “When we get back, how about we get you to one of the PRT’s therapists. Or even one not affiliated with them if you'd prefer...”

I paused. “I can...try it out, I guess. Just want to get this over with.”

“Yeah. Need to wait for Andrew, but I can get familiarized with your arm in the meantime?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged, and reoriented myself so she could get a better look at the mechanisms.

We'd never quite gotten a chance to really sit down and talk about Tinker stuff. It was a relief, in a way, to briefly let go of everything go on and just...talk endlessly about this neat little thing that I'd built. Naomi was just as animated—I guess she got just as excited about Tinker stuff as I did. The only time I'd seen her even more excited was when she danced that one morning.

A part of me wanted to see her dance more.

We were interrupted by Torque's reappearance. He had lost the mask, but added a...red-and-gold
colored apron. A pair of tongs hung at his side like they were his weapons. He gestured at me to get
started.

“So, uh, what's there to do in Glenwood?” I asked nervously as I set to work dismantling my arm. The actual ‘gun' was simple enough to pop out, but the rest...lots of stuff built around it.

“Gorgeous town, Glenwood Springs. Trails for everyone, whether you're fit or...not! Lovely places to eat, and very friendly people. I think the best word for this town is cozy.”

“You're...the only cape, right?” At least after all this I'd free up a lot of space. Even if it would be a pain to remove things...like the spiral shell magazine working its way just under my metal ‘skin’...I could add more capacity to the confoam reagent tanks...or...I paused, thinking.

“Only hero. Small-town, so it's quiet. Only major threat is Grandiose, so other than him, it's mostly supporting the sheriff's office, Treant sightings, S&R, that sort of thing.” He shrugged. “Most of my time is spent in here, building and maintaining tech for others to use.”

“I've heard about him. Some kind of Brute Trump, yeah?” Naomi asked.

“Yeah. Saps strength over time from his opponents. Plays pretty defensively because of it, which limits his threat. I'd be worried if he went all-out though,” he said, shrugging.

I nodded as I worked, tuning out the other two as I concentrated on my work.

“You don't really need to change in the bathroom, you know,” I said, rolling my eyes.

The room was...adorable was the best way to put it. Sorta old-timey, with the flowery wallpaper and decorative bed covers. The two beds both had different covers, even. Almost tacky, but somehow not. I even almost slept more than a little.

“You really don't want to see anything,” Naomi shouted from the bathroom.

“I don't...whatever,” I said with a laugh, “Just don't take all day, I need to brush my teeth still.”

The door opened right as I said that, with a slightly grumpy-looking Naomi stumbling out. Her hair was still somewhat damp, tied loosely in a ponytail.

“Have at it,” she said dryly.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping in. We hadn't packed anything for overnight, but the girl at the front desk had spare toothbrushes and stuff, so we could at least be civilized. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done about the dark circles under my eyes...I hadn't slept well. If anything, things had gotten worse. I just hoped Naomi didn't notice.

Naomi stood by the doorway as I walked out. I supposed she was eager to leave.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Yeah. Let's go,” she said.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as we made our way outside.
Naomi sighed. “Nothing to worry about.”

“You can talk about it if you want,” I offered.

“It's...dumb. Sorry. It'll pass.”

I reached out and pulled Naomi into a hug. She stiffened, at first, before relaxing. An older woman gave us an odd look as she walked around us, but I didn't care.

“Brenna?” Naomi said quietly.

“What's up?”

“Nevermind, sorry,” Naomi said, shaking her head before stepping out of the impromptu hug.

“Okay,” I said sadly.

We didn't say anything as we got in the car. Naomi listened to some radio station as she drove. Oddly enough, it was in Spanish, but I didn't comment. At least Naomi seemed slightly more awake today.

I was not expecting the screech of tires as Naomi slammed on the brakes. I nearly bit my tongue as I jerked forward, the seatbelt digging into my shoulder.

“Jesus, wha–” I started to say as Naomi turned. “–what happened? I wasn't–”

“Torque nearly caused a wreck, for fuck's sake. Probably chasing Grandiose.”

“Shouldn't we help?” I asked. Naomi for some reason was continuing towards the PRT building instead of turning.

“TB and Icarus aren't supposed to be here. He can handle himself, anyways,” Naomi said with a touch of nervousness.

“Yeah, but...shouldn't we make sure everything is okay? Just to be sure?”

Naomi sighed and pulled a U-turn. “I guess. But we'll keep our distance.”

I hoped Naomi knew where she was going, but she made turns without hesitation. I supposed she'd followed after people before.

If only I had my mask on so I at least knew what was going on.

It wasn't long before we came across who I assumed had to be Grandiose. The villain wore an armored black bodysuit with a massive purple cape flapping behind him. A mask covered all of his face except for his...admittedly fantastic beard. He clutched a massive wood axe in his hands, and his head moved to follow Torque driving circles around him.

It seemed almost like Grandiose looked right at us, but there's no way we'd be at all distinctive. Unless he was some kind of Thinker, too.

“Is it your plan to make me dizzy, my nemesis?” Grandiose shouted.

What.

“Of course not! My plan is to cover all possible escape routes! You will not escape me this time,
Even the civilians continued with...whatever, ignoring everything going on. A couple kids pointed and stared, but otherwise no one seemed to care.

“Haha! I have tricked you into telling me your plan, you fool! Isn't that the hero's job?”

_Is...is this some kind of joke?_


Naomi pulled us into some parking spot as the two capes continued...whatever the fuck they were doing.

“Ah, but it's the sort of plan you can't do anything against! Face it, Grandiose. You are trapped!”

Grandiose leaped forward an impossible distance—at least he's an actual cape—and struck out his axe right in Torque's path. Torque in response pushed a button, and his motorcycle launched him upwards, dodging the axe. Torque landed right after, not even swaying a little.

“Oh, you're in for it now, scum!” Torque shouted as he leaped off his bike, somersaulting into a run.

Naomi stepped out of the vehicle and crossed her arms, glaring at the two capes.

Torque charged Grandiose, pulling a...crowbar from his tool belt. Torque was tall, but Grandiose was even more-so, with a much more threatening profile. It was almost laughable seeing the two exchange ‘blows’. It was probably telling just how normal everyone else was acting. A few idly watched with bored expressions.

Grandiose then bashed the shaft of his axe into Torque's crotch. Even I winced.

“You...fiend,” Torque said weakly as he fell to his knees. At least on the surface. Even that seemed staged. “Your evil knows no bounds.”

“You will never catch me, Torque,” Grandiose shouted as he leaped into a car that just...appeared at some point. “Not ever!”

The car drove away with the screeching of tires.

“Darn... you... Grandiose...” Torque said as he slowly got to his feet. He nodded in the general direction of a crowd. “Citizens. Carry on.”

He drove away on his motorcycle without another word.

“Andrew has some explaining to do,” Naomi grumbled as she stepped back into the car.

“Did...did that just happen?” I asked, unsure what entirely was going on.

“Yeah. Some kind of farce,” Naomi said grumpily. “Like this is all some kind of joke.”

Naomi drove perhaps a bit too fast on the way back, aggressively making turns, and somehow parking angrily. She stepped out of the car and slammed the door before stomping into the PRT office. I followed cautiously, not wanting to irritate her further somehow.

Torque was messing around with his motorcycle as we headed into the workshop. He turned towards Naomi.
“Hey!” He said with a smile before settling into a confused expression.
“What the fuck are you doing out there?” Naomi snarled.
“What did it look like?” Torque asked.
“Looked like some joke. Is this all some fucking game to you?”
Torque shrugged. “Small town. Everyone knows each other. Things are different here.”
“You've been out there. You know what goes on.”
“And you think I'm not ready for that?” Torque said, his bemused expression replaced by one of irritation. “Not every cape can be on the front-lines like you two. I don't make mechs. I make vehicles. So I do what I can to keep PRT approval high here, and support other divisions with my work.”
“And where does Grandiose fit into all this?”
He shrugged. “Every hero needs a villain. We're not Denver, we don't have a rampant crime problem. So we make do.”
“Hey Andrew!” I heard someone shout from behind us.
I turned to see Grandiose, sans mask, standing right there, a villain in the middle of the PRT headquarters.
“Oh,” he said. “I didn't know you had company.”
“Oh for fucks sake,” Naomi grumbled.
“Hey Will,” Torque said with a smile. “You know you could've pulled your punch on the last one, right?”
Grandiose, or Will, rather, laughed. “I know you're armored down there.”
I blushed, my mind going exactly where it did not need to go... but it was a cute ship. Naomi gave me an odd look, and I turned to hide my blush.
“Are you two here for a school project?” Will asked.
“I guess it makes sense you two know each other,” Naomi said, ignoring the question. “I just don't understand why you two have to look so damn ridiculous.”
He laughed. “Yeah, it's stupid and over-the-top, but it's approachable. People get enough of the violence and horror from the news. We try to give them an idea of why we need the PRT, why we need heroes... without leaving any dead bodies in our wake.”
“I just... can't you…” Naomi trailed off, shaking her head. “I dunno. It just feels wrong.”
Will cut in. “I think we can both see where you're coming from. Denver's the real deal. We wouldn't be doing anything remotely like that if we had to deal with anything like the Ravens.”
“I guess. Sorry, for getting angry like I did,” Naomi said, looking away.
“It's fine,” Torque said. “It shouldn't have even happened, but someone apparently didn't check his
phone.”

“I lost my charger!” Will said indignantly. He switched to a completely different, villainous tone, swirling his cape. “The Great Grandiose doesn't get paid until Friday, you fiend!”

I giggled. Naomi rolled her eyes, but I could see a small smile now.

“I have half a mind to grab my mech from Denver. See how this ‘Great Grandiose’ deals with that.”

“Hey, just wear your tech on you. I wonder how great Grandiose would look with a tranquilizer dart in his neck,” I said with a wry smile of my own.

Will raised his arms in mock surrender. “Oh please, no. I give up.”

“Wow,” Torque said sarcastically. “I can't believe you've defeated my nemesis so soundly, when I have struggled for so long.”

“If it weren't for these meddling Wards I would've gotten away with it!”

Naomi sighed, a small smile still on her face. “Well anyway, what'd you need us back today for? We kinda have to go real soon.”

“Oh! Yes.” Torque opened one of his cabinets, pulling out a pair of big black duffelbags. “I had these leftover from a project I was working on for a cape up in Wyoming, but it got canceled after he died. Figured one of you would have a need for them.”

I opened one of the duffelbags out of curiosity, my eyes widening. A small jet engine, perhaps twice the size of my own. “You don't need this for anything? This is...wow.”

He shook his head. “Guy wanted basically a glorified jetpack. Halfway through the build when he went and got a hole punched through him by Behemoth. Disassembled what I could and used it elsewhere, but these are...not powerful enough for most of my work, and too powerful for the rest. They're yours if you want.”

“Oh...I, wow. Thank you!” I said excitedly, giving him a hug. “If Naomi doesn't have a use of them, I'll certainly take them off your hands.”

Naomi shrugged. “Wouldn't work for my mechs, so have at them.”

“Imagine what you could do if you could fly, though!”

“It's one thing I'm stuck on with Torunn, but the propulsion is...a bit different.”

“So this is what happens when you get three Tinkers in a room,” Will said.

“Like you don't enjoy watching me work,” Torque said with a smirk. Will shrugged.

“We should probably head out,” Naomi said.

“Aw. Well, it was nice seeing you, Naomi. Can you maybe come on by again without waiting years?” Torque joked.

Naomi smiled and walked over to him. “Yeah. Sorry. I'll make sure to this time,” she said as she gave him a hug.

“And it was nice meeting you, Brenna. Feel free to stop by as well.”
“Uh, sure,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Nice meeting you,” Will added.

“Uh huh. You're certainly the friendliest Villain I've met,” Naomi said jokingly.

“Should see him with kids,” Torque said. “I keep telling him he should've been a teacher.”

Will laughed, and we headed out.

**Blink**

Imperium sure had a fondness for meeting in factories. I flew towards one located on the north-west part of the city, flying far above the electrified fence meant to keep most people out. As like before, seconds after I teleported into the interior of the largest building, a drone floated over to me. It seemed slightly larger than the others, and I thought I could see more panels. I didn't get much of a chance to look before it turned and floated away.

I teleported into the room it stopped at. Recollect flinched and settled into a glare. I supposed everyone else was used to my power, given that no one else reacted beyond Woodwind smiling coyly at me.

“All I got was a text asking to show up immediately. What's up?” I asked as I settled into a chair.

“The Ravens wanted to meet. I gathered everyone as a show of force. Just stay silent and you can leave after. I'll compensate you for your time later,” Imperium replied.

I nodded. Internally, I was a little nervous. I had, after all, directly attacked a Raven outpost, not to mention all of the info I'd been collecting and leaking out.

And if they found out my involvement with Branwen's murder? I wasn't sure I could run away from the collective might of the Ravens without skipping town, and I couldn't leave Jessica.

I glanced at Recollect, expecting him to focus on me like before, but he instead focused on Woodwind.

We waited in silence for about a minute. I saw Encore and Potion on their phones. Imperium stared ahead unmoving like a statue. Woodwind hummed to herself, and I sensed something move near me.

I looked over to see a small concrete figure walking around, as if patrolling, in time with the humming.

“She's here,” Woodwind spoke up suddenly, her voice sounding almost musical as it had before. Imperium nodded.

The door opened up only a few seconds later, and a tall woman in a costume with a weird mix of snake and dragon walked in. I'd never seen her before. Something about her seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite remember how.

“Ah, Basilisk. What a delight. I wasn't sure you were even alive, but here you stand before us,” Imperium said as he stood and rose his arms in some grand gesture.

*Fuck.* Basilisk, one of the leaders of the Ravens, and a powerful thinker. From what I knew, she had disappeared for a while, and many thought she'd died somehow, but here she was, strolling in alive and well. There were only speculations on how her power worked, but it was at least known that she could figure things out about people somehow.
I noted Woodwind actually rolling her eyes at Imperium's over-the-top mannerisms, something I'd thought about doing several times over.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I'm here to stay,” Basilisk responded wryly, making an equally grand gesture. I wasn't sure if she was trying to play along or if she was equally dorky.

“Oh, no. No disappointment at all. It is nice to have someone of some class representing the other Empire in this fair city. Are you here alone?”

“Oh, the kids are on their way,” Basilisk said. A moment later, an alarmingly tall figure walked through the door behind her.

Bloodletter, irritation clear on his face, struck a very imposing figure. The stories of him never quite did his stature justice, as he easily towered over everyone in the room. Streams of blood followed him as he made his way to a seat. After him, a girl with a respirator for a mask walked in.

*Starving Artist.*

Only a few feet away from me stood the cape responsible for so much pain and suffering in the past couple of years. She essentially transformed the Ravens from awful to absolutely repugnant. I turned away. I couldn't stand seeing her.

Rewind and Spellbound strolled in last, side by side. I looked back at Basilisk who, to my surprise, was looking straight at me. I turned back to Imperium.

“Welcome, welcome. Please, enjoy some refreshments as we discuss matters.”

I stifled a groan as what could only be described as a pair of butler drones walked through the doors with large plates topped with small appetizers and drinks. Starving Artist grabbed a drink and sat directly next to Potion, to my surprise. Potion herself grabbed a drink, and I noticed the two of them slipped stuff into the others' drinks with only a hint of subtlety.

Should I...say something?

I glanced at the others in the room, who were partially paying attention to the odd scene, but didn't seem to care. Recollect actually rolled his eyes at the two. Probably not worth speaking up about, however weird it was.

Basilisk herself grabbed...something off a plate. None of the other Ravens touched the food. Everyone else with Imperium took something as the robots passed by, except for Woodwind. I opted not to take anything. I preferred food I could actually name.

“Now, do tell us the reason you've gathered us here,” Imperium said.

“You know why. Our common enemy went too far. One of the heroes murdered Branwen,” Basilisk replied. “One of ours.” I noted her neutral expression faltered when she mentioned the murder, replaced with anger.

I thought back to that moment. One I would never forget.

I had scrubbed at my boots where some blood had touched. They looked clean, but I still checked, even now.

“Yes. I heard.” Imperium said, swirling his drink. “My condolences for your loss. But you say a hero is responsible? I find that a little hard to believe.”
“We know Icarus killed her. We don't know who else is involved besides the PRT. Either way, at least one hero has to die.”

Of course there would be consequences. I still could hardly believe that Brenna went so far. Maybe she would deserve what might happen.

Imperium crossed his arms. “You understand what you're saying, I assume. Even if Icarus killed one of your soldiers, you're proposing what would amount to all-out war, and by your presence here I presume you want to involve all of us in this as well?”

No. How could I have even thought that?

“If the heroes themselves are willing to go so far, what's to stop them from killing your people as well? There must be consequences for their actions.”

“With all due respect, I still do not believe that the heroes would collectively act in such a manner. If it is true that Icarus murdered Branwen, then she did it without their support.”

“Icarus still flies free. They are still letting a murderer walk among them. Someone has to hold her accountable, and the heroes clearly aren't.”

“That may be because they don't know it was anything besides self-defense. Have you considered that?” Imperium replied with a very slight hint of irritation.

I hadn't seen Imperium lose his patience before, and I was morbidly curious of what would happen if he lost it here. We were surrounded by drones, and they were all dangerous. Even if they were wearing stupid little tuxes.

“That doesn't change anything. Icarus killed her.”

“It changes a lot. I'm sure the heroes and the public would be very interested in any evidence you might have. Perhaps then she'll be locked up and the problem solved without blood being let. Shed.”

Basilisk rolled her eyes at Imperium's words. “As if the PRT hasn't covered things up before. And even if we give evidence, it'll be coming from us. Villains. It'll be thrown right out.”

“You and I know very well just how balanced the situation is between heroes and villains. We don't kill each other in the streets lest we invite war in the cities, and no one wants that. They especially don't want that. They'll ship Icarus off to some hellhole if it means keeping that balance, if the murder was so overt as you believe it to be. I know your history. You'll have the evidence.”

“Of course I have the evidence. Even with the PRT scrambling to clean up, there's too many pieces in too many places. They're good at making messes, but terrible at cleaning them up.”

Imperium brought a hand to his chin.

“We won't be involved in open war with the Protectorate. However, I will offer to stand by. A temporary truce, if you will, until this blows over. One way or another.”

“You'll know it's done when we hang Icarus's bloody mask for the world to see.”

“Right,” Imperium said with a very slight hint of sarcasm. “I wouldn't underestimate the heroes if I were you, Basilisk. I would hate to see you all perish in the process.”

“I'm sure you would,” Basilisk said, standing up. “I have what I need. Do you want to bring
“something up before I leave your gracious hospitality?”

“No, but I believe that settles the matters at hand. I do wish you luck in this trying situation.”

“Okay,” she said before turning to her gang. “Let's go.”

She walked out without another word, followed by the rest. Starving Artist winked at Potion before heading out. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know what their deal was. Potion herself did not move a muscle.

The butler robots immediately headed away. Another robot appeared with a mop bucket, working to clean up after Bloodletter. Imperium nodded.

“Alright. We're finished here. Everyone except for Blink may leave.”

He likely just wanted me for a job, using this time as a convenience. Hopefully. The others filtered out except for Potion, who started oddly twitching.

“Potion. Do you have something to say?” Imperium asked.

She shook her head slowly. Then she opened her mouth to say something. Finally, she jerked up and promptly fell out of her chair. She stood back up, shaking, Imperium waiting for her.

“No. Nothing. Good night,” she said as she stumbled out of the room. Imperium shook his head.

“Blink. I know you have something against the Ravens,” he said, the moment Potion left.

Fuck.

He continued, “Don't do anything rash. I won't protect you if there is retaliation against you during this truce.”

“I...I understand,” I replied, not sure what else to say.

He nodded. “You can go. Expect a raise for your cooperation at this time.”

*Leave the Ravens alone. I could do that, right?*

I left without another word, flying off.
Retribution 2.3 - Reunion

Chapter by keira_irl

Blink

I was riding in a car. Mom, Papá, and Jessica were all dressed in black. Funeral wear. I looked down. I was wearing black, too, but my chestpiece was of kevlar.

I found myself outside, the car in ruin. Blood stained every inch of the car, and I found the two thugs laughing, hopped up on some kind of drug. Nothing mundane, looking at them. I ran forward. They'd killed my family, I should be avenging them!

A claw tore into my shoulder, and I screamed in pain. I turned, and found Icarus there, her right arm covered in blood. Behind her the dead body of a woman, her eyes open in the pain she felt just before expiring.

Icarus pointed her arm at me.

“'I'm sorry I got you involved,’” she said in a dead voice.

A bang, and a bright light.

I screamed. I tried to teleport, but I was stuck. Trapped.

I kicked and tossed around and tried to get free, but I only fell off what I was on. I was tangled, but I didn't know what in. I still couldn't teleport.

Oh. Lucidity slowly returned. I was in bed, and I had found myself on the floor. Tangled in sheets. I could feel sweat fall from my forehead and armpits. I slowly worked to untangle myself. I could've teleported, then, not that I really felt the need anymore.

This was the third night in a row I had something like this. The details changed every time, I knew, even as memories of the one I just had flew from my mind.

I shook my head and looked at the alarm clock. 3:47. There was no getting back to sleep.

Damn you Brenna. Why'd you have to go and do that?

I still wondered if the PRT took credit because they knew, or because they didn't. I'd have to ask Brenna myself if I wanted to know, I supposed.

Do I dare get involved? I don't know.

The Ravens were fucking awful. I'd seen what they did during my youth, and that was before they had Starving Artist.

It's funny. A horrible monster, and yet she was so small. Cute, almost. Shows love to depict villains as ugly, but that's only ever the case half the time.

I grimaced. I wasn't paying attention when I collapsed into bed, tired and confused as I was. I still wore my bra. I quickly shed my undergarments and ran for the shower. Maybe some hot water would clear my mind.
I sneezed as I entered, and I realized how much my throat hurt. Coming down with something, on top of everything else?

The hot water and steam was welcome. I let myself close my eyes for a brief minute before settling into my routine.

I still needed a plan. Whether that plan involved doing something or staying away, I needed to decide. Why would I risk myself, when I had Jessica to take care of? Why would I sit back, when the Ravens were out there? Why did I care so much about the Ravens, again? Because of Jenna? As far as I was concerned, she died three years ago.

Guilt. It ate at me. Working against the Ravens? It eased that. I knew the entire time I didn't search for Jenna because I thought she was alive. It was just an excuse.

I sat down. It was easier to be busy than to think about all of this. Stupid nightmare, making me wake up early.

_Fuck it._ I stepped out of the shower, determined to think about something else. Towel wrapped around me, I walked back into my room. I retrieved a binder from the drawer of my desk, smiling. It'd been a while.

Mostly, it contained sheets of the characters I made for various campaigns. Usually for D&D. Two of the people I played with were no longer around, but the ideas in the back of my head were.

I wrote on the notebook, ideas already filling a few pages. I wanted to DM for a campaign. Even if I couldn't anymore, hashing out half-thought ideas was a much easier use of my extra time.

A campaign where the characters would gear up against an evil that reappeared which had darkened an area several years ago. Only, the ‘evil’ they would find was a misunderstood woman protesting the atrocities the local government committed. Of course, the woman wasn't exactly the most moral being. It would be neat to see what the players did with it.

I yawned, and shot up as the alarm went off. I grumbled and grudgingly turned it off and set to getting ready for school. I had only written out a couple pages worth of worldbuilding. Still, I felt...almost refreshed, more refreshed than from the poor excuse of sleep I'd got.

Maybe I could let myself work on it a little more often. To keep myself sane if nothing else.

I shivered as I stepped outside. Light snow fell, and I immediately regretted not using a hair dryer.

At least the car had a heater, though it felt like it took forever to warm up. Stupid Colorado, snowing in April.

I groaned moments after walking into Centralia's main building. People were whispering to each other, and it was obvious they were talking about the dead Raven. Sometimes I wondered if the people here obsessed over cape stuff even more than I did, which I needed to do for _survival._

Naomi leaned against a wall, separate from all the others. I always liked how she seemed to care even less about the cape gossip than I did. She was engrossed in something on her phone. I almost passed by, not wanting to bother her, but instead I walked over.

“Hey Naomi,” I spoke up.

I didn't hear her response. A short ways away, Brenna walked through the halls.
Blood sprayed from the multiple wounds in her chest.

Icarus didn't respond at first, still looking down at her blood-soaked mask. Finally she looked up, her tear-filled eyes meeting mine with a look I couldn't quite place. “I'm sorry I got you involved.”

I shook my head.

“Hey Isabelle, is something wrong?” Naomi asked.

Right. I was at school. Brenna passed us. And my brain promptly decided to freak out.

She looked so normal like this. Saturday night, killed someone. Tuesday morning, went to school. I didn't see Brenna yesterday. Given everything, I was surprised she made it today.

But then, Brenna walked like there was something heavy on her. She slouched more than usual. Dragged her feet. She'd probably slept worse than I had.

“Isabelle?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” I said, turning to Naomi. Despite how I was feeling, I couldn't help but smile a little at her presence. “I was, uh, zoning out.”

“Just checking in,” Naomi said, smiling.

I turned away, hiding my blush—when did I start blushing with her?

“I'm doing okay enough. How are you doing?”

“I…” Naomi trailed off. I looked back to see her smile fell. “Didn't sleep much. I was kinda sick over the weekend and into Monday.”

“Ah, I was wondering why I didn't see you yesterday. You feeling better?”

Naomi shrugged. “Well enough.”

“That's good.” I smiled, and to my delight Naomi smiled back. “I, uh, gotta take care of something. Catch you later!”

“See ya,” she said, with a small wave. I walked briskly, hoping that Brenna had not yet entered a classroom. I saw her up ahead.

Am I really doing this?

I walked behind her and tapped her shoulder. She jerked back in surprise, and her eyes widened as she saw me.

“Rooftop at lunchtime,” I whispered, before moving on. I didn't even look back.

I wasn't even sure why I went to class yesterday, other than out of sheer stubborn habit. I sure as heck couldn't pay attention, anymore than I could now. How could I, after what had happened?

It was like it was a few months ago. I stubbornly went to school despite not being able to concentrate. This...might not have been on the same scale. Heck, I hadn't known Brenna for very long. But the betrayal had hit me all the same.

Motion by motion. Words, uncomprehending. There were no tests, thankfully. I would have failed
them.

When did it become lunch time?

I found myself next to the stairwell that would take me to the roof. I hesitated. Did she deserve what I had to tell her? Should I not stand by?

I took the steps despite my doubts. The roof access was, as usual, unlocked. Some kids broke it a long time ago, or so I heard. Not that it would have been an obstacle. No doors kept me out.

I looked around, finding myself alone. I sat down and watched the door for a few minutes, wondering if Brenna even heard what I said. It finally opened, and Brenna walked reluctantly through.

“Hey,” she said quietly, not looking at me.

Can’t you look me in the eyes?

Seeing her now, I wanted nothing more than to scream at her. What good would that do, though?

I stood up. “I'm not entirely sure why I'm telling you this, even now. I'm not sure if I should,” I said, walking closer. “The Ravens met with Imperium.”

I whispered in her ear as I passed her. “And Basilisk was with them.”

“I...” Brenna trailed off, eyes widening at Basilisk's name. “I don't—You know her powers, don't you? You wouldn't have told me if you didn't have an idea...Isabelle, even telling me...you could be dragging yourself into this.”

I paused. The door was right in front of me, and I was ready to walk away from her.

Instead, I turned around.

“You dragged me into this the moment you shot Branwen in front of me.”

She flinched at my words, taking a step back. “I know. I'm sorry. That doesn't make it any less terrible, what I did, but...I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to happen like that.”

“Why?”

“Because...” she took a breath. “...because I thought I was stronger than that. Than her. But after everything she'd done...remembering that...I guess I'm just as bad as she was.”

“No. You haven't done a fraction of what Branwen did. Doesn't make it right, but...” I trailed off, shaking my head. “I hate you for how you did what you did, but I guess a part of me just had to know why. Why you went so far.”

Brenna paused, finally meeting my gaze. Her piercing blue eyes, conveying a mix of hate and pain. “She's a Raven. Was a Raven. I did everything wrong, but she deserved it nonetheless.”

I suspected, but with the way she looked at me, I was all but certain.

“They did something to you. Or maybe they kidnapped you,” I stated, softly.

Her gaze faltered, she looked away. “Yeah,” she said, tiredly. “Branwen was the one who...who grabbed me. Who turned me into this.” She shook her head.
I could still remember their faces. The thugs who drove into us. What would I do if I ever saw them? I looked away.

“I won’t ask why the PRT decided to take the fall for you, but it’s probably obvious that the Ravens don’t buy it. I think Basilisk said something to the effect of holding your bloody mask up for the world to see.”

She simply nodded. “That...doesn't sound like what I've heard of her, but then again I don't think anyone even knew she was alive. I...I'll have to face that, I suppose. You should lay low, you don't deserve to get associated with me here.”

I chuckled nervously. “With the truce going on between Imperium and the Ravens... Guess I'll be back to boring old robberies and white-collar crimes for now. Laying low, as much as I can.”

Brenna shrugged. “Yeah, that's... probably for the best. Is...is Imperium...helping them? To get even with me?”

I shook my head. “Imperium was losing his patience, actually. I think he finds the idea of going all out against the PRT ridiculous. All he gave them was a truce. Probably just wants to watch the fireworks.”

“I see. It goes without saying, but for what its worth, nobody knows you—knows I got you involved. Cupid...might know I withheld something, but not what. I think.”

Basilisk looked at me during the meeting. Did she know something? I sighed, and set my hand on her shoulder.

“Don't get killed, okay? I can't be angry with a corpse.”

Brenna smiled sadly. “Whatever happens, happens. Thanks for the heads-up on Basilisk.”

“I did owe you, after all,” I said softly before turning and heading for the door.

When I tapped her shoulder, I hardly wanted anything to do with her. But now? I was conflicted. When the last memory of her was of the ear-piercing blast, of the blood, it was easy to hate her. This memory? Talking to her again as one flawed person to another? I couldn't.

I couldn't forgive her, but I could understand.

**Icarus**

This was useless.

I flew in a slow and lazy path over the streets of downtown. Patrolling here made little sense. Who would start stuff practically on the PRT's front door?

I had heard the excuse of ‘PR’, of having heroes make appearances downtown during patrols. They probably just didn't trust me to do anything else, at this point. Not that I'd really blame them.

“This is Tank Buster. Just checking in. How's it going?” Naomi's voice sounded in my ears. Apparently she needed to check in every ten minutes.

“Same as before. More flying. Things as normal. Shoppers shopping, business people businessing,” I replied as my stomach grumbled. “Hey, I'm gonna grab a snack.”
“Get some waves in as you do, okay? PR and all.”

“Sure.”

I rolled my eyes and flew above the 16th Street Mall. Below me, people looked up at me as I roared down the streets, my wings casting shadows on the ground below.

My target was just up ahead, close to the south-eastern end of the outdoor walking mall that was 16th Street. Golden Royal Dragon. My hunger grew at the thought. I cut my engines off, dropping to the ground in front of my destination with a heroic flourish.

The PR and publicity was pointless, but as I listened to the gasps of bystanders around me... I had to admit it felt good, especially after everything. I'd walked here a hundred times, dropping by Dragon to pick up to-go orders while visiting my dad at the capitol, only a couple blocks away. Except now, I was hot shit. I was a hero, not some nobody with a weird arm.

A bit of me couldn't help but feel ashamed, if they knew what I had done... no. I wasn't going to go down that train of thought for the millionth time today. Not during lunch.

Ah, delicious knock-off Chinese food! You will be mine!

I waved to the handful of onlookers, giving finger guns to some random guy who shouted my cape name, before opening the door and making my way inside. It hadn't been the first time I'd visited in costume, but it still felt kind of weird. Especially when I couldn't eat inside, and had to find a secluded rooftop to take lunch, where I could take my mask off.

Weird as it was, there wasn't even a line, when usually this time in the afternoon I had to wait five minutes. Maybe it was just a slower Tuesday than usual. It didn't matter, I was that closer to having General Tso's...and lemon chicken...and teriyaki beef...and a soda.

“Hi!” I said to the rather nervous-looking employee. She let off something like a squeak. Was I...was I really that scary-looking? Or was she just shy? “Are you okay?” I asked.

She stammered a bit, something I couldn't understand, almost looking panicked. I kinda felt bad, to be honest. Anxiety?

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Sylvi.”

No.

Slowly, I turned around, coming face to face with her. Starving Artist.

Brown eyes, far more innocent-looking than I knew they were, staring up at me. My breath shuddered. I tried moving, tried doing anything, but I couldn't even twitch. I was frozen in place, held prisoner by those eyes I knew all-too well.

The Ravens were here.

I screamed at myself to move, but my body wouldn't obey. Even as footsteps thundered behind me, I couldn't do a single thing. Just like before.

What the fuck? How did they know? How did they even get in here without raising an alarm?

“Don't resist, please,” Starving Artist purred.
Suddenly, as she spoke, I was able to move again, her words shattering my paralysis. She was between me and the door...I leaped forward, raising my hands to shove her out of the way...and she slammed a flask into my face.

It shattered against my mask, spreading a thick substance on it that quickly congealed, covering my entire head in something opaque. I was blind. An alarm popped up on my HUD. All my targeting sensors were out, leaving me completely in the dark, the only thing in my sight was the HUD indicator showing my biometrics as they started flaring.

I stumbled towards the door, snarling as someone grabbed one of my wings, yanking me backwards. Even as I throttled my jets up to scorch them, I felt more than heard a crunch of glass as a pair of vials were sucked into my engines, which promptly sputtered and seized up.

I keyed my radio desperately, “The Ravens! They're here! Fuck fuck fuck fuck—”

Arms grasped me from behind, squeezing me so hard I could barely breathe.

“Shit! I'm on my way. Do whatever you can to stall them,” I heard Tank Buster say back.

I kicked at whoever had grabbed me, hitting their leg and eliciting a snarl. My arms were pinned by their grip, and—

A razor-sharp claw pressed against my throat. Claws I'd experienced firsthand before.

_Bloodletter_.

“Would you cut it out,” he growled. His grip tightened on me, metal groaning. If he so much as twitched, if that claw cut my throat...

Over the radio, I whispered, not because I was worried he would hear me, but because I could barely breathe. “Starving Artist and Bloodletter, at least. Please...please help.”

Tank Buster's voice came back. “I'm almost there. Just hold on!”

Bloodletter dragged me backwards, ignoring my useless attempts to pull his hand off my throat. At some point, I hadn't noticed, but my arm was gummed up with the same shit. My boots skittered across the floor, trying to find traction, somehow, anyhow.

_Please. No._

I heard Bloodletter slam open a door, and I felt the warm sun on me. The soft rumble of an engine nearby. A car. Bloodletter was dragging me to some kind of car.

“Dammit!” I heard over the radio. “I've been blinded. Icarus, just hold on!”

I was picked up, and Bloodletter threw me up and in—I slammed into a metal wall, then fell to the ground, landing on my side with a thud. Some kind of box truck, and I was in the back?

“A truck, I think. They're going to drive off. Naomi, _please_ , I can't see, I can't fucking see or fly or shoot, and...”

I couldn't see, but maybe I could get past. I leaped at where I thought the back was, just in time to hear the door slam shut, and I hit it. I was trapped inside.

“Naomi—” I was cut off by an error message. _Signal lost_. I lost my geolocation, my comms, my weapons...
As I felt the truck lurch into motion, it hit me. I was in their grasp...again.

“Sylvi, calm down.”

I was trapped in here with Starving Artist.

I scrambled backwards, away from her voice. Backed into a corner, my wings covering me defensively as I sat there, shivering.

Sylvi, calm down.

I heard the clink of glass, and flinched. My implants had been acting up, I didn't know if I'd be able to filter her drugs properly. If I'd be able to resist. Even now, I could almost taste it, a single sickly-sweet drop of pink liquid on my tongue, melting into me...

“Sylvi, I'm going to clean your mask. Do not strike me or this will be worse for you.”

I heard soft footsteps approaching me. A hand rested softly on one of my wings curled around me. “Leave me alone,” I snarled, jerking my wing away.

Still, she moved forward, I could feel her presence, right next to me. A hand gripped my mask, and there was a sizzling sound as she dribbled something onto it, filling my lungs with an acrid odor that made me cough and jerk back.

“I'm sorry for the smell, but it's completely harmless,” Starving Artist said, rubbing at my mask, dissolving away the opaque gunk. A moment later, she stepped back.

Even with only a single dim light illuminating the interior of the truck back, I could see every detail of her clear as day. In two years, she'd changed little, her hair was longer, but still short; her face maybe a little more filled out. She was staring at me, as if unsure what I was going to do.

If I could have pushed myself through the corner of the truck I was backed into, I would have.

Starving Artist returned the half-full vial she had poured on me to her belt, not breaking her cautious stare.

She'd added green highlights to her hair since then, to match her costume.

My targeting system flickered back into life, uselessly painting tracking info over her. She cleared her throat. “You've made yourself immune to my creations,” she said matter-of-factly, in that quiet voice I could never forget.

I simply nodded. She twitched a bit in response, and pulled her mask up just long enough to take a drink from one of her vials. I shut my eyes, trying to clear my mind of her, what she'd done...

This can't be happening.

This isn't real. It's just another nightmare. You'll wake up soon.

Look at me, Sylvi.

She'd spoken. Starving Artist had spoken, again. I opened my eyes.

She was right in front of me, staring at me with her head cocked to the side. “I understand your fear, even if I don't agree with it. This is not going to be pleasant for you. I can make it better. Limit the suffering. But you have to trust me.”
“Fuck you,” I replied. “Leave me alone!” I couldn't get away, she had me backed into a corner. I could have attacked her, but...I didn't know how well my implants were working. If she hit me with something, if I let her get into my system let her into my head it could be over. At the same time...

I was suddenly aware, once more, of that sweet taste, of that whole feeling, pulsing through my veins. I hated it, I detested that feeling...but I missed it. Two years was a long time. I'd pushed the addiction down, but I was suddenly well aware of that voice in the back of my head, that I'd repressed. No amount of Tinkertech could fix the addiction in my brain.

Being aware of the urge didn't make it go away. I found my eyes on one of Alex's vials, the pink one, next to the gray one that had dissolved the glue she'd hit me with.

No.

I clamped my eyes shut. Don't look at it, Syl—Brenna. Don't look. You don't need it. You're stronger than that. Even if a single sip would probably be filtered.

My implant was still kinda working, right?

No, stop.

“I saw that look, Sylvi.”

Fuck.

There was the sound of clinking glass, and I could feel her getting closer to me.

“You miss Heartbreak, don't you? I can tell, I can taste your fear, your excitement.”

I found my eyes open, looking at the vial she was holding in front of me. I couldn't look away from it. I couldn't tear my eyes away from that horrible delicious fluid.

There was a gloved hand resting on my mask. I couldn't help but tense up...but my eyes didn't leave the Heartbreak she was dangling in front of me.

“Hold it,” Starving Artist commanded, her voice still soft. I hesitated, but grabbed it shakily. Her hands were on both sides of my mask now, reaching to the back, to the connection points behind my ears. She wanted me to take it off, to take my mask off. To let me taste the Heartbreak again.

There was a click, and a stab of pain from the neural link breaking as I mentally unlocked the connections, and she pulled it off. She set it next to me, and took back the vial.

“Good girl,” she purred, smiling at me. When did she take her mask off? A green-gloved hand rested on my cheek, brushing away tears I didn't know I had. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I could feel her heartbeat. Our heartbeat. “There's been refinements in my formula since you last had it, Sylvi. No more of those side effects you hated.”

“No,” I whispered. Be strong, Sylvi. It's not too late. You can get out of this.

Alex rearranged herself, straddling my knees as she looked down at me, still with that soft, reassuring smile. Her brown eyes radiated happiness, excitement, like showing an old friend everything she'd been up to since we'd last met.

“I'm not going to force you to take anything, Sylvi,” she said, uncorking the Heartbreak and filling an eyedropper. “Tell me if you want it.”
There was a small wooden box, small enough to fit into a backpack. I pulled it out and opened it.

Inside were four vials wrapped in foam padding. I pulled one out, tossing the padding to the ground, holding it up to the light to get a better look. A clear, pink-tinted fluid. Heartbreak. One of the signature drugs the Ravens produced, nasty shit and very addictive.

No. I won't take it ever again.

I took a deep, shaky breath. I was crying again.

“Yes,” I whispered, tears running down my face.

She opened her mouth, and dangled the eyedropper above her. The truck hit a bump, and a drop fell onto Alex's tongue.

I could hear her heartbeat.

“Open your mouth,” she ordered.

She held the Heartbreak out. I closed my eyes, and opened my mouth.

I felt something like a breeze rush over my legs, my arms, the back of my neck. I couldn't help but shiver, letting out a sob as I did. Suddenly, there was a loud crackle, and then a thump, as the weight resting on my legs fell over.

I opened my eyes, to see Flashstep, in jeans and a Kaminari t-shirt, with his bandanna and goggles the only thing indicating he was a cape. Starving Artist was on the bed of the truck, twitching and convulsing in a puddle of pink.

He tased her a second time for good measure, before dropping the taser and rushing to me. “Br—Icarus, did she give you anything?”

I shook my head, crawling over to Starving Artist, rolling her over with a grunt, to reveal her vials, making sure to avoid the Heartbreak. I grabbed the gray vial, popping the stopper off and pouring some onto my arm, cycling mechanisms to work it into all the nooks and crannies...Not perfect, but enough.

“Icarus, are you...okay?” Flashstep asked, placing his hand on my shoulder. I flinched away his touch without even realizing. I handed him the vial, gesturing towards my engines wordlessly.

He shook the rest of it into my engines. I cycled everything, letting it get in, but stopping the sequence before firing the jets up all the way. No sense filling the truck with exhaust.

“I'm so glad I was in the area,” Jordan said, looking at me. “Still had you tagged from the other day. It's going to be okay, Icarus.”

I didn't respond to that, pulling myself shakily to my feet, using the wall of the truck for support.

You have me tagged? I thought, staring at him. He held out a hand for me to take.

I took it, standing up. I looked over at Starving Artist, twitching pathetically in the puddle of Heartbreak.

Oh. I picked my mask back up, sighing in relief as it clicked back into place and flickered to life.

My implant. It's disabled. When did that happen?
I shuddered and turned it back on. I waited for the pain, but it didn't happen. I narrowly escaped...

No. Don't think.

I pointed my arm at Starving Artist and foamed her before turning back towards the door.

“Brenna?” Jordan asked beside me. I turned, looking into his worried eyes.

No amount of thanks could ever repay him for stepping in.

I turned towards the door and rolled it open. I didn't recognize the street we were on, but it didn't really matter. I just had to get away, from Starving Artist, from the truck, all of it. Even if it meant letting her get away as we let them drove off.

I fired up my engines, wincing at the intermittent popping as I throttled up and jumped into the air. I didn't fly for long, landing on the sidewalk as the truck trundled away, driver unaware their captive had escaped. As Flashstep appeared next to me without fanfare my comms finally finished reconnecting.

Flashstep's voice, his radio hidden beneath his mask. “Tank Buster, this is Flashstep. I...Icarus is here, safe with me.”

He paused. I was tuned in, but I didn't hear a response.

“TB, it's Flashstep, do you copy?”

Flashstep was looking at me strangely. “She's not replying,” he said. “This is Flashstep. Status on Tank Buster?” he said, this time into a different channel.

I tuned into the PRT channel, just as an unfamiliar voice replied. “Flashstep, stand down at your location and await response team. Master/Stranger protocols in effect, maintain silence.”

It must've been something in his eyes, the way he almost fell back. Dread.

“They're sending a team,” he said. “But I can't get TB.”

I sat down, thinking. Last I'd heard, she was on her way.

I've been blinded. Icarus, just hold on!

Then it hit me. Naomi wasn't responding. Protocols were in effect...

I spoke for the first time since Starving Artist. “The Ravens have Naomi.”
I couldn't say how many times I'd watched. I couldn't look away.

There was no sound, but I could almost hear the sirens in my head as Tank Buster pulled over to the side of the road. She'd been blinded, and managed to stop herself before she could crash.

The video quality was almost pitiful, a shaky vertical video shot from an office window, but I could still see holes appearing in her bike. Tank Buster shook her head and tried to drive.

I wanted to yell, warn her about what was coming, but I couldn't. I watched helplessly as Bloodletter tackled her to the ground. Tank Buster slammed her fist into Bloodletter and shoved him off. She stood and backed off, pulling out her oversized baton. She must have been in pain, with the deep claw marks where Bloodletter tore into the armor of her arm, but she stood as if it made no difference.

She leaped at him, and swung her baton. He batted it away with his claws, but Tank Buster kicked him in his knee. Bloodletter didn't react, looking almost amused. Naomi jabbed him with a taser as he taunted.

Bloodletter convulsed for a second before the taser stopped having any effect. He lunged at Naomi, claws ripping into her armor as if it were made of paper.

If his claws had dug any closer...I shook my head. Naomi flailed briefly before regaining control and stepping back.

This wasn't a one on one fight despite all appearances. Spellbound had to be in the background, somewhere, supporting Bloodletter. Blindness, losing control of movement. Even Bloodletter's resistance to the taser, unless he was also hopped up on whatever combat stimulants were cooked up by Starving Artist. This was two on one at the very least, likely three on one.

Bloodletter walked slowly, patiently. Naomi's head turned briefly before looking back at Bloodletter. They paused—I still wasn't sure if they talked or just sized each other up. A truck swerved into view, and Bloodletter charged her.

Naomi dodged or parried his blows, but Bloodletter's attacked relentlessly. She backed up more and more, still trying to attack when she could.

Please. Run away. Don't try to fight.

My thoughts were useless. This already happened. It was in the past, and I couldn't do anything here.

Rewind stepped into view behind Naomi, and once again I wanted to scream at the video. Naomi backed away from Bloodletter, only to get punched from behind by Rewind. She teleported forward, right in front of Bloodletter. He backhanded her to the ground and slammed his foot onto her back.
Naomi tried to push herself up through brute force alone, but Bloodletter's strength matched her armor's. Rewind walked up to TB and poured something from a vial which dissolved part of Naomi's armor. She poured a different vial and Naomi stopped moving.

I watched as they dragged her still form into a truck, similar to the one they threw me into.

“You keep watching that,” I heard behind me. Red Light. I nearly jumped.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Don't know why. I keep thinking, maybe I'll get a hint, a clue, something to help find her.”

“It's your fault, isn't it?” he spat, voice dripping with accusation. “They were after you.”

I didn't know what to say. What do you say to something like that? Especially when it's true.

“You better do all you fucking can to help us get Naomi back. Or I swear to God...” Red Light shook his head and turned around, his hands balled up into fists. Shaking.

“I will,” I said quietly. “I won't let her go through...through that. We'll get her back.”

The doors slammed open, and I looked up to see Bunker and the Director side by side, the rest of the Protectorate following behind them. Two unfamiliar capes entered shortly after. Their costumes were hardly distinguishable, their colors subdued. Even with masks, they looked downright normal next to the flashy costumes of the Denver capes.

It was the first time I’d seen Jade in person. She appeared more human than I expected, even with her curved horns. Her yellow cat-like eyes gazed into me, an almost alien quality in them. Only her blue hair brought some humanity to her appearance. Even right now, I felt a very slight pull towards her.

Chozo nodded to me. I nodded back, trying not to grimace. We'd only had a couple sessions sparring since I'd started, but they hadn't gone well. He didn't pull his punches, that was certain.

Cupid looked at me, but I wasn't about to meet her gaze. I didn't want pity.

Umbra seemed almost bored. I heard she was generally...aloof, but here she seemed almost unaware of the situation. Tendrils of golden light extended from her, and one of them ran over to me in the form of a dog and cocked its head. Despite myself I couldn't help but kneel down and pet him. I was surprised it was even possible, but it felt...off. Cold, almost hard. The 'dog' reacted to being pet, but the experience was more unnerving than anything.

Red Light snarled, “Took you l–”

“Shut up and sit down, Red Light,” the Director ordered. “There's no time for that unless you want to rescue a drugged-up husk of a person.”

Red Light flinched and opened his mouth, but sat down instead, doing his best to scrape the legs of the chair against the floor.

“I hope you all understand the gravity of the situation,” Bunker said. “Tank Buster was captured near the heart of downtown in full view of thousands of people, both on the streets and in the office buildings surrounding the scene. Icarus was also captured, but Flashstep's actions ensured we didn't lose her too. Errata and Yuzhou personally came to us from Salt Lake, given we're all but certainly compromised.”

Oh. Right.
“I almost forgot,” I muttered to myself. I cleared my throat. “A contact of mine told me that Basilisk is back.”

“Basilisk. Are you sure? Who's your source?” the Director said.

“I can't say. I haven't met them,” I lied. One of the unknown capes looked directly at me, cocking their head, and Cupid and I locked eyes for a brief second. “But they've never been wrong before.”

“It would explain how they managed to do this,” Bunker said. “It would be reasonable enough to assume Basilisk is among the Ravens and act accordingly. Wouldn't you agree, Veronika?”

“I don't like unknowns, Icarus. I expect you to tell me all you know later, when we aren't short on time. If Basilisk is truly back, your source is likely compromised,” the Director said.

Shit. I couldn't give up Isabelle. I'd have to figure out some way of getting out of this. After we got Naomi back...

“We're getting off track,” Bunker said. “We're gathered here for one reason. We need to retaliate before this gets out of hand. The public eye is on us now, so we have to tread extremely carefully on this.”

I stood up. “They attacked us here. We should just head to their territory and hit them hard in every single safe house we know they have.”

“That's exactly what we're going to do,” the Director said, to my surprise. “If you would shut up, and allow Bunker to give the details.”

Bunker's voice was smug as he resumed. “We're splitting up in to teams, and ensuring these teams stay within half a kilometer of another. We won't have a repeat of what happened earlier. Icarus and Jade. Cupid and Eimyrja. Umbra and Flashstep. Red Light and myself. Chozo will travel with a small attachment of PRT officers.”

The Director nodded, and he continued.

“We're heading out now. No delay. Wards, follow your assigned Protectorate teammate. Understand there will be consequences if you try to head out alone,” he said, before turning around and heading out.

Certainly doesn't waste words on speeches. Not that it'd do any good. We know what's at stake.

I'm so sorry Naomi. We'll be there. Hold on.

Tank Buster

I couldn't say who I was or what I was. My mind was mud and my limbs were foreign. The mud slowly cleared, and I regained a greater and greater sense of being. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, but was likely only over the course of a minute, I rose to consciousness. Memories of the fight and of being dragged into a van flew through my mind, and I forced my eyes to start opening. It was slow, and painful light started shining as I did so, but soon I could see. Numbness faded more and more, and I could start to feel restraints digging into me. Logically, I knew it was futile, but I still struggled to move out of the chair I was sitting in.

“Dammit,” I whispered, the word slightly slurred.

“Oh, you're awake,” said a voice, letting me know I was not alone.
I moved my head as much as I was allowed to look at the source, a woman wearing plain clothes and a paper mask. I slogged through my memories of briefings and recalled the description of a Raven cape called Papercut. Telekinetic with paper.

“How are you feeling? Starving Artist's serums can be a bit over the top if it's your first time.” she said. She looked at me with concern.

I might have laughed at the question if I was in the mood. Instead, I simply glared at her. I had nothing to say to any of the Ravens.

“Oh, okay, I'm not getting an answer. I'll just assume you are feeling alright,” she said under her breath, almost as if to herself.

I was feeling just peachy, not that she needed to know that.

“Oh, well, the bosses wanted me to let them know when you are awake, so I'm going to go let them know you're awake,” she said, as she walked past me. I heard a door open and close behind me.

This was bad. This was very, very bad. Kidnapping a Ward was not something that would be taken lightly, especially when its by a group with the kind of reputation the Ravens had. They knew this. They knew what the consequences could be before attacking us like this.

Icarus. What were they doing to her at this very moment?

Please. Please let her have gotten away.

I had no tools. No armor. They stripped me of it, possibly with the same metal dissolver from earlier.

At least I'm not naked.

I wore loose fitting jeans and a cami. There was no doubt they'd figured out I was a girl, but that was the last thing to be worried about.

If Starving Artist gets to me...

I shook my head. Or tried, their restraints were thorough. Excessively so. I could barely squirm, and I was no escape artist. I wasn't getting out of these bonds.

Alarmingly, my wounds still bled. Cuts from Bloodletter didn't heal naturally, and I couldn't be sure if my wooziness was from blood loss or the drugs. No telling how much time had passed. If they didn't want me to bleed to death...

The door opened and closed behind me, interrupting my thoughts. I took a deep breath. A woman stepped in front of me, looking like some cross between a dragon and a snake. Familiar. I knew this. Damn the bleeding. Damn the drugs. I couldn't think well enough to remember. Her gray-blue eyes pierced my own, unblinking. She didn't let up for a while, our eyes meeting for hell knew how long.

“I can honestly say that you being a girl now caught me off guard, Tank Buster. Did you sleep well?”

It was so tempting to retort, but I was better off keeping quiet. At least, as long as they didn't resort to...measures. I almost shuddered at the thought.

“Hmm. Papercut wasn't joking when she said you weren't the chatty type. Although I'm a bit hurt. I
don’t suppose you know who I am, do you? I doubt you would, I was before your time…” she trailed off, still staring intensely at me.

I would’ve shrugged if I could have.

“Of course you don’t. What do they teach you kids in school nowadays? A shame. Please tell me the name Basilisk rings any bells?”

_Basilisk. Oh fuck._

I knew I recognized her costume. I read the file on her. A powerful Thinker, one who had been around way too long for the PRT not to know her power. Just that she was a Thinker. Never known for direct action, but there were always...disappearances. That she was here, that she was back...it probably explained how they knew how to attack us that deep in downtown.

“Ah, there you go. My faith in the PRT has been restored...slightly. You're smart, Miss Buster, so I will be frank with you. I have a very powerful, very broken little chemist of a friend who would like nothing more than to pump you so full of drugs that you would sing us a song. Among other things. But that would be in neither of our best interests, would it? Probably not. So how about you cut the fucking bullshit with me before I have to do this the hard way.”

_of course._ They went so far as to capture me. That would be the next step, wouldn't it?

_I thought back. Brenna...I don't know if I could go through what you did._

Even if she was bluffing, could I risk it?

“Wha-” I coughed. My mouth and throat felt dry. “What do you even want with me?”

“You have such a lovely voice, I don't know why you insist on disguising it,” she said condescendingly. “I want you to answer some questions for me, if you wouldn't mind. Let's talk about Branwen.”

“I heard about that. Shootout with the PRT,” I said, attempting to shrug before remembering I was strapped down. Dammit. Too easily distracted, forgetting things.

“Indeed. But we both know what actually happened, don't we? Brutally murdered, left naked on a rooftop. Don't worry, I already know Icarus was the one who did it.” she paused, as if gauging my reaction.

“Why am I here?” I asked, even as I probably knew the answer.

The Ravens weren't stupid. Especially with their Thinker, they would see through that cover-up.

Where did that leave me? If Icarus got away, I could be a bargaining chip. Or they knew I was part of the cover-up.

Either way, Basilisk didn't have all the details. Not if she was talking to me, right here, right now. They knew they couldn't possibly have much time before the Protectorate went out in full force for me.

I had to hold out. Stall, possibly. At the very least, try to say as little as I could.

“Not exactly a believable denial of your subordinate's actions. Let me sate your curiosity, then, Miss Buster. There are three ways you will be leaving this room. One, is unharmed in any way, I'm sure
that will be your favorite option. Another is a drugged-up whore for us to sell, that's the option if you
don't play along. Number three is I put a fucking bullet in your face,” she smiled, sickly sweet, and
set a pistol on the counter behind her. “So, you knew Icarus was the killer. Why did you order
Branwen's death?”

She had to be fucking with me. Trying to get me to say a stupid lie?

“I doubt I'd be much use as a whore,” I muttered. Maybe she'd be curious enough to ask about that. I
continued, speaking normally, “I'm a Ward. We both know I don't have the authority to order deaths.
And even someone had a kill order, I'd have to order my fellow Wards to stay away. I imagine
you've studied the PRT?”

Basilisk raised an eyebrow. “Quite the wordy young lady now, I see. You'll have to find a better
way of buying more time, I'm afraid. So your winged friend acted alone, without the help of any of
her teammates?”

“How would I know, even if she did? I wasn't there when Branwen died,” I said. Technically true.
She raised an eyebrow behind her mask. “Is that your final answer? You had nothing to do with
Branwen's murder, or the cover-up?”

“Cover-up?” I said, sweating a little. “What would I know of any of this? I might be Ward Captain,
but I'm still just a Ward.”

“So it would seem,” Basilisk replied, sighing melodramatically. “You're not the only cape who was
there. Who am I missing?”

Flashstep. “What proof do you even have for all these things you seem so certain about?”

“You and Bloodletter should just fuck already. I'm a fucking Thinker. I might've retired, but I've
spent much of my time over the last four months studying that one-armed excuse of a vigilante,
among others. Continue misleading me. Go ahead. Or be honest, I'm afraid at this point either option
helps me just the same.”

“What's the point of this interrogation, then? You sound like you have all the answers you need.”

“I'm not perfect, not yet anyway. I was hoping you'd fill in the last few blanks I’ve had. One last
question. When you let Icarus on your team, did you see her being a murderer?”

“No,” I said. Might as well be honest, here. “I wasn't sure if she was a hero or a villain, at first, but I
invited her anyway. She grew on us. Did you know she's a bit of a dork? Gets along with another
one of the Wards very well, who's almost dorkier than she is. I call her a friend, despite the short time
we've had.”

I took a deep breath. “She's been through a lot. I know she triggered because of you and your gang. I
know what the Ravens do to the girls they capture. I know Starving Artist did something with her,
though what extent I couldn't imagine. Even so, when I took her in, I couldn't see Icarus killing
someone. I couldn't see any of the Wards killing someone. As far as I'm aware, I'm the only one
who's had to end a life.”

Besides Icarus. But I still wasn't going to say that directly. Just in case.

This damn situation. Reminding me. Probably the worst part was it didn't even weigh heavily, when
it felt like it should have. Even if it was just a mercy to someone who was going to die anyway.
Basilisk pulled something out of her pocket and set it on the table behind her.

“You don’t say. Well, I’m off to deal with Icarus. Thank you *so much* for your honesty, Naomi.”

Basilisk turned, pressing a button on the device as she walked out without another word.

*She knows my name.*

The door closed on me.

“*Direct—*” I heard myself say. It was a tape recorder.

“*Tank Buster, why the fuck did your newest team member, who hasn't even gotten so much as a fucking paycheck yet, go out by herself with the express purpose of starting a war with the Ravens?*”

The recorder continued the discussion, line by line.

*I see.*

I looked up.

*I'm going to die.*

They went after both of us. Maybe even Bunker, too. They wanted Icarus, and everyone who helped her.

Basilisk could have shot me, here in this room. Why didn't she? Why was I still here?

“Are you still not talking?” Papercut asked as she walked around the chair, carrying a small wooden box with bottles and vials in it.

I didn't hear the door. Distracted. Woozy.

“I kinda gave up on that.” I rasped.

“Cool. Well, you want some water? And I brought one of Starving Artist's ointments, for your cuts. They won't stop bleeding without it, I guess.”

They could drug me easily enough with or without my consent. No harm in saying yes.

“Sure,” I said. Fuck, my throat was so dry. I don't think I could've refused that water.

Papercut nodded and pulled a bottle of water from her box, and held it up to my lips. I drank eagerly, and the bottle was completely drained when she pulled it away. Then she grabbed a tin filled with some sort of plum-colored goop, that she scooped out with a fingertip and started applying it gently to the scratches and cuts running from my shoulder down to my elbow. Some more scratches on my waist.

“Oh, that'll probably feel weird as it heals, and you might get lightheaded at first. Or not, it's been awhile since I've had to use any, last time was the Thanksgiving fiasco of 2009,” she laughed.

“Oh, right,” I said dryly. “I guess I'm being kept alive for now?”

“That depends on your hero friends, I guess?” she asked with a shrug. “Honestly, I'm hoping everyone gets out of this alive. Branwen was enough, right?”
“I prefer being alive, yes. I don’t want to see Icarus dying, either. Though, I guess she would be already if you had her?” I asked, hoping to get some info.

“Oh, she got away. Al—Starving Artist said one of the other Wards rescued her? I haven’t seen her that furious since one of our crew helped himself to her supplies. Found him twitching in the basement.”

I sighed in relief. It was just me, then. Probably as a backup. Better than the alternative.

“You know, this is gonna sound really weird, but it's so cool that you're a girl. I wasn't expecting that.”

“Yeah?” I said, eyebrow raised. “What's cool about that? Woo, I'm a girl.”

“I mean,” she sighed, a little hurt at my sarcasm. “It's just kinda weird that you were the only guy Ward I liked, but now I guess this explains it.”

“Sorry,” I said, sighing. “About the sarcasm. I'm a little stressed. Obviously. Are you, uh, a fan or something? I'm confused. I mean, you're with the Ravens and all.”

“Sure, yeah, a fan,” Papercut replied, looking away for a second. “And yeah. I'm a Raven, I guess. But that doesn't mean I can't admire you heroes. Not all of us are like Branwen was, you know.”

“I read your file. You did volunteer work as a rogue before ending up with the Ravens?” She nodded in response. “If you're being coerced...I know the Protectorate will take villains in, under some circumstances. Put you in a new location with a new name, even.”

“I can't...not right now, at least,” she sighed. “Personally, I like to think I can do at least a little good, even in this position. Makes it easier sometimes, when I have to do the hard stuff.”

“You know there's a good chance I'll die, right? Basilisk knows I was involved in the cover-up of the murder. She has the tape. Are you okay with that?”

“I'm sure it won't come to that,” she said in a tone that suggested she was trying to convince herself of it. “You're gonna get through this. We all are. I hope.”

I tried to shrug again. Dammit. “If I do die...you should probably run. The Protectorate wouldn't tolerate such a thing against their Wards. Remember on the news, a few years ago? Wards kidnapped. No holds barred in getting them back. With me dead? Maybe even one of the Triumvirate themselves would be showing up on your doorstep.”

“I remember. You think I don't think about that every day, Tank Buster? About all the—about everything I have to do? I hate it, I absolutely do, but do you honestly think any of the other Ravens are going to hold Starving Artist back? If I run to the Protectorate, who's stopping her from slipping some drug into the water supply on a whim?”

“It's hard to imagine Starving Artist being any worse. No offense. She's a monster as is.”

“I...she's misunderstood. She doesn't see things the same as the rest of us. You haven't met her, have you? It's...hard to describe her.”

“I'll...keep that in mind if I meet her. But I won't be forgetting the mark she left on my friend. Or everything I've read.”

“You shouldn't,” Papercut said, sighing. “Good luck, Tank Buster.”
She grabbed her box and walked out, giving me a sympathetic smile. The door shut behind me, and I was, once again, alone.

**Icarus**

“Upstairs is clear,” I said, shoving a zip-tied goon in front of me as I returned to the small kitchen area. Jade was there, her power pressing another Raven goon into a wall.

I shoved my goon forward and Jade’s gravity well caught him, slamming him into the wall with a loud and satisfying thud. I couldn't help but smirk a little as he fell onto the wall with a softer, but still satisfying, thud. I covered the pair with some foam and Jade let her power fade. We split up again, searching through the house-turned-drug den for any potential leads.

Nothing.

I sighed as we left, that was the fourth place we'd raided and still no luck. From what I'd heard over the comms, our long shot of getting a lead was getting longer by the hour. At the very least, they were finally doing something about the Ravens.

A voice crackled over the comms in my mask, just as I took off into the sky. “This is Bunker. The PRT have just received a message from the Ravens. They want to trade Tank Buster for Icarus.”

I paused. I could feel more than see Jade's golden eyes looking at me. I swallowed, keyed my mic...and turned it off. They weren't...they wouldn't seriously consider agreeing to that, would they?

“We need to regroup to discuss our next course of action. Meet at my location.”

We were deep within the seediest part of Arsenal, an area that looked more like a third-world country than part of any modern city. The evening sun managed to make the scene below us even more depressing as we flew. Jade's power let her fly, but she wasn't able to fly nearly as fast as me, so it was slow going.

Jade and I touched down at the meetup point, a dingy-looking park...or vacant lot, it was hard to tell. A handful of PRT vans were strewn throughout the lot. The streets around the park were empty. Around here, PRT and heroes meant fighting, and nobody wanted to be stuck in the crossfire.

I almost didn't notice Bunker and Chozo, who were both leaning against one of the vans, talking quietly. I chose not to join them, instead sitting down on a graffiti-covered bench, waiting for everyone else to show up. I noticed Red Light sulking by a flickering street light. He shot me a glare, and I looked away. The two Thinkers almost blended into the background, talking about whatever Thinkers talked about.

Flashstep arrived a minute or so later, along with Umbra. A golden light connected to her was in the image of an older woman, hand clasped on Umbra's shoulder.

As crazy as I might have been, I was grateful that at least I didn't think I could summon the souls of my dead friends and family.

A minute later Cupid and Eimyrja arrived as well. I stood, and walked over to the circle of heroes standing in the center of the park.

Bunker nodded curtly once everyone was there, “I'll repeat what I said. The Ravens want Icarus in return for Tank Buster. If we don't give them what they want within eight hours, they're going to kill him. Washington is watching us. We only have a small window of opportunity before everything is...”
completely out of our hands.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Red Light said tersely while glaring at me. “We won’t let them get that far.”

“Icarus. I’m genuinely sorry to ask this. Are you willing to be bait?”

I paused. Obviously, if what Blink had said was true...Basilisk wouldn't let Tank Buster go that easily. It was an obvious trap...but it meant that they might have a chance at grabbing one of the Ravens. “I'll do whatever it takes,” I said hollowly, thinking of the quick modification I'd installed before Jade and I had set out.

If it all went south, they wouldn't get me alive.

Bunker nodded.

“We don't know how Basilisk's power works, a blind spot we've had for decades. Still, there's steps we can take. We're going to limit the information everyone has about the plan. Errata and Yuzhou will meet with you all individually. Icarus, you're going to sit in one of our trucks while they discuss.”

“Well,” I replied, turning away. Whatever it takes, right? Still, I couldn't help but feel a sense of anxiety as a pair of armored PRT guards escorted me to one of the trucks.

At least the hard metal benches were a bit more comfortable when you weren't handcuffed.

The doors shut behind me, leaving me alone in the truck. It was quiet, except for the sounds of my breathing, the quiet mechanical whirs of my arm as I fidgeted. The only thing keeping me from going insane in here was the periodic PRT radio comms.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel the walls closing in on me. After what the PRT had done...whether I deserved it or not didn't matter. As if remembering the tasering, I couldn't help but feel a tingle running down me, along the traces of wiring connecting all my implants.

No. Stop.

I took a deep breath, and distracted myself by counting rivets lining the stainless-steel interior of the truck.

Still, all that did was get me worrying more about Naomi. What she was going through...she'd been captured because of me. It was my fault that she was in Starving Artist's grasp. I wanted to throw up.

Was it narcissistic to think this was the worst day of my life? When Naomi was going through so much worse? If anything, I should have been relieved that at least I'd managed to get away, and that we weren't both in their clutches. No, I had to be positive. It meant one more person to help get her back. It would be fine. We could make this work, as dire as the situation was. It was going to be okay.

My thoughts were interrupted as my HUD popped up an alert, a phone call. I took a deep breath when I saw who it was from. A mental command to answer the call.

“Dad?”
Icarus

“Dad?” I answered, hoping my voice didn't betray my emotions.

“Brenna, God, are you alright?” he asked, his voice trembling.


“I...I received some photos just a few minutes ago. You never told us what happened, but I didn't think...I don't know what to think,” he said, trailing off.

“Photos? Dad, what do you mean?” I said, alarmed. I felt my stomach sinking. The way he sounded...

The line was silent for a few seconds. Instead of his response, I heard Linda's voice, quiet and clearly-disturbed, “He couldn't bring himself to say it. They showed you...on a bed...There was...other stuff, that I don't know if I could say it, either. The photos just showed up in the mail.”

No.

What the fuck?

What the FUCK???

The Ravens had gone after me, they'd gone after my friend, but that wasn't enough. They had to go after my fucking family too?

The interior of the van shook as I slammed my fist into the wall, denting it.

“Brenna?” Dad asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Yeah,” I responded, my voice shaking. “Are you still at the office?” I had to take care of this. Then, the Ravens would pay.

“Yes. Brenna...who would even send those?” he asked, anger and despair seeping into his tone.

“I'll be there in a second. Don't touch anything.”

I ended the call.

I kicked open the doors to the back of the van, stepping out. The heroes and PRT officers looked at me in alarm, but I ignored them.

I wasted no fanfare with taking off, shooting towards downtown at full throttle.

Bunker's voice growled over the radio, barely audible over the roar of my engines, even with my mask's sound dampening. “Icarus, what the hell are you doing?”
“The Ravens,” I shouted back. “Sent something to my dad. I'm checking it out.”

“Dammit, this is not the time. We can send over a PRT squad—”

“Fuck you. This is my family. I'm going,” I said angrily.

“Fine. I don't have time to argue with you. Just make it quick.”

That wasn't even worthy of a response. I turned off my comms system. *Fuck you too, Bunker.*

I'd only flown full-out like this once, testing over some dreary farms in eastern Colorado, but even so it was taking far too long to reach the capitol building. In mind, at least. Below me, the ground shot past, a blur a hundred feet below my wings. I could feel titanium-reinforced bones creaking under the forces, but everything held.

It only took a minute or so to travel from Arsenal to downtown, but even then I felt like I was late as the golden dome of the Capitol appeared.

I dropped down in front of the doors, landing with a thud, people all around me pointing and staring. Stan looked at me, surprised, as I strode through the doors, ignoring the metal detectors' beeping.

“Wait, Miss, uh, Icarus. There are procedures here, you can't just—”

“I don't have time for this, Stan,” I interrupted, continuing on without a second look.

“Bre–what the hell?” he said, alarmed.

I ignored the fact that I had just outed myself to Stan and continued towards Dad's office. I could see security begin making their way towards me but they stopped, with a couple of them speaking into their radios. Instead, they, along everyone else who could see, simply stared at me as I flew up to the third floor, papers flying everywhere below me as jet exhaust filled the area.

I touched down only to roughly open the door to my dad's office, and slammed it closed behind me. I was greeted with the sight of my dad sitting on a couch with Linda, who awkwardly met my glance. My dad, startled, stood up.

When I saw him, saw his facial expression...I couldn't. I fell back against the door behind me, slid down until I was sitting. I unclipped my mask. I couldn't look him in the eyes. Just stared at the mask in my hands.

“I–I didn't want you to find out this way,” I said, quietly and...tired.

Dad sat down next to me, and wrapped me in a hug.

“I'm not even sure what to say,” he said, his voice still shaking. It sounded like he had been crying at some point. Tears ran down my own face, I realized. “Why did I get these?”

I took a deep, shaky breath, before responding. “I've been going after the Ravens for what...what they did. They're finally getting back at me. I'm so sorry they dragged you in.”

He was half hysterical. “Brenna, I don't want you to put yourself in danger against those...those...God, let's just all move far, far away from here. Just leave this whole thing behind us.”

That was...a tempting offer. But I couldn't. After everything, after what they'd done...they had to pay for. Naomi needed me, and I couldn't abandon her, not when it was my fault.
I shook my head. “Dad, I can't. I have to stay and fight. Until they're all gone.” One way or another.

He edged away a bit, and for the first time I met his eyes. Stress, both old and new, plain as day. Anger, fear, regret.

“Is that really what you want, Brenna?”

Was it? I'd told myself that I fought them to stop it happening to others, but...if that were the case, I could have done things much differently.

No, I had only ever fought for vengeance. Protecting others had never been a factor until Naomi had been captured. Even helping Isabelle, that had just been a chance to strike a blow to the Ravens, not to rescue her friend.

I pulled myself to my feet. “I don't know. But it's what I'm doing.”

I walked over to Linda's desk, where there was a stack of photos sitting on top of a plain manila envelope. I swallowed, ignoring the lump in my throat.

It was surreal. During the whole ordeal, I'd spent most of my time drugged out on one thing or another, and didn't remember most of what had happened. What I did remember...I had Starving Artist to thank, for turning so much of it—and much of the memories before—into blurry messes and unreliable hallucinations. I'd basically accepted that, for a three-month period two years ago, I had a block of memories that I couldn't trust. All that was left was me, a scared addict with half her childhood blacked out.

Looking at the rich-colored, glossy-print reminders in my hands made me double my mixed relief and horror that I couldn't remember most of it. It was sickening, not only everything that had happened, but that some sick fuck had decided to take pictures.

It wasn't all old news, either, there was recent stuff too. A picture, taken from a car, of me in my school uniform walking home from class. Buying groceries. Even a shot of me eating lunch with Dad, a place we'd visited only a couple months ago.

I froze when I saw the last image, though. A grainy picture of me, sleeping. The floor around my bed was strewn with half-unpacked belongings, and I was bunched up under a PRT-issue blanket.

The Ravens have someone working for the PRT?

“Brenna?” Dad asked.

“Until this all blows over,” I said, my voice coarse and hollow. “You two aren't safe. Is...Mom still in London?”

Dad nodded.

“Okay, um. I think you should stay with the PRT for now. They're on high alert, you'll be safe there.” Whoever the fuck was working for the Ravens...they wouldn't be able to act, too many eyes watching. Dad and Linda...they'd be okay, for now.

I grabbed the photos, stuffed them back in the envelope, put it in a hidden pocket on my costume. Naomi would know what to do.

“I'm going to have the PRT send someone over to pick you up. We'll—can we talk, later?”
Dad's words were anguished. “Of course. Please be safe, Brenna. I love you. I don't want to lose you again.”

I reached over and gave him one more more hug before reluctantly letting go and putting my mask back on.

I took the stairs down this time, trying to ignore the people staring at me. At the entrance, I pulled Stan aside, who still had a confused and bewildered expression on his face.

“The PRT will be here to pick up my dad,” I said to him. I didn't wait to hear his response, instead striding out the doors. I was sure other people heard that, but at this point I didn't care.

Outside, the sun had completely set, leaving the area dark. I took off, flying back northeast, towards Arsenal. Below me, the white LED streetlights of the Capitol area were replaced by the harsh orange of poorer areas. I flew over I-70, following the eternally traffic-choked highway for a minute or so.

Eventually, I turned my comms back on, and as soon as my mask re-synced with the PRT network, I spoke. “This is Icarus. I need someone to pick Senator Grovsmed, and escort him to the PRT building. The Ravens...know he's my dad.”

I heard an unfamiliar voice on the radio. “Officer Rodgers, here. There is precedent for securing individuals threatened by cape matters. We'll take care of him.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

The voice I didn't want to hear sounded in my ears, “This is Bunker. Are you on your way back now, Icarus?”

“Yeah,” I said back, somewhat irritated. “What's my part of the plan?”

“Just get back to the meeting location immediately. I'll notify you then.”

“Okay,” I replied. There was nothing else to say.

It was only five minutes or so of quiet flight. I concentrated on the ground below. Not that I needed to, but it kept my mind off of things. Eventually, I saw the circled PRT trucks in the vacant lot they'd taken over, and I landed, walking over shakily.

The only people in sight were Bunker and a pair of PRT officers. Bunker nodded as I approached.

“Icarus. Please hold still. We're going to foam you.”

I cycled my engines off, taking a deep breath as the first jet hit me. I'd agreed to this plan. Hopefully it didn't get me killed.

**Blink**

*Beep. Beep.*

I listened to the ever-present and consistent beeps as I floated over her.

I just wanted to see Jess again. She seemed so at peace, laying there asleep. Hopefully free of the pain her life had become.

All I could do was make sure she received the best care. It wasn't enough. Couldn't be.
What would she think if she knew what I did? I wished I could tell her, however ashamed I'd be. I told her everything, once. But this? How could I? How could I crush the image of her little sister that she had?

Even so, I wanted to. I wanted to so badly. But she'd tell me to stop, and what then? I'd lose any amount of control I had over everything. I'd lose the ability to really choose. I set my feet on the ground and placed my hand on hers.

I was in a situation way over my head. With Icarus. The Ravens. Basilisk. Involving myself could well mean my death.

I couldn't step back, though. Not when I could help.

_Who would care for you if I messed up, though?_

The Ravens, all-out against the PRT. I shook my head. So many people could get hurt in the chaos.

I could cripple the Ravens' retaliation. If I was smart about it. If I avoided the attention of the PRT, the attention of the Protectorate and the Wards. If Imperium didn't fire me for doing this.

I made up my mind already. At this point, I was just hesitating and wasting time. I sighed.

Jess's eyes fluttered open.

_Shit._

“Wh–who?” she stammered sleepily. I teleported out at that exact moment. Hopefully she'd think of it as a dream.

I wished I could fly as fast as Icarus. 20 minutes wasn't a whole lot for flying over most of the city, from the hospital to the middle of Arsenal, but it still felt like a long time.

I couldn't help but feel that Tank Buster's capture was my fault.

But the Protectorate was hardly subtle in the past hour or two. DPD and PRT worked to keep people off the streets, and PHO was abuzz of the situation despite the obvious attempt to at least try to keep things on the down-low.

Hitting their safe houses, one by one. It was disgusting, once I had time to think about it. They _knew_ about these safehouses. They knew of these places the Ravens operated.

And they did nothing. Until now. Until it was one of their own in danger.

I shook my head. I'd almost joined the Wards, in the beginning. I could understand why Icarus did so. Resources. Support. I could operate on my own.

Dreary half-abandoned factories lay beneath me. One or two that could have belonged to Imperium.

_Almost there._

I had flown around earlier, even seeing Icarus and Jade in the distance. As long as it was still light out, I couldn't risk heading down at the time. Now? It was almost dark.

I had no leads. No real information. I knew less than the PRT knew, probably. I resolved to do something, but _what_? I couldn't fly uselessly for hours.

_That's right._ It was a long shot, but I knew many of the locations that they moved stuff around,
mostly mundane drugs and supplies. They liked to rotate where they did things. Right now, it was
effectively martial law over Ravens territory, but they had to be doing something. They didn't have
Icarus, after all.

I flew over a spot. Nothing, even when I got a little closer. The next couple of spots were much the
same.

A boom ruptured the air around me, and I fell a couple feet as I recovered from the shock. A couple
lights were blown out, and just where I floated, I could see windows that had shattered.

I looked around. I almost missed it. A flying figure, already far away.

*What the fuck. Icarus?*

I considered trying to follow, but at that speed I wouldn't have the slightest chance. I continued my
search, groaning as the next two spots turned up empty. I was running out of time and potential
leads.

I saw lights a few blocks from my next target. White and green, PRT colors. At least I knew where
they were gathering now.

I ignored it for now in favor of checking another spot. This time I finally spotted something. A
couple people, moving some boxes with the light of their cellphones. A couple cars were around, but
no trucks. Suspicious, especially given the location. I glanced around, finding a tiny light a short
distance away around a corner. A cigarette light, I noticed as I got closer.

No time to be subtle. I dropped down behind him, pulling out my knife. I pressed it against his throat
as I grabbed his mouth with my other hand.

“Don't scream,” I whispered. He nodded, and I let my hand drop.

“Wh-what do you want? I'm just a lookout.”

“Those boxes you're moving. Where did they come from?”

I sensed someone creeping up behind me, holding something. *Trying to sneak up on me? Idiot.*

“F-from a truck.”

I rolled my eyes.

“What, you guys moved the boxes from the truck right to the ground? Kinda weird.”

“Yeah, well, they were in a hurry.”

I grabbed my taser and jabbed it into the person behind me. I heard a satisfying thump as they
collapsed.

“Holy sh–”

“Just tell me what I need to know, and I'll let you go,” I said, interrupting him. “Who was in a
hurry?”

“Some...some Raven cape. Rewind I think? Wanted everything off the truck.”

“How long ago?”
“I don't fucking know. Half an hour?”

“What direction did she go in?”

“Like I fucking know.”

I pressed the knife tighter.

“Jesus, I don't know anything. Don't kill me, I've got a little s–”

“I don't care. I need something concrete.”

“Fuck, I don't know. She said to just to get the stuff inside and stay out of sight since the PRT was close by.”

They didn't have any other trucks available? Or maybe they just needed another?

I sighed. I figured this was going to be a long shot. Nothing I could really use.

“What did the truck look like?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Just a white, rusted over truck. Now can–”

I withdrew my knife and backed up, teleporting into the building next to him so he wouldn't see me. I flew through the building and up through the roof, up out of it and towards the PRT. Couldn't hurt to see what they were up to.

There wasn't any good cover, none that the PRT might not be watching, so I flew high above them. I wasn't sure about Cupid's range, so I made sure to fly until the people below were practically dots.

Even with my binoculars, I could barely see them. I shivered. It was always so cold at this height. I couldn't stay here long. Shaking my head at the thought, I looked around. Bunker, talking to some PRT officers. I heard Icarus before I saw her, flying towards the park with engines at full burn. She touched down, and some vans left the area.

An officer approached Icarus, doing...something, I couldn't quite tell. Then as they stepped back, another of them foamed her.

What in the fuck?

They foamed her, and Icarus just let them. What were they planning?

I was here with no leads thanks to my damn hesitation. Following them was the best I could do for now. I watched them lead Icarus into a truck, and I followed as it moved, only one other in the convoy.

It stopped, and I watched as they pulled Icarus out and lead her forward for a bit, before setting her to her knees. There were more buildings here, a couple apartment buildings and some office buildings, so I took cover on one of the rooftops facing the scene. There was also a small grocery store, and one of the office buildings had a Taco Shame on the bottom floor.

Despite the situation, I couldn't help but smile at the memory. Papá telling me I was never to eat at that caricature of a food establishment.

Other trucks appeared, dark but mismatched, unlike the uniformity of the PRT. I didn't see the van that was described earlier.
Maybe I should've looked for it?

I shook my head. I was here, now. May as well stick by.

Bloodletter stepped out. He stood, staring at the heroes. They were talking, but I could hear the words.

Were they seriously going to give Icarus to them? What in the fuck?

Icarus let them. She had to know what they were doing. Perhaps it's a ploy? The Ravens would see right through it.

Maybe they know that. Maybe both sides knew it'd be a stalemate until they met in some way. I shook my head. Fucking nutty situation.

If the Ravens actually got Icarus here...no one deserved that. I'd break her out. I nodded to myself, decision made.

Something felt so...off about this, though. The PRT knew it'd be a trap. They'd be setting a trap of their own. No matter how strong the Ravens were, it'd be risky for them. The PRT simply had more resources than they did.

I'd have to hope they'd be too focused on each other to notice me zooming around, searching the area.

I kept an eye on them as flew over the rooftops circling the scene, starting with the Ravens' side. Rewind and some thugs stepped out, forming a sort of line. One of the thugs pulled someone from a truck. They had a bag over their head, masking their face.

Tank Buster?

If they were doing an exchange, that would make sense. The thug lead him over to where Icarus was, setting him down in front of her.

Her, I realized. It was a girl wearing the bag. Tank Buster was a girl?

I thought I saw movement on one of the rooftops to my left. Hard to tell with how dark it was. I flew over anyway, also keeping an eye on the situation below.

“It's not her!” Icarus shouted.

I reached the spot. A figure was laying prone under a blanket, holding some kind of rifle pointed below.

Fuck.

The PRT launched a glob of...something, landing on Icarus and dissolving the foam.

I grabbed my baton as I reached the figure and batted at the rifle—

BANG.

Fuck, that sound hurt as much as the handgun did when I first met Branwen. I looked over at Icarus, my ears ringing from the gunshot.

Fuck. *Fuck* fuck *fuck*.
Blood. I only caught a brief glimpse before a force-field covered her.

“You,” I heard next to me.

I turned to the figure, who began standing, grasping at something at her belt. A handgun. I bashed my baton into her hand, and she cried out as she dropped it from her scaled hands.

Basilisk, of all people. Going so far as to snipe Icarus?

“So Imperium shows his hand,” she said, backing up. “No. You're doing this alone.. For that fucking cripple?”

No time for this. I drew my taser as I teleported behind her and drove it into her back. I only watched enough to confirm she fell, convulsing, before I flew towards where Icarus had fallen.

Barriers were spreading across where all of the PRT were. The Ravens were scattering, driving away from the scene.

I pulled out my regeneration vial that Potion gave me.

I had been too late. Icarus was shot. Maybe I redirected it enough, but...

If I went down there, I'd expose myself. My involvement with Icarus, my involvement with this whole situation.

If I didn't go down there, what would happen? If Icarus lived, then I would have made the right choice. If she died...

_Dammit, why do I care? She betrayed my trust. She killed._

I flew down, vial in hand. I paused in front of the dome where Icarus was.

I couldn't feel through it. I couldn't teleport through it. Bunker's forcefields prevented my movement.

Making note of that, I flew towards the back where there was an opening. The PRT wielded flashlights, and a couple of them were watching through small holes in the barriers.

Icarus was lying in a pool of blood even as a pair of PRT personnel were attending to her. I couldn't see the bullet wound from here, but based on the blood alone...

I shook my head. Losing that much blood was more than enough to kill someone.

“Here. This will restore you if you need it,” Potion said, handing me a small corked bottle filled with purple liquid.

“What exactly does it do?” I asked.

_Potion shrugged. ‘Won't regrow limbs, but it'll stitch you up. Maybe restore lost blood, if you're attuned enough. You should come by my Sanctum sometime, attune yourself and grow in power.’_

“Stop right there!” one of the PRT officers shouted. Guns were leveled at me. Bunker turned towards me, looking at me confused.

“Blink. You better have a damn good reason for being here.”

I wasn't expecting the leader of the Denver Protectorate to recognize me so quickly. Probably not a
good thing, given my occupation.

“She's bleeding out. I have a regeneration potion from Potion,” I said, nervously. I was a lot less sure of this being a good idea.

“My Ward has been shot. And you just happen to be here. As far as I'm concerned, you are under arrest.”

“Fine,” I said. “But Basilisk is currently on a rooftop, convulsing after I tased her. We don't have time for this. Take the vial, and I'll also bring you Basilisk.”

A forcefield formed behind me, blocking my chance to escape.

“Which rooftop?”

“The Taco Shame,” I said, disgusted. “She was the sniper.”

Bunker nodded. A break in the forcefield opened, and two officers ran through. I could see the forcefield extending to cover them.

“Down on the ground.”

I can't believe I'm actually letting myself get arrested. You'd better fucking live, Icarus.

Bunker walked forward as I knelt down. He picked up the vial as I laid down.

“You aren't just teleporting out.”

“I didn't come here for nothing.” I wasn't about to tell him I couldn't.

“No, you didn't,” he said, before turning around and walking away. Not towards Icarus. “Escort Blink to a van and foam her.”

Two PRT officers stepped forward, dragging me to my feet and shoving me forward. Even though I wasn't resisting in the slightest, they felt the need to act as if I was. I winced as I fell into the truck roughly. They pulled me up and shoved me onto one of the benches.

If I had any chance of escaping before, I lost it as the foam enveloped me. I couldn't see, but I could still hear the sounds outside, if a bit muffled. That changed when the doors were shut, and I didn't even have that much.

I could still sense things in a small radius, but I was connected to the foam around me. I was hoping my power would still let me move if I needed it to, but the foam effectively connected to the wall. As far as my power was concerned, me and the truck were connected. I couldn't move that much.

All I could do was wonder if I did the right thing.

**Tank Buster**

The terror of possibly meeting my death could only hold off boredom for so long.

So many bumps in the walls and ceiling. I knew about how many, given I was counting them. Again.

I was sleepy, but not to the point of being able to fall asleep, bound like this. If I lived, I was going to be sore. I also really had to pee.
There were sounds, breaking the silence. Shouting, I realized. It was faint, but there was definitely something going on.

Did they find me?

The door slammed open, and I smiled. Then the door slammed shut, and I felt dread.

A small figure stepped into my view. Green. Vials strapped to her chest. Gas mask.

Starving Artist stared at me, unmoving. Her curious brown eyes looked me over. Then she began feverishly mixing chemicals from her vials into the paint can, before dumping the contents onto the floor behind me.

“This will give us some time together,” she said quietly, her voice muffled slightly by the respirator. “Papercut told me to stay away but Papercut is busy.”

She began mixing more chemicals in her bucket, periodically looking up at me every couple of seconds.

No no no.

I read dozens of reports. I’d seen the victims firsthand. One of those afflicted, I called a friend.

By all accounts, she was a psychopath. Known for human experimentation, for releasing drugs unlike anything produced elsewhere.

And she was standing right in front of me, eyeing me like one of her specimens.

“I can smell your fear from here. There is no reason to be afraid, nothing I am making will hurt you,” she said, pulling her mask up to take a sip from a vial.

She looked younger than I expected, her features suggesting Japanese ancestry. Either she triggered at an unusually young age, or her drugs gave her a more youthful appearance. I wasn't sure which option was worse.

Papercut's words came back to me. I hoped she was right, that there was something human in there. Someone I could talk to, to get through this.

“W-what are you doing?” I asked, doing my best to keep the shaking out of my voice.

“I'm helping,” Starving Artist said. “We both appreciate beauty. Embrace it, even. But our art is different.”

“I–” I paused. I needed to word things carefully here. “What is the difference between our, uh, ‘art’?”

“We both understand that bodies and minds are simply canvasses to be painted upon,” she paused, and run a finger through her bucket before sticking it in her mouth. “Not quite,” she muttered, dumping the bucket's contents onto the floor and starting over.

“You've changed yourself, somehow,” I said.

“Yes,” Starving Artist said. “But you are hobbled by–” She sniffed disdainfully. “–mundane filth.”

She somehow knows?
“You know I'm trans?” I asked.

Starving Artist rolled her eyes and took a sip.

_She knows, and she wants to help. Oh god._

I needed to steer this conversation away from me. Hopefully buy enough time for help.

I was also curious, in spite of myself.

“How have you changed yourself?” I asked.

“You and I have a lot in common. Like I said,” she said, taking another sip.

Oh. _Oh._

_I actually meet another trans cape and she's fucking Starving Artist of all people._

_Also, dang, whatever she gave herself, it worked very well._

I looked at the bucket she was mixing in.

_And she wants to give it to me._

“I...appreciate the offer, but I feel good about what HRT has done for me.”

Starving Artist stopped her stirring and peered at me intently, her eyes staring unblinkingly.

“No.” she said at last, shaking her head.

“Wha–”

“You want more. I can see it.”

I tried to shake my head before remembering those fucking restraints.

“Do the Ravens know? About you?” I asked, desperate to distract her.

Starving Artist sipped a vial. “Of course.”

She dipped a finger into her bucket, nodding. She pulled out an eyedropper and began filling vials with the swirling, cloudy blue mixture.

“Open your mouth,” she commanded firmly, yet somehow gently.

“Really...I'm fine. You don't need to do this.”

“No...I'm fine. You don't need to do this.”

“Are you sure? There isn't time to change your answer.”

She was giving me a choice?

_I won't have to take it. That's good._

I couldn't help wondering what if, though. Imagining myself as...less of a caricature.

_No. Stop that line of thought. I'm fine. I am._
I looked at Starving Artist. Hurt, plain as day on her soft face. She took a sip, and the hurt was gone.
Papercut had a point, I realized. There was something inside, expressed in such a horrific manner.
She changed herself through some Tinker-powered HRT, I knew that much. What else had she filled herself with?
“What does it do, exactly?” I asked. Maybe the question would buy more time, I told myself.
Starving Artist smiled, almost relieved.
“Softens the hard features like your mundane filth could never imitate. Cleanses. Nourishes. I didn't have time, so there are still side effects, but what matters is as pure as anything else.”
Curiosity burned through me.
Would it hurt to try it just once?
“Your hesitation speaks for you,” she said.
I opened my mouth to reply, only for a drop of cold to land on my tongue, tingling as it melted in.
Fuck. No. This wasn't supposed to happen!
“As I said, time was short. I had to adapt from Heartbreak, and some effects are still present, if subdued. I'm sorry,” she said as she put stoppers on all of the vials.
She leaned close and slid the vials into one of my pockets. She smelled slightly sweet, but not overwhelming. Almost like the fresh air after a rainstorm.
I felt...different. Lighter, somehow. An effect so minor I could barely feel it. Mere seconds, and I was already feeling a change.
I wanted to shout at her, but any anger I felt evaporated. She pulled back, but I wasn't going to forget that scent anytime soon.
“One drop on your tongue, every night before you sleep. Or mix into a drink, if you prefer.” she reached for another sip, and stopped herself. “I must go. Please tell Sylvi I'm...I'm sorry,” she said, pulling the vial to her lips. Her feet sizzled against the ground as she stepped away.
Sylvi. Why did that sound familiar?
Oh. Right. Brenna Sylvi Grovsmed.
I shuddered.
I heard shouting and the break of a glass vial. The shouting became yelling that abruptly cut off. Seconds later, I heard footsteps running towards me.
“Tank?” Eimyrja yelled.
“Careful!” I shouted. “Starving Artist poured something on the floor!”
Fire erupted into the room, filling my sight. Ropes burned and metal glowed white-hot. Some of the ropes held, protected by my immunity. I struggled, but I still couldn't stand up.
Eimyrja appeared by my side, knife in hand. She cut the remaining ropes, and they burned as I finally stood up, wreathed in flame. Eimyrja wrapped me into a brief tight hug and stepped back. The fire danced along her grayish eyes. I felt like I could get lost in them.

“Hey, you okay?” Eimyrja asked.

Oh.

That was what Starving Artist meant by side effects.

“Naomi?” she said, my name rolling off of her painted lips.

“No,” I said in a small voice before turning away and walking out the door.

“TB,” Red Light said, relief evident on his youthful face. Parts of his costume were melted, revealing hard muscles.

Stop it. These are my friends.

“It's good to have you back,” he said, smiling, revealing perfect white teeth. “Let's get you out of here.”

Stop it stop it stop it.

I yelled and kicked the wall. It did nothing to distract me, and both Red Light and Eimyrja looked at me in shock.

“I'm going to hit something,” I said. “Point me to the fighting.”

“Uh, there's some Ravens over—”

I looked to where Red Light pointed and ran past him as he became very still. Right, I was still on fire, a fire that didn't need fuel.

A found a pair of thugs heading the direction I came from. They stopped, fear in their pathetic, self-servicing eyes. I yelled, and charged one of them. He brandished a metal bat and tried to swing at me, but I dodged his desperate strike and latched on. He yelped as the fire heated up the bat, and I took hold and smashed the bat into his knees. The other thug pulled a handgun out of his pocket, only to be pulled to the ground by a golden figure.

I focused on the thug in front of me, curled up in fright and pain. I made to kick him, and he flinched before I even hit him.

Worthless. Hardly a fight.

I couldn't shake this fucking feeling.

Umbra's youthful figure stepped into view, her twinkling green eyes looking at me with concern.

Dammit.

I ran past her, pushing through the torn-off outside door.

“Hold it!” a PRT officer shouted at me. “Stop where you are!”

I paused, remembering that being on fire probably didn't paint a friendly picture.
“Wait!” I heard someone shout. Cupid, I realized. She ran over to me, worry etched on her face. Her scarlet hair flowed in a slight breeze.

I stepped back. I didn't want Cupid to see me like this. I could imagine her face, disgusted.

I only saw concern.

My back hit a wall and I slid down, holding my knees to my chest. The flames disappeared shortly after. The others must have been staring at me, but it didn't matter anymore.

I looked up after a time. Flashstep was talking to Eimyrja and Red Light, Red Light glancing at me for a brief moment.

The side effects had worn off, I realized. My friends were just my friends, nothing more.

I still felt violated. Fuck, I felt ready to puke.

“What?” I heard Flashstep shout, horror on his face.

*Did something happen? I have to know.*

I stood up, and all the aches and pains in my body became apparent. I staggered and nearly fell over, but Cupid caught and helped steady me. I could see the worry and trepidation on her face.

“Thanks,” I muttered, half walking, half stumbling over to the other Wards with Cupid's help.

Red Light turned towards me again, worry on his face.

“Uh, hey,” he said. The others turned to me too.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“What for?”

I shook my head. “Has something...happened?”

They went silent, shooting each other looks.

I stumbled as the storm intensified, the rain that had been pounding my face becoming a wall of water hitting me, freezing me to the bone. I maintained my grip on Iona's hand and pulled her along, running.

Brenna was crying again, though she was held firmly in my wife's free arm. I wished nothing more than to stop and comfort her and tell her everything was going to be okay, but there just wasn't time. Behind me, I could hear a rush of water, another wave crashing over the narrow bridge and drenching us.

"Audun!" Iona yelled. I didn't respond, just pulling her along. We had to make it to the mainland. The...the thing was making its way north, and every swipe it took at the heroes buzzing around it caused a tsunami to crash into our home. It was apparent that it wasn't Behemoth, the Endbringer. What had humanity done to deserve not one, but two of the monsters?

We finally made it to the other side of the bridge, just in time to turn around and see the structure collapsing into the waters of the fjord. Behind the wreckage, Ulvøya—the island we had called home for the last five years—was in little better shape. The trees and houses had been torn away by the relentless waves, leaving only dirt and rubble to crumble into the water.

"Audun, where are you going?" Iona asked.

I looked back at her. She was shivering in the cold, our daughter in her arms. "High ground. We must pray that it doesn't follow us," I said, unsteadily making my way up the road. I knew she was looking for an answer beyond the one I'd given, some measure of hope beyond waiting for the waters to take us... I didn't have one.

As we stumbled along, I couldn't bring myself to look inside the crushed cars we passed. Even if there were survivors, there was nothing the three of us could do to help them. We had to take care of ourselves.

We continued our way up the road, struggling to keep our footing every time the waves hit us. It was slow going, everything was under a foot of water, and the only source of light was from the lighting that periodically arced across the sky. Explosions and bolts of light shone above us, as the superheroes continued their battle. It was astonishing, in a way, watching the capes deliver blow after blow, each magnitudes stronger than I'd ever seen on the television, but doing nothing to the monster. I couldn't help but pause for a heartbeat, and watch the battle. The monster—a second Endbringer?—swatted at the capes, only some of whom managed to dodge its claws.

One of the capes who had been hit came careening towards us. Something on his back, I could see showers of sparks coming out of it as he came closer.

I had to push Iona and Brenna out of the way, just before the hero crashed into the ground where they had been standing and bounced off the water with a sickening crunch. He kept going, tumbling down the roadway, sparks flying. He came to a rest a distance away, on top of a crushed sedan.

I rushed over, instinct kicking in. A long time ago, what felt like a lifetime, I'd done my conscription
duties, and maybe I could help the guy. He was moving around, which I supposed was good, but the broken bones jutting out of his leg were worrying to say the least.

“Iona,” I heard myself say. “Take Brenna, just head uphill...”

“Audun, what—”

I cut her off. “I'll find you. Don't worry.”

She stared at me for a time, those sharp blue eyes I'd fallen in love with piercing my soul. She finally nodded.

“Be safe. I love you,” she said simply, before heading on up the road, a wide-eyed Brenna still in her arms.

They would be fine. My wife was the smartest person I knew. If anyone could make it out of this in one piece, it was her. I turned my attention to the cape. He had pulled the sparking device off his back, seemingly unconcerned with his leg. He swore, his voice a deep American drawl, and tossed the device aside.

“Let me help,” I said in my heavily-accented English, approaching him. His head jerked around to look at me. A line of blood was running down his forehead, staining the brilliant blue fabric of the mask he wore. He struggled to get up, screaming in agony as it caused his leg to twist. There was a lot of blood, I noticed.

“Just...need to get up,” he growled. I nodded, and reached my arm under him, pulling him to his feet with one of his arms over my shoulders. Instead of crying out he just made angry-sounding gargled noises, which I counted as a good thing. With his spare arm, he pointed north of us. “I have to get back.”

“Just a moment,” I said calmly. I took off my belt and used it as a tourniquet on his leg. I tried to ignore the cape's screams in pain.

“Okay,” I said, trying to help him keep his weight off the broken leg. The rain died off a touch, and I could see where we were heading. A building, maybe a mile north of us, where heroes were streaming in and out like bees from a hive.

With the relentless waves, it would have been slow going, even without carrying a wounded superhero. We crawled along, each step a milestone, celebrated by thundering booms and explosions from the battle.

After what felt like hours, we were close enough to the command center that we were spotted. The ground in front of us shimmered, and a woman in a brown costume was pulling herself out of the ground as easily as if it were water. She gave me a silent nod, grabbed the cape from the other side, and together we were able to carry him the rest of the way, into one of many large, hastily-erected tents around the building.

I heard moans of pain from the countless injured inside. Medical staff worked frantically. Troops in black armor with “PRT” stood guard next to Norwegian soldiers, rifles at the ready. Not that rifles would do anything against the Endbringer. No— an Endbringer.

I pushed that train of thought out of my mind. There was nothing good to come from that.

We set the jetpack cape down on a cot. A doctor wordlessly pushed me out of the way, leaving a bloody handprint on my rain-soaked shirt as she looked over the injured hero. I took the hint and left.
the tent, giving the professionals space as I stepped back into the storm.

The wind howled, bringing with it the constant drizzle, and the distant sounds of fighting. It sounded louder, now. Closer.

I felt someone next to me, and looked over to see the brown-suited cape who had helped me and the fallen hero. Her hand rested on my shoulder.

“You have family?” she asked. I nodded, and she continued. “You helped that hero. I will help you. Take you to them.”

“Don't you have that... Jörmungandr to fight?” I asked, wincing a bit at my tone.

“Over water? I cannot. Only land,” she said, her words halting. “I come to fight Behemoth, not... not this. This is new.”

I didn't reply for a moment. Finally, I pointed eastward. “If you could, uphill. I can find them from there.”

She grabbed my arm. “Close your eyes. Do not open them. Or breathe. If you do... just don't.”

I nodded, and shut my eyes. Suddenly the heavy rain was gone, and I felt like I'd been dunked in a vat of syrup. Chunky syrup. There was a sense of motion, of thickness moving around me, past me, the cape's firm grip pulling me along. Her warning not to breathe was at the forefront of my mind, but thankfully... I didn't feel the need to.

The pulling continued, but for how long I couldn't tell. And then it was over, and I was on my hands and knees gasping for breath, the smell of dirt and mud filling my nose. The normalcy of the pounding rain returned, running down my back.

I wiped the mud from my face, opened my eyes. We were standing in a park, high up above, overlooking the water. There were still trees here, although one or two had been upended by the storm's wind. Below, if it weren't for the flashes caused by the heroes' fighting, I wouldn't have been able to see the outline of the monstrosity in the storm.

It was horrifying, and beautiful. Seeing it from this high. The Endbringer lashed out, slicing a flying hero in half, before its shadow of water flung the two halves of parahuman away. I felt like I should have heard something from the fight, but only the occasional rumble of thunder punctuated the steady howl of wind and rain.

I pulled myself to my feet, and turned to say something to the hero who had brought me here, but she was gone?

“Audun!” a familiar voice shouted. Out of the trees Iona came, holding Brenna's hand as she followed. They'd gotten jackets from somewhere, the tags still hanging off them. Our eyes met, hers filled with relief, and worry still.

I rushed over and gave the pair of them a hug, sweeping our daughter up into my arms. Iona handed me a jacket, and I put it on over my soaked clothes. It was better than nothing.

“No trouble?” she asked.

I shook my head. “You?”

She shrugged. I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was thinking, making plans. She was
always the type of person to see ten steps ahead, even in a situation like this.

There was nothing to do from here. It was half a mile away now, trodding slowly towards the command center I'd been at moments ago. We could see the ripple of waves around it, trailing out to slam into the docks, into the buildings and houses of Oslo itself.

I let Brenna down, clenching her hand firmly in mine.

Around us, the storm raged on, and the three of us watched our city die.

Day fourteen. I'd run out of options.

Fourteen days ago, I'd gotten the call from Brenna's friend, worried that she hadn't shown up at the convention center. Fourteen days since I'd seen my daughter.

This plan, as stupid as it was, was all I had left.

I looked out the window of my car, at the, for lack of a better term, crackhouse across the street from where I was parked. There was a dog barking, somewhere, and weeds grew out of cracks in the asphalt. A crow cawed from its perch atop a sagging power line.

I emptied my pockets into the glovebox. Phone, wallet, pocket knife, none of it would help me here.

It was a short walk, across the street and up the cracked concrete path up to the front door. I took a deep breath and pounded on the door.

Inside, I could hear the music they were playing stop. A second later, the door opened. A woman, with a black bandanna across her face, and carrying a baseball bat with nails sticking out of it.

"The fuck do you want?"

I cleared my throat. "I want to speak to--"

"They ain't here," she said, cutting me off.

She moved to slam the door shut, but I stepped forward, holding it open with my arm.

"Let me in," I said simply.

"That's enough," a voice said behind bat girl. She turned around.

A woman holding a leather-bound book was standing behind her, dressed in a masked red and purple costume, with faintly-glowing accents studded throughout. Shimmering reddish energy surrounded her.

Spellbound.

"I didn't think you were serious," she said, her voice resonating oddly. Like she was speaking from atop a throne in a massive room. The glowing accents on her costume flashed with her words.

"I was," I said simply. I wasn't here to talk to a cape pretending to be an enchantress.
“Okay.” She looked me over, then said hesitantly, “He doesn't take kindly to...interruptions in schedule. Make sure it's worth it.”

I simply nodded. “I know the risk.”

She didn't respond, instead opening the leather-bound book she was holding. She produced a pen from her sleeve with a flourish, and wrote something down.

Everything became darkness. I was blind.

“It will wear off, don't worry,” she said. I felt hands on me. I was about to say something rude when I realized they were just patting me down for weapons. No sense in angering the supervillains. Not today.

I was pulled back outside by someone, lead out into the street. I heard the sound of a car door opening, then I was pushed inside. The backseat, based on the complete lack of legroom. As the car took off I fumbled around for a seatbelt, eventually getting buckled up. There was a soft laugh in front of me.

“I'm not that bad of a driver, come on,” Spellbound said lightly. I decided not to respond. I wasn't sure whether it would be a good idea to ask why she couldn't teleport us to wherever we were headed to with one of her 'spells'.

It was maybe ten minutes before the car stopped. The door was opened and I was dragged out, a little rougher than before. Just by the smell, I could tell we were somewhere different. It wasn't the stale cigarettes and ass from the Ravens' crackhouse, or the vanilla and sandalwood smell of Spellbound's car. This was more of an older, disused building, with the faint smell of oil and grease. If I had to guess, an old mechanic's garage?

“Oh, open your eyes,” Spellbound said, a bit more assertively than she had sounded in the car. I hadn't even realized they were closed.

I was standing, in fact, in what had been an oil change place. Half the windows were shattered, and the other half were boarded up. Holes in the roof let the sun shine in. Just in front of me was the pit where the mechanics worked, half-filled with water. Lines of red dripped down into the murky water below. I followed the trails up to their source.

Bloodletter, standing ten feet away from me.

The pictures didn't do him justice. He was unnaturally tall, seven or eight feet of muscle covered in a sleek maroon costume. His arms were bare, revealed massive gouges from which blood ran down his arms, wrists, hands, down to the footlong serrated bone claws he had instead of hands.

He was intimidating.

So intimidating, that I almost didn't even notice the capes next to him. Spellbound on one side, on the other, a young woman in tight-fitting clothes, with an almost-boyish figure, although most of her face was concealed by her mask. A cape who had rocketed to notoriety recently. Starving Artist.

She was looking at me curiously. A bit like a cat looking at the bird it was about to pounce on. Unnerving.

“Speak,” Bloodletter intoned, his voice deep, grating to the ears.

I hesitated, at first, but with the first word, my offer flowed through. “You know who I am. Audun
Grovsmed, state senator. Father of Brenna Grovsmed. I want her back, and I'm willing to give anything, do anything, to get her back.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Please.”

“What makes you think we have your daughter?” Bloodletter finally replied, his voice flat.

“I know what the Ravens do.” I said, swallowing. “My daughter went missing two weeks ago in your territory. Either you took her, or you know who did.”

“Hmmph.” He turned to Spellbound. “Deafen him.”

One moment, I could understand them. The next, everything I heard was garbled. I knew the words, but I couldn't comprehend. As if I had just woken up, and someone was talking in the next room.

Starving Artist talked to Bloodletter in something of a concerned tone. Bloodletter gave short responses, and Starving Artist stomped her foot on the ground. She all but yelled at him, and Bloodletter raked his claws together as if he was about to strike her. Spellbound said something, and he growled, but seemed to calm down. Bloodletter finally sighed and shook his head. He gestured to Spellbound.

I could comprehend again, but I could feel their discussion fading from memory. It was all...falling away, like a dream during the first moments of the morning.

“No,” Bloodletter said. I jumped.

“No?” My voice was shaking.

Bloodletter shrugged. “We don't have this ‘Brenna Grovsmed’. Our enforcers won't have her, either.”

“You're lying,” I whispered. I shouted, “You're lying!”

“Watch your tone,” Spellbound warned. “Senator or no, a bloody corpse is a bloody corpse.”

“T'll...I'll give you anything. Please,” I pleaded.

Bloodletter rolled his eyes. “There's nothing a state senator could offer that we couldn't already... acquire. Even if we had your Brenna.”

“But—” I started to say before suddenly I lost the ability to speak.

“That's enough. You had your time,” Spellbound said, looking up from her spellbook. I watched her write, and I was blind once more. Seconds later, I was pulled away, back outside.

It was back in Spellbound's car again, but I couldn't speak, and she didn't seem to want to talk. So I sat, stuck listening to the quiet sounds of Top 40 pop music on her radio, until the car stopped again.

The door opened, and I pulled myself out, my vision suddenly popping back into place.

“I'm sorry,” Spellbound said, shutting the car door behind me. We were parked next to my car, it seemed.

It also seemed her muting spell was still in effect, since I couldn't voice the retort I wanted so badly to
“You can speak in an hour or so. I’d say it’s out of my control, but then I’d be lying,” she intoned.

I shook my head, and started walking to my car, but she grabbed my sleeve.

“Hey. I hope she comes home,” she said, the mystical effect on her voice faltering. “Really. Good luck, okay?”

I jerked my arm to free my sleeve from her grasp, and walked away.

She hadn't woken up yet.

I sighed.

The machinery attached to Brenna continued its steady beeping.

A little more than a month after she'd come home, and my daughter had nearly died. Her arm had been shredded, cut down to the bone. The emergency room doctors had said that even if it wasn't Bloodletter's doing, she probably would have had to lose the arm anyway.

Now she sat there, unconscious, missing a part of her.

And it was my fault.

If I hadn't gone to the Ravens in desperation, if I hadn't stuck my nose where I shouldn't have, this wouldn't have happened. She'd come back on her own, refusing to talk about where she had been or what had happened. And I'd gone and pissed off Bloodletter enough to do this to her.

The worst day of my life, up until today, had been June 9, 1996. The day my city died, along with most of my friends and family. We'd been one of the few survivors of that mess, and I thanked God every day for it.

Now, though, I was convinced it was this day that was the worst.

It was a hopelessness I couldn't describe, deep within my heart. A feeling of despair, of being useless. A gut-wrenching anger and fear. A father's purpose was to protect his family, and I had failed. More than failed, I'd caused it to happen.

I looked over at Brenna. She looked so much healthier. Her cheeks were no longer gaunt, her skin no longer deathly pale. And yet, here she was, closer to death than she'd been the night she stumbled back home.

There was a knock at the door. After a moment, I rose, and walked over.

A peek through the small window embedded in the door. Two people, in dark suits. Reluctantly, I opened the door.

“Mr. Grovsmed?” said the one on the left, hospital lighting reflecting off his bald head.

“What is this about?” I asked, irritated. I wanted to be alone with my daughter.
“May we step in?” the other asked, holding up some form of ID. The shield logo of the PRT. His hand twitched, making it difficult to read.

“I don't want to disturb my daughter. We can talk outside,” I said.

The pair looked at each other and back at me.

“This is potentially a sensitive matter. Are you sure?” asked the bald man.

“Outside,” I repeated, my voice hard. They backed up to let me out, and I followed, leaving the door slightly ajar. “What is it?”

The twitchy man cleared his throat. “We're here about your daughter. We have reasons to suspect she may be a parahuman, and we'd like to—”

“What?” I said, a little too loudly. I continued, more quietly. “Don't you think she's gone through enough already? Go away.”

“It's non-invasive,” Baldy cut in. “Just a quick MRI, and we will be on our way.”

“Absolutely not,” I said, storming back to Brenna's room. I took a deep breath just outside it.

“But sir—”

“That's enough,” I said. “If she has powers, and if she wants to speak to the PRT, she will. That will be all.” I stepped back into Brenna's room, quietly closing the door in the PRT men's faces.

“D...dad?” I heard. It felt like my heart skipped a beat.

Brenna's eyes were half-open, blinking slowly, as if even eyelids were heavy to her right now.

“Brenna,” I said, taking a seat next to her. “How...how are you feeling?” I asked. I knew it was a stupid question, but I had to ask.

“I'm...I'm here, I guess,” she said hesitantly, looking down at where her arm used to be. “Mostly.”

I winced.

“I'm here for you, Brenna. I always will be.”

She smiled. “I know, Dad,” she said, pausing. “I'm...I'm sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I just...want you to be safe.”

She looked away, a strange expression on her face. After a moment, she spoke. “Is Mom doing okay? Does she...know?”

“She—”

The door opened, quickly but without slamming. Iona stepped in, worry on her sleep-deprived face.

“Iona! You made it,” I said, wanting to embrace her, but also not wanting to move away from Brenna.

“Hi Mom,” Brenna said.

Iona walked over and carefully enveloped Brenna in a hug.
“Sorry I couldn't come sooner. I was in the middle of a meeting with someone, and they're hard to walk away from. You...” she paused, glancing at Brenna's stump. “You holding up okay?”

“I'm holding up about...half as much, Mom,” Brenna said, smiling. Even that smile looked different.

“Do...do you want to talk about what happened?” Iona said finally.

Brenna's smile fell. “Not really.”

“Okay. We're here for you, you know? And if we need to pull strings, we can,” Iona said cryptically.

“Okay,” Brenna said, blinking several times in succession. “I kinda feel like taking a nap. Is that okay?”

“Yes, dear,” I said. “Take as much time as you need. We'll be right outside if you need us.”

I gave her a hug before stepping out with Iona. I took a deep, ragged breath, relieved for a reason I couldn't say.

“Are you holding up okay, Audun?” Iona asked.

“No,” I said, leaning against a wall, looking down at the pristine hospital linoleum. “I've failed to protect her. First the kidnapping, now this? When are we going to get the call, finding out that she's died?” I sighed and continued, “She doesn't talk to me. Not about anything important. I just want to know what's going on, and to not feel so helpless.”

I looked at Iona pleadingly. Brenna had always talked to her more. Maybe she knew something I didn't.

“She...” Iona paused, hesitating. “She hasn't talked to me about this either.”

“Damn,” I said softly, shaking my head. “What was that about pulling strings, by the way?”

Iona sighed. “You know I can't talk about work. It's—”

“Classified,” I finished for her. “You've said this.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, not meeting my eyes.

We were quiet for a time. I slid down onto the floor, and Iona joined me.

We watched a pair of nurses half walking, half running past us.

Finally I spoke, “I wish we could go back. To our homeland, before everything. Simpler times.”

“Yeah,” Iona said. “Me too.”

I looked out the window of the PRT cruiser, at the twinkling lights of the Denver skyline rising around us. That memory, of Brenna in the hospital. Why was I thinking about that? Where was this feeling of dread coming from?

“It's quiet,” Linda said.
“Radio silence,” one of the PRT officers said to us. “Can't say much, unfortunately. Active operation and all.”

“It's fine,” I replied. It was only a mile or so to the PRT Headquarters, but after...how we'd been targeted, I was more than happy to accept the PRT-sponsored ride.

Still, the silence was going to drive me insane. I needed to know what was going on. Needed to know that the Ravens were being taken care of, that my daughter would never have to fear them again.


“Shit,” one of the PRT officers said. He pushed something on the console, and the radio shut off. Both of the officers adjusted earpieces.

“What's going on?” I asked, the silence and the dread clenching around my racing heart.

The officers looked at each other, and one of them turned to me. “There's been a situation. I'm afraid we can't say anything.”

Cape down.

“With Icarus?” I asked, swallowing. Please say no. Please, fucking God, say no.

The officers looked at each other again, and their expressions answered my question.

Not again.

“Take me to her,” I said.

I won't stay back. I will be there for you.

“We're under orders to—”

“I don't care. Take me to her now, before—”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Linda looked at me, shaking her head. She spoke up, “Can you take us to Anschutz? Or let us out and we'll find our own way.”

The officers looked at each other.

“Technically we should be—” the passenger officer paused as the car abruptly turned. “—I guess that's a yes.”

“I'm not about to keep a father away from his daughter,” the driver said apologetically.

I thought the drive to the hospital, that one day two years ago, was the longest car ride of my life. I was wrong.

“She's a tough girl. She'll make it,” Linda said, probably trying to comfort me. It didn't work.

“What happened?” I asked. I couldn't stand not knowing anything.

“I'm sorry, but we really don't know,” the driver said. “Information is sparse right now. Not to
“mention the protocols...” he trailed off.

“Dammit,” I swore under my breath.

Silence. Gut wrenching dread. My companions, as I was forced to sit there, not knowing. Wondering. Worrying of the worst.

I just wanted to know my daughter was safe.

The Wards were supposed to protect her. It was why I pushed her to join them. Not get her killed. It hadn't even been a month.

Eventually, a lifetime too long, we turned into a parking lot. The hospital was just ahead. I unbuckled my seatbelt, ignoring the angry beeping coming from the console. The moment the car stopped, I shoved the door open and sprinted towards the multitude of white and green lights clustered around the entrance.

I heard shouting, and a pair of PRT officers stepped forward as I got close. “Stop right there! This is your first and only warning!”

I kept my pace, and one of them brought his hand to his hip. It hit me, in that moment. Onlookers, staring at me and the officers.

I slowed to a stop before them.

News vans approached, and it shook me how close I was to outing Brenna's identity.

“Wait,” I heard someone say loudly.

A cape stepped through the line, looking directly at me. I didn't recognize him. “Let him through,” he said.

The PRT officers stepped aside, and I walked through, wary of startling them. I couldn't see Brenna if I was writhing on the ground from a taser.

The cape walked deeper into the circle of PRT vehicles, and I followed. He finally turned back to me.

“Senator Grosvmed. If you would be so kind as to wait here. We can't let you in just yet, but exposing yourself any more could jeopardize Icarus's identity.”

I waited. And waited. I waited too long, damn it, and they were making me wait more.

I hoped the waiting was because she was alive, and they were making sure she stayed that way.

There wasn't much activity around me. Mostly keeping the public and the media from getting inside. The only interruption was a sudden, strange hum from above, and I looked up to see a strange shape lifting off and tilting away from the hospital. Lights on it illuminated the red and gold hull. It looked...futuristic, for lack of a better term. Probably one of Torque's vehicles. Actually, definitely one of Torque's vehicles.

“Sir?” I heard from behind me. One of the PRT officers. “We've been informed that you are clear to enter. Follow me, please.”

I followed the officer, my dread back in full force. Finally, I'd learn something of whatever the fuck was going on.
Armored PRT guards were present at every corner, every end of the hallways we passed through. Unlike the ones outside, they had assault rifles. From the way they stood, it seemed like they were expecting trouble.

Up ahead, a familiar Denver cape. Chozo was leaning up against a wall. He turned towards me.

“I’ll take it from here,” he said, in the same deep, assured tone I’d only heard twice before.

“Please,” I said. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Operation gone wrong,” Chozo said, shaking his head. “We were setting bait to try and draw the Ravens out.”

“...Bait? What sort of bait?” I asked, anger spreading through my body.

“Icarus. She agreed. It was the only option we had that didn't end with Tank Buster in a body bag.”

“You used my daughter as bait?” I gasped. I clenched my fists, seething.

“We had no intention of letting the Ravens anywhere near her. Bunker...” he sighed. “He didn't think Basilisk would go so far as to shoot Icarus from a rooftop.”


Chozo didn't respond. Didn't flinch. His old, tired eyes just stared into my own.

“What kind of fucking excuse is that? Why are you even putting children in that situation. You're the goddamn heroes, for Christ's sake. You were supposed to protect her!”

“She wasn't supposed to go AWOL and murder one of the Ravens, either,” he grunted.

“What?” I took a step back. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Chozo's eyes widened for a split second before settling back into his stony expression.

“Branwen.”

Oh. Oh God.

I felt myself sit down. I wasn't sure when.

I couldn't imagine my Brenna killing.

No, I didn't want to imagine my Brenna killing.

Ever since she'd come back, I'd seen the flashes of...an expression on her face which I could not put into a single word. Anguish. Something else.

God, I'd thought about killing every last one of them myself. Brenna just took that extra step to actually doing it.

I failed. I failed in every way possible. I had yelled at Chozo, told him he was supposed to protect her.

But that was my job. I'd failed in every way, every time.
I just hoped she lived, so I could apologize.

“Mr. Grovsmed?”

I looked up, an exhausted doctor holding a clipboard standing in front of me.

“Brenna... she's made it through the worst. We're going to keep monitoring, but the nature of her... modifications has caused complications.”

“She's going to be okay?” I asked, hopeful for the first time.

“We believe so. She's lost most of her left shoulder, but the bleeding has stopped. Her body is rejecting everything we give her, though.”

“Rejecting?”

“Implants. Effectively an overzealous immune system. Filters out any foreign chemicals.”

Why would she have something like that?

“Can I see her?”

“Yes, of course. Follow me.”

The harsh beeping was the first thing I noticed. It was faster than it should've been.

“God. Brenna...”

Only her face was exposed, but even then I could see so much. Too much, but I wasn't going to look away. Couldn't. Her eyes were closed, but she looked like she was in agony. I could see small, barely perceptible twitches.

“She's in pain?” I asked.

The doctor nodded. “I'm sorry. We applied local anesthetics where we could, but anything that would go through her whole system would just be rejected.”

My daughter was suffering. Because I failed.

I sat down in the chair next to her. If nothing else, I would be here when she woke up.

“If she wakes up, please ask her to turn off her implants, if she can. It would... help,” the doctor said as he walked away. “I'll leave you two alone.”

I wasn't sure how long I sat there, unmoving. Listening, watching. I felt myself nodding off, feeling my old age now more than ever. I had to resist, though. I had to be here when she awoke.

A gasp startled me. Brenna shouted incomprehensibly, fighting to get up. The beeping became faster and faster.

“Brenna!” I shouted as I stood. “It's me. You're safe,” I said desperately as I reached for her hand.

She swung a fist at me sluggishly. It connected, but it barely hurt. Even so, I stepped back. The door slammed open, and a pair of nurses ran in and held her down. She screamed incoherently, tears running down her face.
“What are you doing?” I shouted. “You're hurting her!”

“She’s hurting herself by thrashing around,” one of the nurses said. “Can you tell her to turn off her implant? That would help.”

“Brenna?” I said, softly. She wasn't screaming, just quietly sobbing. I blinked away tears of my own. “Can you turn off your filter for us? Please.”

She stopped struggling, just staring ahead.

“Please,” she garbled. “No. Alex.”

Her eyes closed, and she stopped moving. The beeping slowed.

“Brenna?” I asked, the nigh oppressive dread filling every part of my being.

“She's asleep now,” one of the nurses said tiredly. “Drained what energy she had.”

*God.*

“She's...she's still going to be okay, right?” I asked. Plead.

“It would be easier for her if we could give her anything,” one of the nurses said, shaking his head. “I'm sorry, but it's really up to her now.”

I sat back down. At some point, the nurses left us alone. I wasn't sure when. Next time she woke up, I would be more prepared. I had to be.

I heard heavy footsteps behind me. I turned, and found myself face to face with Bunker.

“I'm sorry,” Bunker said, quietly.

“You're sorry,” I said quietly, with contempt. “That's all you can say for yourself?”

“Not much to say,” Bunker said, looking at Brenna. “I failed her.”

“Why did you do it? Put her in harms way like that?”

“Tank Buster,” he said, with a level of contempt that threw me off guard. “That's all. We were pressed for time, but we could've explored more options. Should have.”

“I'm only hearing excuses.”

“Yes. Excuses,” Bunker said before turning to me. “I hope she lives. For her sake, and for yours. There is no pain on this Earth that is worse than losing your own child.”

I heard whimpering, and I turned to see Brenna sluggishly blinking. She whispered something that I couldn't hear, more tears running down her face.

My fists clenched. I couldn't stand this. Watching her suffer. Because I failed to protect her. I begged her to join the Wards, and she did. She nearly died, and was lying in pain right here.

And the person who let her get shot was standing behind me.

I stood up, turned around, and punched Bunker in the face.
Tank Buster

I almost didn't notice that I was buried in a hug.

“Thank god you're safe. Oh, thank god,” Jennifer sobbed.

“Sorry.”

“Why would you be sorry?” she said, stepping back. I didn't respond. Jennifer looked at me with concern. “You're probably tired. Damn, I'm tired.”

“I want to go see Icarus,” I said, quietly. I pressed a hand to my forehead. After everything, I was surprised I didn't have a worse headache.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“You don't know?”

Jennifer sheepishly shook her head. “I was distracted.”

Oh. Right.

“Sorry,” I said again.

“Stop saying that. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

_I don't know about that._

I unconsciously brushed my hand along my pocket, feeling the vials.

_I need to dispose of these._

“I just wanted to see you, make sure you were safe,” Jennifer said after a pause. “I'll be heading back to the apartment. Or do you want to come with?” she asked hopefully.

“So—I'm going to stay here. See Icarus. Maybe do some Tinkering. Not sure if I can sleep.”

“Okay. You take care of yourself, okay? Get _some_ sleep.”

“I will,” I said, not sure if I was lying or not.

I headed for the elevator. I nearly hit the button for Medical, but instead I headed for the Wards quarters. 

“Tank Buster?” one of the PRT officers said. I nearly forgot they were there. “You aren't going to medical?”

“I am. Just, I want to change first.”

“We're supposed to make sure you don't skip out on a check-up, given...” he trailed off.
“I won't. Five minutes.”

He sighed. “You do have a proven track record. Five minutes.”

The lights were already on in the Wards center. Thomas looked up at me from one of the chairs, his mask on the floor nearby.

“Naomi—”

“Just here to change,” I said. Thomas winced.

It didn't take long to throw off my current clothes and put on something that made me feel... still dirty, but slightly less so. I wished I could shower, but it would have to wait.

I glanced at the pants with the vials still in the pocket.

Whatever. I'll deal with it later.

“Hey, Thomas,” I said as I walked out of my room. “You should probably just get some sleep. I'll be in medical for a while, probably.”

“Oh, I'll come with you,” he said, scrambling to get his mask.

“I...” I hesitated. I usually enjoyed his company, but my teammates had already seen more than enough of me being weak. “Sorry, I'd rather go alone.”

“Oh,” he said, deflating. “I'll just go home, then.”

“You won't see Icarus later?”

“Didn't she get you in this mess?” he growled. “Why would I?”

Where the hell did that come from?

“Icarus is one of us,” I said, irritated. “Don't blame her for this.”

“She killed Branwen, didn't she?” he shot back.

Fucking hell.

“Dammit Thomas. Don't go there.”

“So she did.”

I sighed. “Officially, no.”

“Officially,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Fucking PRT.”

I didn't have the time or patience for this.

“Go home, Thomas. Get some rest. Cool off. And keep your theories to yourself.” I walked out of the Wards center. If he had a response, I didn't hear it.

A PRT officer nodded to me as I walked past him to the elevator.

Icarus was shot.
There was a terrifying shortage of information on how and why. Or even her condition. Just that she wasn't dead. At least, not yet.

This situation was so fucked. There was no telling what the Ravens would do next. What we would do next.

I just didn't want people to die for once.

We walked into the PRT's medical facility. A secretary looked up at me and nodded.

“Dr. Garcia will be with you shortly, ma'am.”

I sat down on the bench heavily.

_Damn headache._

“Tank Buster?”

“Hey Maria,” I said, looking up at her. The doctor seemed frazzled, several bits of dark hair sticking our of her bun.

“Follow me,” she said softly before heading through a hall.

I followed her into a standard examination room. Maria wordlessly pulled out a scale, and I stepped on it. I'd done this dozens of times before.

“135 pounds, around usual,” she muttered, typing on the room's computer.

She checked my blood pressure and muttered good. Normally an assistant would be doing these tests, but I was too tired to contemplate why Maria was doing them herself.

“I will skip the usual questions and cut straight to it. I'm sure you were asked earlier, but were you injured anywhere?”

I shook my head. Nothing other than some scratches which were gone already thanks to Papercut's ointment.

“Oh alright. I know you were given some kind of chemical that knocked you out. Can you describe the effects?”

“I became drowsy and fell asleep quickly. Waking up, I felt much more...uh, muddled than normal.”

Maria nodded, typing away. “Alright. Were you given anything during captivity?”


She sighed. “Damnit. Are you okay?”

“Not really.”

“But enough that you made it here, at least.”

I didn't comment. She continued, “Can you tell me about it?”

“It was...it was Starving Artist,” I said, pausing. “She...didn't say much,” I lied.

_Why did I say that?_
“I know it's hard. I know what that...that shit can do,” Maria said. I don’t think I ever heard her cuss before. “But I need you to tell me all you can.”

“I...” I gulped. “I feel dirty.”

Maria sighed, and placed a hand on my shoulder. “If you can't tell me, I don't blame you. We'll just have to work with the blood tests, to make sure there's no complications. Talk to someone, though.”

I nodded.

The section of Anschutz Hospital felt eerie, the usual hustle non-existent. White halls and a sterile scent didn’t help the feeling. Only the PRT guards and a couple of nurses were in the hall. I walked around a corner, only to nearly collide with Bunker. He glared at me, one hand holding his nose. He pushed past me silently.

*What?*

I walked through doors into a waiting room. Flashstep sat on a chair nearby, wiping something with a cloth. He looked up.

“Hey,” he said, concern on his face.

“Hey,” I said, taking a seat next to him. “Is she...”

“Doctor said there's complications. Having trouble with her implants, but... she's alive.”

“She'll get through this,” I said. I hoped.

Flashstep looked back to what he was holding. Icarus's mask, I realized.

“I guess I'll go see her,” I said, standing up.

“Naomi...” Flashstep trailed off.

I paused. “What's up?”

“I'm just... glad you're back.”

“Me too,” I said, making my way for the door. If it weren't for the PRT officers, I might have gotten lost. Still, it wasn't long before I found Icarus's room. I flashed my ID card—the guard would certainly recognize me, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were going by the book given the situation.

“Her father's in there,” he said quietly.

I nodded and stepped in anyway. The harsh beeping, faster than I'd normally hear. Brenna was still, her father hunched over in a chair. The stress was plain in his eyes, his suit ruffled and his hair disheveled. Even his tie was undone, a complete contrast to the immaculate statesman I'd had lunch with.

He looked at me, confused before comprehension dawned on his face.
“Naomi. Or should I call you Tank Buster?”

I shrugged. “Either is fine in private, though maybe we should stick to my cape name while I have the mask on,” I said, taking the mask off.

He nodded, and looked back to Brenna. I noticed he was rubbing his knuckles.

“Did you punch Bunker?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yes.”

“Good work.” I nodded.

He turned, giving me an odd look.

“Thanks?” he said, leaning back and rubbing his temples. “God, this is all... too much, and nobody's even telling me anything.”

I didn't see another chair, and I was so tired, so I plopped down on the floor.

“I don't know much, either,” I said, sighing. “But, fuck. I did just get out of my examination.”

“Are you okay?”

“I...” I paused. For whatever reason, I found that I couldn't lie to him. “Not really.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I wish I was stronger. Not get captured. Not let my friend get hurt like this.”

He was quiet for a time, the beeping and steady breathing from Brenna being the only sounds.

“Did you know?” he asked quietly.

“Know what?” I said, heart sinking.

“Did she ever talk to you about what they did?”

“A... a little. Not much, just that the Ravens had her captive for a while. But I know what they do.” I turned towards Brenna. “I've seen a lot. Been to a few Endbringer fights as search and rescue. They're terrifying, the way a force of nature is. The Ravens? They're a horror in their own right, a horror done by people.”

“I wouldn't call them people,” he growled. “More like animals to be put down.”

“I've seen enough death. There's due process, and there's the Birdcage.”

“You're right. Still too good for them,” He paused, and swore something in a language I didn't understand.

I thought back to Starving Artist. The cool drop on my tongue. Brenna's tattoo.

I shuddered.

“Maybe. But it's easy to say something like that if you aren't going to be the one pulling the trigger,” I said. “Sorry, that might've been harsh.”
He paused. “It's fine. You're right... I can't help but feel like this is my fault. I didn't know the full extent of what they'd done until today, until... But deep down, I knew. I just never pushed for her to get help. I never... she became a different person when she came back, and I spent the entire time waiting for the rest of her to come home too.”

“You'd wait forever,” I said, bitterly. “Trigger events have that effect. But... being a Ward has been good for her, I think. She's my friend, and she's made good friends with Jordan. They watch anime together,” I said with a short laugh. “But I see, every now and again. Twitches, here and there. Her expressions going dark. I've seen her shut down. I just... I hope she gets through this and smiles again, even if only part of the time.”

“I'm glad. That she smiles, even a little. When she came home after... I didn't see a single smile.” He looked at Brenna, years of pain evident on his face. “I feel so helpless. Helpless to help her through this. Helpless to protect her. I can't do anything but sit here and worry and think about what I did wrong.”

“From what I've seen... you're a good father. Brenna's lucky to have you,” I said. “I think we all feel a little helpless. I have powers, but I'm not the Triumvirate. Or Scion. And they can only do so much themselves. Me? I... I even let myself get captured.”

“I've seen you in action. You're... so young, yet so brave and strong. I think more people look up to you than you might think. My daughter included. I guess... sometimes bad things just happen,” he said with a heavy sigh. “This world doesn't need Endbringers for that to happen.”

“It's easy to look strong when you're covered in several inches of steel and titanium.”

He shook his head. “It's more than that. It's the way you carry yourself. I could see you leading the Protectorate here, or elsewhere, someday.”

I gave a short laugh. “I doubt it. Fucking politics.”

“Fucking politics,” he said, shooting me a questioning look.

A phone rang, and Brenna's dad jerked up, fishing around his pockets before pulling his phone out. One potentially awkward conversation turn averted.

“I have to take this, sorry,” he said.

“Oh, right. Of course. I'll... leave you to it, then. I... thanks for the talk.” I turned and headed out the door. He was already talking quickly in some language as the door closed.

I felt ready to collapse, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to see what dreams might give me.

I headed back through the eerie hallway.

Blink

The pair of PRT officers lead me firmly past numerous cells. I wondered if I would end up seeing Kaboom. I could already hear his mocking laughter.

They pushed me into a room, drab and bare except for a table and two chairs. A mirror dominated one of the walls, probably one-way. Definitely one way, I sensed, as they stopped me in front of a chair. I took the hint, sitting down, and they handcuffed me to the table.
In the brief time that took, I could've teleported away if I wanted. I had to know, though.

The pair of PRT left the room, leaving me alone in the dimly lit room. I waited for what felt like an eternity, hoping they didn't just forget about me. There was an article recently, DPD forgetting someone in a cell for two days.

This was the PRT, though. Slightly more competent. Maybe.

I felt someone approach, finally. The door opened and Cupid walked in, exhaustion plain on her face. She smiled thinly.

*Of course. Send the emotion reader to interrogate the villain.*

“Did she...is she alive?” I asked before she could say anything.

“She's past the worst of it,” she said as she plopped down across from me.

I sighed, relieved. No matter how conflicted I felt about Brenna, she didn't deserve to die like that.

“Did they get Basilisk?”

Cupid nodded.

“Good. I hope for everyone's sake that she goes to the Birdcage. Including mine... She saw it was me.”

“You're worried Imperium will know your involvement?”

“No. I'm sure he knows. That's my business, though.”

She nodded again. “Okay,” she said, pausing. “You're her source, aren't you?”

Goddammit.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I said nervously. I rolled my eyes. “Wait, that's stupid. With your power, there's no pretending.”

Cupid smiled. “Yup.”

“So what happens now?”

She raised a finger, closing her eyes.

“Do you know Icarus's identity?”

*Why don't I just spill my fucking life story for you.*

“Your power is basically cheat mode for this. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“They have,” she sighed. “And she knows yours?”

“Yeah,” I said, shrugging. “Kind of an accident.”

“Ohay,” she said. She stood and unlocked my handcuffs. “Follow me.”

“Seriously?” I said, eyebrow raised. “I could teleport through this building. That's an awful lot of trust for a villain.”
“You're free to do that, if you choose to,” she said. “Follow me,” she said again, walking out.

_Fucking Thinkers._

She lead me back to an elevator, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite identify as I followed. She pressed a button, the one at the top.

We stepped out, the outside air only slightly more chill than the floor with the cells. The roof was without any rail-guides, which seemed odd given it was obviously intended to be used, given the helicopter pad. She walked to the edge, facing away. I followed, walking to her side. Denver was stretched out in front of me, and I could just barely see the outlines of the Rockies.

She stood there, silent, the wind blowing her auburn hair around. Lights from the city danced in her emerald eyes. I always thought she was cute, seeing her on TV, but she was even prettier in person.

Oh fucking hell, she'd catch that too. Note to self—just don't check out Thinkers.

There was a hint of a smirk on her lips, but it quickly faded as she spoke. “There's something going on. I haven't been able to figure out exactly what, but you're balls-deep in it now, Blink.”

“That could mean a lot of things,” I sighed. “My life was complicated enough before all this.”

“Well, you're in it now,” she said, passing me a card.

It was a... business card, to put it simply. A phone number in the most awful handwriting I'd ever seen was written in green ink on the bottom.

“What's this for? You know I'm not joining the Wards.”

“There's something going on. Beyond you, beyond Icarus. Beyond me. If you feel you're in too deep over your head, give me a call. We might be on opposite sides officially, but... whatever is going on with you, I'm sure you'll do the right thing in the end.”

_What the hell is she talking about? Beyond the circle of revenge going on?_

“What have I gotten myself into?” I asked, as Cupid turned around.

“Good night, Blink,” she said, walking towards the elevator.

I pocketed the card and flew up into the night sky. I flew west, wanting to just be _done_ for the night.

A drone flew beside me.

_Dammit. Why now?_

I stopped, and the drone hovered in place. It flew north, and I followed. No reason to anger Imperium now.

I didn't need to be a Thinker to know I was being lead to a factory, and I rolled my eyes as the drone did just that. It flew through an open window and I teleported after it into some kind of office. Imperium sat, reading a book as a robot closed the window behind me.

“Blink,” he said, putting the book down. “Have a seat.”

I sat down, and he immediately continued, “I believe I told you not to do anything rash.”
“I couldn’t just stand by and watch,” I said, trying my best not to let my nervousness leak into my voice. I only half succeeded.

“I can’t say I’m not surprised. Still, I do commend you. Taking out Basilisk, making sure Icarus didn’t die? Would have made business difficult, with the Triumvirate taking control of the situation.”

“You think they would have?”

Imperium nodded. “Kidnapping a Ward is not something taken lightly. A harsh response to teach a lesson.”

“How do you know all this, anyway?” I asked. If this conversation had happened tomorrow, I might have waved it off. But just after?

“Sources. Ones you aren’t privy to. I’m sure you understand why you are trusted as far as a mercenary is.”

“Right,” I said flatly. “Where does this leave us?”

“That depends on you. What happened in the PRT headquarters?”

Either Imperium only knew so much, or he was interested in how I said it.

“Cupid asked me a couple questions and let me go,” I said. No reason to lie about that part.

Imperium cocked his head to the side for a moment.

“I don’t like that you directly disobeyed me, Blink. I won’t forget it. But I will give you another chance, given how you approached the situation. Our current arrangement will stand.”

I nearly sighed in relief, but I wasn’t about to let that show.

Imperium stood up.

“Now, give me the card you acquired from Cupid, and you may be on your way.”

*What the fuck? Was I being watched that whole time?*

I reluctantly handed over the card, giving the phone number a quick glance. Imperium set it on the table and the drone zapped it, scorching the table and obliterating the card.

“If you ever do anything so irresponsible again without so much as consulting me, regardless of the results,” he wagged a finger, a thin bookmark clutched in his hand. “You will not be able to do so a third time.” Imperium returned to his book. “Have a pleasant flight home, Blink.”

I teleported out and sighed. That could’ve been worse. At least I still had my job.

I flew towards home, glad I’d memorized Cupid’s number.

**Icarus**

Everything hurt.

It wasn't “everything hurt” in a metaphorical sense. Literally everything in my body hurt. Even my wings hurt, and they weren't even capable of feeling pain.
I heard a voice say something in the distance, but I couldn't understand it. It was faint and tinny, like listening to someone on the other side of the room who had their phone turned all the way up.

I tried to remember what had happened. I was being driven somewhere, taken to a place I couldn't recall. Naomi. She'd been captured... because of me? Something I had done?

The voice said something again.

I still couldn't understand a fucking thing they were saying.


It all came back. The heroes had been trading me for Naomi. Which meant I was back in the clutches of the Ravens.

That voice said something again, but now I didn't care that I couldn't understand it. I had to get out. I had to fly away. I wouldn't let myself be their plaything again.

The voice was louder now, shouting, but still unintelligible. Someone grabbed onto me. I swung towards them, felt something hit. They pulled back. I couldn't see, my hearing was useless, and I could feel nothing but pain in my limbs. And I was in the Ravens' grasp.

I had to escape. I wouldn't go back. Not like this.

Someone grabbed me again, and I swung at them again. This time they didn't budge. I tried again, but they grabbed my wrist. I tried to pull free, but couldn't.

Someone was screaming, and crying. I realized it was me.

Eventually, I ran out of energy to struggle, and the hands let go of me. I was too tired to do anything. Too tired to stay awake.

God, my fucking head hurts.

I opened my eyes.

I saw a drop-tile ceiling, fluorescent lights blaring into my eyes.

I looked around. A room in a hospital? Out of the corner of my eye, I could see someone sitting in a chair. I thought I heard voices, but I wasn't sure what they were saying. I turned my head to look and see who it was.

On second thought, I didn't need to know who it was.

I blinked back the tears. Okay, moving my neck was a bad idea.

God, I was fucking tired.

I saw the person get up, and I heard an impact. I heard a door slam, and I saw them appear again in
my peripheral vision.

“Where... am I?” I asked weakly. God, even speaking made it hurt.

It was Dad.

“Hey,” I said.

“Brenna...” he paused, as if remembering something. “Can you do me a favor?” A favor? I must have made a confused face, because he continued. “Brenna, whatever you have inside you, can you turn it off? The doctors can't help you when your body is undoing all their work.”

“Help... me?” Why do I need help? What happened?

“Nothing, don't worry about it,” he said, a worried tone in his voice. I hadn't realized I had spoken. Either that, or he knew what I was thinking.

Either way, I doubted I was in danger of getting poisoned while my father was around. I gave the mental command to shut my filtration system down.

Almost immediately, I could feel myself getting sleepy. Whatever had happened, it must've been big, because it normally took an hour for things to be fully disabled.

“Hey... What happen–happened?” I asked, feeling my eyelids droop. He didn't reply, or I didn't hear it, so I let sleep overtake me again.

This time, when I woke up, I felt... fuzzy.

I didn’t know what was worse, the throbbing headache or feeling like my brain was made of cotton balls.

I yawned, looking around the room. There was a painful twinge when I moved my head, but whatever they had pumped into me took the edge off, making it bearable.

A very tired-looking Lindsay was sitting in a chair, reading a book.

“Hey,” I said, wincing at the slurring of my voice. I tried again, “Hey. What time is it?”

“Like, one AM or something,” she replied, not looking up from her book.

Nice to see Lindsay is the same as ever.

“Naomi, is she okay? Did we find her?” I asked, worried. I remembered shouting, that the girl the Ravens had brought wasn't her. After that...

She actually looked up for that, hesitating before replying. “She's... shaken up. Starving Artist gave her something before we got to her. She's been sleeping off the effects.”

“Oh... oh god no.” This is all my fault. I leaned forward to get out of the hospital bed, but Lindsay pushed me back down. How did she get over here that quickly?

“You're not going anywhere. Not in your condition.”
“My condition? I'm fine, really,” I replied. Other than the pounding fuzziness in my head.

“Jesus Christ, Brenna,” she said, irritated. “Lay down. Do you not remember what happened?” I shook my head, and Lindsay rolled her eyes. “I need some of whatever they've got you on. Brenna, are you even aware you got shot? Your entire left shoulder is... gone.”

Shot? I looked down. My left side was covered and bandages, and my arm was in a sling. I peeled some of them back, curious.

“Oh,” I said. She wasn't joking. There was a little bit of flesh visible, but for the most part it was a giant, ugly-looking scab. Most of it simply wasn't there. There were fragments of bone sticking out, and I could actually see some metal sticking out—the attachment points for my wings.

That was weird. It was the first time I'd seen my work actually in use. It was damaged, to be sure, and certainly wouldn't hold up to any significant force. That would make flying difficult.

“Yeah,” Lindsay said. “You lost a lot of blood. If it hadn't scabbed over so quickly, you would have been toast, or something. It didn't help that your body was rejecting everything they were trying to give you.” She hesitated, and looked as if she was going to say something else. But she didn't.

“I... was my dad here? I remember seeing him.”

“Oh, yeah. He was here until, like, a couple hours ago. Went to take a walk and said to let him know if you got up. That reminds me.” She sighed and got out her phone, typing out a text. “There.”

“What about Naomi, is she... does she know what they gave her?” I asked.

Lindsay shrugged. “She didn't seem like she wanted to talk about it. I didn't feel it was proper to ask,” she said smugly, as if gloating that she hadn't made an ass of herself in that particular instance.

I leaned forward again, to get out of bed. A wave of nausea hit me, and I groaned, resisting the urge to throw up.

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I leaned forward again, to get out of bed. A wave of nausea hit me, and I groaned, resisting the urge to throw up.

“I thought I told you to stay,” my teammate said, pushing me back down. I was too tired and out of it to resist.

“I have to make sure she's okay,” I said.

“Look, if you want to be an idiot and get yourself more hurt, go ahead, but wait until your father gets here. He made me promise to keep you in bed until he got back.” She sat back down and returned to her book.

Whatever.

I leaned back and tried to clear my head. Whatever I was on, it was strong. Too strong, really. More pain would've been preferable.

Fuck it. There was an IV drip sticking out of my right arm, above where my prosthetic started. I grabbed it with my teeth and yanked it out, ignoring Lindsay's startled look and the shard of agony in my neck. I mentally re-enabled my filtration system as well. Maybe in an hour I'd be able to think clearly.

After only a minute or so of waiting, I heard someone sprinting down the hall. It stopped when it sounded like it was close to the room I was in, and a second later, Dad walked in, almost casually.
“Nice try, I heard you running,” I said with a smile.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, ignoring my remark.

“How honestly? I'm fine. Well, I will be, once these drugs wear off. Seriously, what's the point of making me feel like I'm drunk?”

“Because otherwise you start screaming and crying and try to fly away?” Lindsay said without looking up from her book. Dad gave her a look. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I was worried about her remark. *Did I really do that?* It was sometimes hard to tell what was sarcasm and what was serious with her.

“Whatever, I'm fine now. No fuss,” I said with a sigh.

“Brenna, why do you keep getting hurt like this? You need to be more careful. Your mother and I have been worried sick.”

I groaned. “Why did you tell Mom? Seriously?”

“Do you want to try hiding something like this? That you've been shot... probably lost another arm?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, like that's a big deal. I'll just build a replacement. It's not like I haven't done it before.”

Lindsay snapped her book shut. “Okay, that's my cue to leave. Good luck with your insane daughter.” She stomped out of the room, muttering to herself. It sounded oddly like “fucking tinkers”. I must have misheard her.

Dad was giving me a strange look, “What?” I asked.

“...Nothing,” he replied. “But I knew you would react like this, so once you were past the worst of it, I talked her down from 'get on a plane immediately' to 'take a break once London is done'."

“Gee, thanks,” I replied sarcastically. “Just what I needed. Another parent for supervillians to send mail to.”

Which reminded me, I'd kept those pictures in my costume. Which I certainly wasn't wearing. *Fuck.* I looked around.

“Hey Dad, do you know what they did with my costume?”

He shook his head. *Great.*

“Okay. I have to go find it.” I stumbled out of bed, ignoring the biting pain and nausea as I crawled out with the terrible hospital blanket wrapped around me.

“Brenna! What are you doing?” he exclaimed. I ignored him and pushed my way through the door.

I wasn't in the PRT building's infirmary, that was certain. It was definitely a hospital. There were armed PRT guards stationed around the hallway, presumably to keep people away. They looked at me strangely as I stepped into the hall, the linoleum chill against my bare feet.

A pair of nurses were rushing towards me, concerned and... startled? One of them said, loudly, “How is she up?”

*Good to know my weird healing is still a thing.*
“It’s not like they shot me in the leg,” I quipped as they got closer.

“Icarus, you shouldn’t be up right now, you’re—”

“Perfectly capable of walking,” I interrupted, slurring the words only a little. “Where is this?”

One of the nurses grumbled something under his breath I didn’t catch. The other one spoke up, “Anschutz Hospital. You really need to get back to bed.”

“Nah,” I said to her. “I’m fine. Perfectly fine. Is my team around?”

They looked at each other.

“I mean I could just go wander around looki—”

“We’ll take her over to Flashstep,” one of the PRT guards said, amusement in his voice. “And keep her inside the secure area.” That last bit was directed more at me than at the nurses. A subtle hint?

“Sure.” I said, and the guard escorted me down the hall.

“I’ve seen people lie around for months with less,” the guard commented, shaking his head.

“Don’t tell anyone, but I can cheat,” I said with a smile. Although I wasn’t expecting this fucking headache to still be here. “Is... how is Tank Buster doing?”

“I know we got her back. That’s all,” the guard said, shaking his head. “She was here a little while ago to see you, but she left pretty quickly.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Are you even in pain?” he asked, giving me an odd look.

“Yeah,” I said, not really wanting to elaborate further.

He led me through some double doors, into a waiting area of sorts. A bored-looking nurse was behind a desk, playing something on her phone. More importantly, collapsed in a chair was Flashstep, having a nap. On the coffee table in front of him, my mask, along with a red-stained rag.

“Hey, are you awake?” I asked as I approached. He jumped up, and disappeared.

I guess I startled him.

A second later he reappeared in the chair. “Brenna! Jeez, was I asleep that long?”

“Uh... I dunno? Lindsay said it was ‘like one AM’ so...” I trailed off, plopping next to him in a waiting room chair. Sitting made the nausea go away a little, but my fucking head was still pounding.

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I shrugged, wincing at the reminder that one of my shoulders was missing.

Oh well, that’s what my power was for.

“Should you even be up? I mean... jeez.”

“Probably not, but it was either this or kill myself with worry wondering.” I paused. “Did we get
them, at least? The Ravens?"

Flashstep sighed. “No. We almost got Starving Artist when she ran from the room TB was in, but...” he shook his head. “I heard we got Basilisk, though. So that's something.”

“Oh,” I said softly. Was I wrong, to have expected more of them to have been captured? Basilisk out of the picture was still significant, but...

“We'll get them, though,” he said. “Some day.”

I sighed. “This is all my \textit{fucking} fault, Jordan. I... I don't even know what to do.”

“Me neither. I'm just glad you're in one piece,” he said. He then winced. “That... wasn't. Ugh.”

“It's fine,” I said with a smile. “If my head was where it's supposed to be, I'm sure I'd have a couple good puns already.”

“How can you joke like that?” Jordan said, looking at me with worry.

I almost shrugged, but caught myself. “I mean, it's a pain, but I'll just build a replacement. I mean, I've already done most of the work,” I said, waving my good arm pointedly.

“But...” Jordan paused. “Where does it end? How many times are you gonna get hurt and just... replace yourself?”

“I mean. It's my power. On some level, yeah, it's a huge inconvenience, but...” I swallowed. “My power is part of who I am. My wings, my arm, my soon-to-be other arm... it's as much a part of me as flesh and blood.”

He didn't respond for a while. I almost said something, when he finally said, “I'd give you a hug, but I'd be too afraid of hurting you. And, uh, you... aren't wearing much.”

I looked down. Blanket was still covering the important bits. I rolled my eyes, and leaned into him, giving him a one-armed hug. He scooted over and placed his arm along my back just under my wings. I wrapped a wing around him and rested my head against his shoulder.

I saw Dad peek in for a moment before smiling and turning away.

I couldn't help but yawn. Even after all the sleeping I'd done, I was still tired. At least the headache was gone now.

I let my eyes droop shut.
I shambled back into the Wards floor, finally done for the night. I felt so ready to drop. I was opening my door when I realized the light was on in the kitchen. There were a couple clanks and some words I couldn't understand, though they didn't sound happy.

I walked over and found Brenna in her pajamas, struggling with the stove one handed. Her left arm was in a sling.

Wait. How long was I tinkering?

I leaned against the doorway and quietly said, “Hey.”

Brenna yelled and jumped, the egg in hand being crushed, egg goop coating the floor and wall.

“Oh. Hey,” she replied when she saw me, wincing a bit. “Sorry.”

“Are you...” I trailed off. “Should you really be up?”

She snorted as she wiped her eggy hand off on a towel. “Everyone keeps asking me that. I'm fine.”

“Sorry. Just... people don't usually walk away after being shot like that.”

“I... Anyway, how are... are you doing okay?” she asked, looking away.

I looked down at my grease-covered hands.

“I...” I shook my head. “I don't know if I can answer that.”

She nodded, giving me an apologetic look. “Yeah. She has that effect on people.”

I sighed. “I guess they would've said something about that.”

“Lindsay mentioned something when I woke up. If, uh...if you need someone to talk to...”

I should tell her.

I turned and walked away, collapsing on a couch.

Brenna has dealt with Starving Artist's drugs before. She could help me.

Would that be right, though? Would reminding her be worth it?

And I'm the team leader. I should be stronger than this.

I felt myself dozing off. I probably should've gone to bed, but the couch was so comfortable...

There was the sound of a plate being set on the table next to me, startling me. “You should have something to eat,” Brenna said softly.
I opened my eyes. She even brought the saltshaker over. I smiled slightly.

She sat down on the floor next to the table, a box of cereal resting in the crook of her arm. “So uh...” she trailed off.

What if I'm not strong enough? What if not telling her would be a terrible mistake?

“Thank you,” I muttered, devouring the eggs. I forgot how hungry I was. I guess I hadn't eaten since yesterday.

“Starving Artist was nothing like the reports said,” I said quietly, the now-empty plate in front of me.

Brenna froze, and after a long pause finally spoke. “Yeah. Not really something you can describe in words. I don't know what's scarier, that shit she makes, or that I know she thinks she's helping.”

“Yeah,” I said. I took a deep breath. “I assumed she'd be some kind of... psychopath. Instead she took one look at me and told me how she'd help.”

“Oh Jesus...did she, uh... sorry, I shouldn't.”

“She...” I shuddered. I could still feel the drop on my tongue. Her scent. The violation I felt. “She offered and I couldn't stop her.”

“...Heartbreak?”

I paused.

Wait.

I looked at Brenna, concern and an undertone of horror on her face.

“Did she...” I stopped and looked away. “Fuck, I shouldn't ask that.”

“Yeah. She did.” Brenna's voice was quiet and dark. “Developing Heartbreak.”

“Fuck.” I shuddered again. “I'm sorry.”

“Me too.”

“Did you know that she's trans?” I asked. “Wait. Goddammit, that was a stupid question.”

Dammit. I want to tell her. Tell her what she gave me.

“Yeah, I figured that one out,” she replied, a bit of sarcasm creeping in. “Honestly... that's not even the part that bothered me, not nearly as much as the addiction. The need. My thoughts not being my own.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “She didn't give me Heartbreak, but... it, it had a little of its effects. Those thoughts. Fuck. I feel dirty as it is. I couldn't... I don't know how I'd handle going through worse.”

“Do you want more?” Brenna asked cautiously.

I froze.

Yes. “I just want to forget about this whole day.”

I couldn't admit that. Not to someone who actually had to fight it.
Brenna nodded, giving me a look I couldn't quite place. “Yeah. Me too. God, this is all my fucking fault. I'm sorry.”

“Don't say that, Brenna.”

“Not saying it doesn't make it any less true. All this... if I hadn't fucking shot her, none of this would have happened.”

*If I had been stronger, more vigilant. I let myself be captured in the first place.*

“If they didn't do all that to you in the first place...” I trailed off. I doubt she'd have liked knowing I blamed myself. “It's dumb to play the blame game at that level. They attacked us.”

Brenna shook her head and looked away.

“Brenna?” She didn't respond. I stood up and walked over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. She tensed. “Please. Stop blaming yourself. I'm fine. I'm okay. We got through this in...” I nearly said one piece, but that would've been a lie. Not that I wasn't already lying, saying I was okay.

Brenna turned to me, her eyes meeting my own. She stood up, arm around my back, pulling me into a hug. I stiffened for a moment before wrapping my arms around her, a motion made awkward by her wings. Her wings wrapped around me too, forming a cocoon.

“We'll get them,” she whispered. “If they ever... if they even think of... we'll get each and every one of them. No matter the cost. I won't let my friends pay for my mistakes again.”

“We will,” I agreed. “We're a team, after all.”

I could finally relax, feeling the weight I didn't realize I had drift away.

Brenna said something else, but I couldn't catch what. She was warm, and I was comfortable. I was safe.

**Icarus**

I chewed on the back of the pen, scrutinizing every part of the design on the notebook.

*Too obvious. They'd notice a big fucking gun like this.*

I sighed, looking back at where Naomi lay sleeping soundly against me. I smiled. I could still hardly believe she fell asleep on me mid-conversation. She was so peaceful. Cute, when she wasn't practically married to her career.

Naomi murmured something incomprehensible and shifted, stretching and pushing herself into my chest. It was difficult to not laugh, and I was oh so tempted to take a picture.

I yawned. I felt like I should sleep, too, but I *needed* to design my new arm. Even if I had the design for my first prosthetic as a base, it was both replacing more and would need its own separate modules.

Including having the option of... of doing whatever it would take to protect my friends. I glanced back at Naomi, who was now smiling at what I hoped were pleasant dreams. I couldn't—I wouldn't let Starving Artist do to her what she did to me. If she hadn't to some extent already.
I shuddered. Naomi didn't tell me everything. I could only imagine.

The door opened. I looked over to see Thomas walking in, backpack clasped in his hand. He looked at us, eyebrows rising. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but he closed it and walked past us.

I might have said something, but I didn't want to accidentally wake Naomi. Thomas likely felt the same.

Thomas walked back and sat down on a nearby chair, pulling a notebook and pen out of his backpack. He wrote something and turned the notebook towards me.

*How is she doing?*

I flipped to a blank page in my own notebook and wrote a response. *She's been better. Went through a lot. Trying.*

Thomas didn't respond. He stared at his notebook, and being this close I could see the dark circles under his eyes. I went back to my schematics, only to feel a tap on my remaining shoulder moments later. He held up his notebook again.

*Did you kill Branwen?*

I stared at the page for a moment and sighed.

*Yes.*

He didn't take long in responding.

*Why?*

I looked down, avoiding his gaze.

*Because she made me trigger.*

I showed my response without looking up. Naomi squirmed in her sleep, and I winced as her elbow dug into my side.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, and I looked up to see his response. I still avoided his eyes.

*I still feel like I should be angry.*

I hesitated for a moment before writing my response.

*You should be. My fault. Wasn't strong enough.*

He wrote, *Strong enough to-- scribble-- stop them all?*

*Strong enough to stop myself from killing her.* I held it out, but changed my mind and wrote another line *--but that too.*

I watched him write and strike-out several times. I worked on my schematics while he figured out what to say. I didn't make any progress by the time he tapped my shoulder again.

*Bunker wanted to see you.*
I looked down at Naomi, sleeping soundly beside me. I looked up, and Thomas was writing more.

*But that asshole can wait.*

Thomas stood up and walked out without another glance.

I looked back at Naomi, her eyes blinking slowly. She looked at me and her face turned a bright shade of red.

“Wha—” Naomi started to say before a yawn interrupted her. “What?”

She tried to move, and only succeeded in rolling off the couch, barely avoiding a collision with the table.

“Good morning,” I said, grinning briefly. “Are you okay?”

“Ugh,” Naomi said before standing up. She looked at me nervously. “Brenna. Can you tell me what happened?”

“You fell asleep,” I said, laughing. “I guess I make a pretty good pillow or something.”

“Did... I...” Naomi trailed off, sighing. “I guess I did. Sorry about that.”

“Don't be sorry. God knows you needed the rest, and I did manage to get some work done,” I said, gesturing towards the notes on the table.

“Still...” Naomi paused, blushing again. “I can't believe I fell asleep on you. Literally.”

“I don't mind, really. It's not like you snore,” I said, smiling. “Now, uh, I gotta pee. And eat. And I'm fucking starving. I don't even want to know what time it is,” I said, racing off before Naomi could respond.

Unmentionable business concluded in record time, I rushed to the kitchen even as my body threatened to eat itself. I looked through the cupboards, unsure what to make.

*Peanut butter and honey sandwiches it is.*

It only took a few minutes to make them. Far too long. I nearly devoured the first one I made, but Naomi needed to eat too. I set that one aside on the other side of the kitchen, safe from me. Once made, my second sandwich did not last long. Not enough, but I was too lazy to make another, so I dipped my finger into the peanut butter jar.

*Ugh, this is going to be hell to clean up.*

I licked glob after glob off my finger, making sure I didn't accidentally cut my tongue. I tossed the now-empty jar in the trash and worked to cleaning the peanut butter off with only *some* regret.

Naomi still hadn't taken her sandwich after I was done. I picked it up and took it over to the common area, but Naomi was nowhere to be found. I set it down and fished around for my cell phone, and Naomi appeared wearing fresh clothes, her hair damp.

*Oh, I guess that'd be a priority.*

Naomi gave me a soft wave as she collapsed on the couch. I pushed the sandwich in front of her, and she muttered something before taking it.
It struck me that I probably trusted her more than anyone else right now. She'd seen... my worst, she'd seen my tattoo, and yet she was still here. Those fucking pictures. I couldn't just forget they'd been taken.

When I'd gotten my tattered costume back from the hospital, the envelope had still been in one of the pockets, untouched. They were tucked away in my room now.

_Naomi could help me._

But... I couldn't let her see them. I shuddered.

No, I wouldn't bother her. Not now.

“Hey,” Naomi said softly, her face full of concern. “You doing okay?”

“I, uh, I shouldn't put more on your plate today. Don't worry about it.”

“Okay. I'm here if you need to talk, though.”

I hesitated. “I... okay. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Naomi said, pausing. “I'll be in the workshop if you need me.”

“I guess I'll see what Bunker wants,” I said, sighing.

“Ugh. Good luck with that.”

We walked out together, not saying anything more. In the elevator, I pressed the buttons for the workshops and the Protectorate floor. Figured I'd find Bunker's office somehow. Naomi gave me an apologetic look and a wave as she stepped off the elevator.

Unlike the Wards, the Protectorate had their entire floor dedicated to their operations. Only a handful of PRT staff were around to give me strange looks as I wandered through the dimly-lit halls, looking for Bunker's office.

I finally found a door with the words _Bunker – Team Leader_. I knocked on it.

“Come in,” I heard Bunker say from within.

I opened the door. Bunker was sitting behind a large red-brown desk. His mask was off, and I was surprised to see how young his reddish face looked. Long black hair trailed behind him, with the occasional silver hair showing through.

“Please, have a seat,” he said.

I glanced around as I walked to the desk, and sat down on the chair he'd left for me. The room was almost bare of any personal effects, except for three pictures on his wall. One of them depicted a man with his arms across the shoulder of a woman and a young teenage boy. The other depicted the same teenager and another boy who seemed oddly familiar, both with large grins on their faces. Another above them showed the same man in the first photograph locking arms with a few other people, all of them in some kind of Native American garb.

“How are you doing?” he asked with a surprisingly soft tone.

“Tired,” I said. I hadn't slept since I got out of the hospital. “Worried. I have my arm to work on.”
“I'm surprised the hospital let you out so soon.”

“Well…” I looked away. “They didn't, but it wasn't like my shoulder would heal any quicker in bed.”

Bunker sighed. “You're walking around in pajamas and you forgot your mask. I'm not sure if bed wouldn't be good for you right now.”

I was tired and I just wanted people to cut to the chase already. “Was there something you wanted to talk about? Thomas said you needed me.”

“Yes, a couple of matters. I wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize? For what? We got Naomi back.”

Bunker shook his head. “I should never have put you in that position. Should've explored other options.”

“What other options? Wouldn't have gotten Basilisk otherwise. Could've gotten more of them, but... I agreed to it. Me getting shot is on me as much as it is on you.”

“You were going to die. The only reason we have Basilisk, the only reason you have your life, is Blink.”

“Blink?” I asked, trying not to let the worry slip into my voice.

What? What was Isabelle doing there?

“She walked up to us, just after you were shot. Offered one of Potion's potions and let us arrest her. Gave us Basilisk’s position, where she was reported as unconscious. I was wary of giving you the potion, but the medical team said you were as good as dead otherwise. Too much blood loss.”

Holy shit.

“She... did that? Let herself get arrested for my sake?”

“Apparently. Unless she had other motives. What do you know about her?”

I couldn't give her up, especially not after she risked it all to save me. “Nothing, besides that she, uh, works for Imperium now. I could talk to her, maybe, if she hasn't been talking?”

Bunker looked at me suspiciously. “We already let her go, given the situation. Token of good faith.”

“I see. Well, I guess that's for the best. I'll have to, uh, send Imperium a thank-you card or something,” I said, laughing nervously.

Bunker rolled his eyes. “You can drop the act. I'm aware you two know each other.”

Fuck me.

“...I can't give up an informant, Bunker. You can't fault me for that,” I replied tersely.

“Point taken. I get your lack of trust. Truth be told, I would be careful talking to the Director about her, if I were you.”

“Why is that? Besides Director Meyer's... charm?”
“I couldn't say anything... bad about her,” Bunker said cautiously. “Let's leave it at that.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod. What a delightful way to word it.

“Were you planning to sneak off to see Basilisk?”

“Sneak off? No. Am I interested in...talking to her? Yeah.”

“If I try to stop you, will you try to see her anyway?”

“Yes.”

Bunker nodded. “Well, we can see her now, if you'd like. Or later. She'll be here for a while.”

“Uh, sure. Yeah. Let's do that.”

Bunker stood up and pulled his mask on. “Let's go,” he said as he walked to the door.

I followed him to the elevator, down to where the cells were. I stopped as he walked forward, looking at the jailers with a mixture of anger and worry. Bunker looked back.

“It's fine. You're here only as a visitor, Icarus.”

“Yeah,” I said, unclenching my fist.

I avoided looking into the cells as we passed them. Thankfully it wasn't long before Bunker stopped in front of a door, a pair of PRT officers standing by.

“We're here to see Basilisk,” Bunker said.

“Wait,” I said. Bunker looked at me curiously. I asked one of the guards, “Can you take my arm?”

The guard nodded, and I held it up for him. I disconnected it once he had my arm in hand. Bunker looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite tell before opening the door.

Inside, a woman dressed in PRT issued sweats with VILLAIN written on them, handcuffed to the table. She looked to be in her thirties, with long brown hair held back in a braid. Steely blue eyes met my own as Bunker and I sat down across from her.

“Basili—” Bunker started to say.

“Don't want to risk adding to your kill count?” Basilisk interrupted in a bittersweet tone, looking at my arm socket.

“We only came here to talk,” I replied.

“And to gloat,” she cut in. “If my aim was only a few inches closer...”

“And to gloat,” I admitted. “My father? Was that you?”

Basilisk smirked, her eyes glinting, not a shred of humanity left in them. “Harder than you would think, digging those photos up. Good thing Starving Artist remembered her pet very well. She was so sad when she realized you were gone. So angry when we failed to get you back. Maybe you should go back to her to apologize.”

I was glad I'd left my arm behind.
“So,” I said, taking a deep breath. “You went after my fucking family. Why? Just to get at me?”

“You went after mine, Icarus. Eye for an eye and all that.”

“The Ravens aren't flesh an—”

“She. Was. My. Fucking daughter, you murderous bitch,” Basilisk snarled, her fists clenched.

_Branwen was her daughter?_

It was hard to think that... that such a hateful person had a mother at all, as silly as that sounded.

**What if that had been you who died?**

In my head, I saw my mother across the table, looking at me with those accusatory eyes.

Who would that make me, in that scenario? Branwen? Starving Artist? Still myself?

“You and your daughter have taken many daughters yourselves,” Bunker said angrily. I had almost forgotten he was there. “Don't act the victim here.”

“Tough words. For a man who drove his son to suicide,” Basilisk smirked.

I only had a split second to react to Bunker storming forward. I extended a wing to block his path, and he paused.

“You bitch,” he spat, seething. “That's not how it happened.”

“_Right. You put all the blame on Naomi._”

I flinched at the casual usage of my friend's name.

“That's enough,” I said to Basilisk before Bunker could respond. “Don't drag anyone else into this. This conversation is between you and me.”

Basilisk stared into my eyes, unblinking. I could hear Bunker shifting around behind me, but I couldn't see. I was staring back, not letting her win even this petty game.

“Branwen being your daughter... doesn't change what she did. She'll be buried in an unmarked grave out of respect for the countless victims whose lives she ruined,” I said, glancing back at Bunker.

“Probably better than the Birdcage,” Bunker growled. “But you'll get to see that for yourself. Unless you try anything... excessively stupid.”

She took a deep breath before speaking. “So it's been decided.”

“There'll be a trial, but there's a rather large pile of evidence and charges against you,” I replied. “I guess running a human trafficking ring does that.”

“You had another question,” Basilisk said, irritated.

“Tank Buster. You kidnapped her when you couldn't get me. Why?”

“She helped cover it up. Just as guilty as you two. I had a bullet with her name on it. I would've fed it to her while you were begging Starving Artist for more.”

I paused, looking at her as I tried to put that... together.
“Got nothing to say to that, asshole?” Basilisk said to Bunker. “You blame her that much that you'd be fine with her dying?”

“You shut the fuck up. Before I do something I... won't regret at all.”

“Bunker,” I said flatly. “Stop fucking letting her do that.”

Bunker took a deep breath. “Dammit. She knows the buttons to press, but that's no excuse. You're right. She's nothing. Her life is over. I have nothing more to say.”

Basilisk rolled her eyes.

I took a deep breath. “Branwen... did she have any religious observations we should know about?” I might have murdered her, but at least I could make sure she was buried with respect.

“That was almost genuine. Even if you're only playing the part of someone who cares. You're just a fucktoy who thinks she has control over her life.”

“You're just a one trick with those taunts. Way I see it, I'm doing better than you.”

“Starving Artist's cock was the best thing that happened to you.” Basilisk paused, “I was going to let this be a surprise, one last ‘fuck you’. But I think I'll be generous and tell you, Sylvi.”

I ignored her casual use of that name. “Tell me.”

“Before I sent those photographs to your father, I sent them to an ally, along with everything I knew of you. Instructions to release everything within a week if I were to be captured or killed.”


Basilisk smirked, looking at me. “Am I?”

I looked into her eyes.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I said.

“Well... If I couldn't kill you, I could do the next best thing. Ruin any chance you might have had a normal life. Not that you really had one left to begin with.”

Bunker stepped forward. “Tell us who this person is, and we'll be lenient.”

“If I wanted to get fucked that badly, I'd wine-and-dine Bloodletter. Nice try.”

“Fine. Want to blatantly spit on the unspoken rules like this? There's ways of passing messages to the Birdcage. Let your fellow cellmates know what you did,” Bunker said.

Basilisk giggled. “Now your bark is showing a little bite behind it. Good boy.”

“Let's go,” I said to Bunker, standing up. He turned wordlessly, pounded on the door for the guard outside to let us out.

As the door opened, I hesitated. I turned back to look over my shoulder at Basilisk. “I hope the meanest mother fucker in the Birdcage makes you his pet,” I said quietly.

As I stepped out of the interrogation room, I tried not to think on how genuine that felt to say.
“Everything she said about me,” Bunker murmured, his tone almost apologetic. “Forget it.”

I nodded. “I think I need to talk to my dad.”

“He's on the ninth floor.” Bunker smiled weakly. “Your father has a mean right hook.”

“He what?” I said, before shaking my head and turning to the guard holding my arm. “Never mind.”

“Dad?” I shouted as I stepped into the makeshift visitor's suite he'd been given.

“Brenna?” I heard a crash and cursing in Norwegian. Dad walked into view, blobs of shaving cream still on his face. He paused. “Brenna. Are you... is something going on?”

“Dad... I'm sorry,” I said quietly. “That fucking bitch, she...” I trailed off.

Dad walked over and enveloped me in a hug. He was stroking my hair, and I realized with a choke that I had no idea if he did that when I was little or not.

Thanks, Starving Artist.

“Brenna, please. We can move, get away from this. Your friend is safe. You don't have to throw yourself at... at this anymore.”

“Dad, she... Basilisk. She's going to release it all. Those pictures. My identity. Everything.” I let out a shuddering sob. “I don't know what to do.”

“God,” he said, tightening his hug. “Don't the PRT have her? How...”

“She set something up. Arranged something. A week after she gets captured, it gets released.” My voice was hollow.

Dad stepped back, scratching his head in deep thought. “I... have some connections. I could get us set up with new IDs, get away from this. You'll be safe.”

That sounded nice. I could start over, escape all this. Maybe the PRT would let me stay being a hero, wherever we went. But...

I'd be leaving Naomi behind.

She needed my help, now more than ever. I wouldn't let her go through it alone.

“No. I can't. Not while the Ravens are still around. I'm sorry,” I choked, wiping the tears stinging my eyes.

“Anytime you want to leave...” Dad paused. “Tell me, and we can be gone the morning after.”

I nodded, blinking away tears. I didn't say anything for a bit.

“Dad? I don't... God, I'm sorry. If I would have known this would happen...”

I would have done things differently.

Oh God, he knows. He fucking knows.

I nodded, unable to meet his eyes. “I'm sorry.”

“Brenna, you know I love you. I will never stop loving you, no matter what. Even if...” he paused. “Hell, I can't say that I blame you. If I were in your shoes... I, I might have made the same choice.”

I wouldn't stand anymore. I plopped down on the floor, looking up at the PRT-issue ceiling. With a groan, Dad sat down next to me.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“Do they have any way of finding who has that info?”

“Basilisk is a Thinker. She wouldn't fuck up something like this.”

“She got captured. Maybe...” Dad sighed. “Otherwise, we can try to get ahead of this situation.”

“Get ahead of it? What, just out myself, and hope for the best?”

“Better to do it on your own terms. Public will sympathize with you more, ease the shock. Give them time to digest the situation, and they won't care when the info is released later. They'll have moved on to the next... scandal.”

“Scandal,” I said quietly.

“You know what I mean.”

I sighed. This is what I got for being a politician's daughter. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever taken his own advice.

“Okay, yeah. Sure,” I said finally. “Talk to PRT PR, figure something out? Probably your work, as well? Someone from the party?”

“Don't worry about me. All you need to do is give the statement. I'll handle anything on my end.”

“Dad, you know... this is going to tank a lot of what you worked on. Are you sure—”

“Brenna, I'll be fine. You matter to me more than... more than anything else in the world.”

“God, school tomorrow is gonna suck,” I mumbled to myself. “We should probably go downstairs. Get this out of the way.”

With a groan, Dad stood up. He offered a hand, which I was happy to take, soreness reminding me that I was shot yesterday.

I led him to the elevator, and together we traveled downstairs. We had to deal with Ben, but first I wanted to let Naomi know what happened.

The PRT guard stationed outside the workshops only gave me a glance. I reminded myself to get his name at some point. All I knew about him was that he was taking night classes after his shift ended. It was kinda hard to have a conversation, though, when I usually was walking in with some new thing to attach to myself.
“Naomi!” I shouted as we entered the main workshop area. “We gotta talk. My dad's here.”

Naomi walked into view, clutching a yellow-orange... pot filled with some molten metal. With her bare hands. I could feel the heat from here.

“Oh, uh, give me a moment!” Naomi said as she disappeared into a side-room. The other mech she was working on was nowhere in view.

I looked back at Dad and smirked at his bewildered expression.

“She's the reining Hot Potato World Champion,” I said. Dad snorted.

Naomi ran over to us. The heat was... subdued, but I could still see the heat waves over her head. Her eyes twinkled. She was firmly in her element, and I was about to break that.

I sighed.

“What's going on?” Naomi asked, concerned.

“So, long story short, we're going downstairs so I can out myself on TV. Thought maybe you'd want to know?”

“What?” Naomi shouted. “Slow down. What's going on?”

“It's Basilisk,” Dad spoke up. “She set some kind of dead-man contingency. Everything they have on her, released in a week.”

“Fuck,” Naomi said. “So you're... getting ahead of it? Fuck. She had to go there ?”

“Apparently,” I said flatly. “From the sounds of it, you're safe, so we've got that to be thankful for at least.”

“She knew my name,” Naomi said quietly. “She... I'll tell you later.”

I nodded. “We're going downstairs to break this to Ben. He's gonna love me even more after this,” I said sarcastically.

“Let's... deal with that as it comes. This will be a fun conversation,” Naomi said. “I'll come with.”

“Okay. I'm gonna stop by my room and grab a costume. I don't think pajamas will fly on TV.”

“I'll meet you downstairs. I'm gonna suit up for this.”

“Dad, you wanna follow her downstairs while I get changed? It'll probably take a bit, and this way I can avoid the worst of Ben's screeching.”

“Sure,” he said.

**Tank Buster**

I shut my eyes and leaned my head back. On the TV the newscast played. We all knew what would be at the top of every channel for the evening news.

*As if they haven't already done so much to her.*

Basilisk stole Brenna's remaining chance at a normal life. School would be tough for her. Hell, our
identities were at risk, too. Just associating with her. But... they might notice us suddenly not associating. That would be suspicious too. Though that would be giving high school students any mental credit.

*Heh. They're the lucky ones, though.*

The newscaster said some words that I tuned out. The news cut to Icarus walking up to a podium.

“Hi. Sorry, this is my first time doing this,” Icarus said. I could see how nervous she was through the camera.

I tuned the rest out. I'd already seen this live, in person. She said some more words, her distorted voice sounding almost sinister through the tinny TV speakers.

I grabbed the remote and hit the power button. I didn't need to hear this again. The television flicked to black just as Brenna took her mask off.

I yawned. I slept in, but I was already tired again.

*I should get some sleep. Be ready for school tomorrow.*

Despite everything, I couldn't put school on hold for long.

I walked into my room and closed the door. The lights were off, so I could pretend my pants from yesterday weren't on the floor, holding the...

*The cool drop on my tongue.*

I shuddered.

I collapsed onto the bed, but my mind raced. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I could see the outline of those *damn* pants.

*Please go away.*

They didn't go away. They sat there, taunting me.

*Shit.* I forgot my evening pills. And morning pills.

I grudgingly stood up, walking past to the door—

I was holding the jeans.

*I need to get rid of these. Prove I'm stronger than... than this crap.*

I pulled a vial out.

My breathing shuddered.

The blue mixture, almost whispering to me. Though not really. Starving Artist didn't make *sentient* drugs. I was just going crazy.

I slipped the four vials into my pajama pockets and walked out my door. Lindsay was sitting on a chair outside.

“Yo,” she said, giving me only a brief glance before returning to her book.
“Hi,” I said quietly, before walking to the bathrooms.

I stopped in front of the sinks, looking into the mirrors.

* I look like shit. *

I stepped into a bathroom stall, not wanting to risk Lindsay coming across what I was about to do.

I pulled the stopper off of one of the vials and held it over the toilet.

My heart raced. I hesitated.

* Please, hand. Tip over. I don't need this. *

I finally tipped my hand, and the cloudy blue mixture poured into the toilet.

I felt a sense of loss, of regret. Almost pain.

* Just three more. *

I poured another out, faster than the first.

* Two more. *

The third, I hesitated again, but with my other hand I forced myself to tip it over.

* Just one more. I can do this. *

I stopped, and hesitated. And waited. I grabbed the vial with both hands, but I couldn't. Tip. It. Over.

I squeezed, maybe I could just *break* it if I couldn't pour it.

The vial remained, taunting me.

* Starving Artist was... she was beautiful. Why can't I just let myself be beautiful like she is? *

That's it. I was officially crazy, being envious of one of the most notorious supervillains in Denver.

* We have so much in common. *

I shook my head. We just had some common ground. Didn't make us similar in any way. The only thing I had for Starving Artist was a pair of handcuffs and a trip to the Birdcage.

She just wanted to make me into another *experiment*. Like she's done so so many.

I looked at the vial, at the swirling liquid. At what it promised me.

* The violation. Don't forget the violation. *

If I hid in my room, I wouldn't have to face it.

* Stop. Don't. *

* Why? *

* You know why. *
But why not? Use this vial, get a little improvement. Be done from there.

But...

I felt a cool drop on my tongue.

I put the eyedropper lid back on the vial.

I placed the vial back in my pajamas, flushed the toilet, and calmly walked out.

I looked in the mirror. My face stared back. I couldn't figure out my own expression.

I'm not strong.

I walked back to my room.

I should've shown them to Brenna, no matter what she would have thought of me.

I set the vial in a drawer and collapsed on the bed.

Why why why.

I sobbed quietly to sleep.
Blink

I sighed. I'd just arrived, and it already started.

A small group of other students were standing around on the stairs outside the entrance to Centralia, talking loudly about how Brenna Grovsmed was Icarus.

“I always wondered why she never took her backpack off,” one girl said, her voice annoyingly high.

“You've got a class with Icarus?” a guy said.

“Yup! She was always so quiet, at least as long as I've noticed her. Now I know why!”

I rolled my eyes as I passed them.

_You don't know the slightest thing about Brenna._

“You'd think a superhero would be, you know, pretty?” a different girl said.

I stopped and turned towards the group. “She's prettier than you are,” I said.

_Did I really say that? Oh god I just said that._

“You shut up!” the girl shouted, her face red. “Fucking dyke.”

“Excuse me?” I said, glaring at her.

_Just because I am one doesn't make it nice to say._

“Whoa, hey, the fuck?” one of the guys spoke up. “Not okay, Alicia.”

“Yeah. Totally uncalled for,” the girl with the high voice said. I felt bad for thinking her voice was annoying.

“Wha–but–” the asshole tried to say.

“Gonna apologize?” I asked, arms crossed.

She growled something in a low voice which sounded like it might have been an apology.

“You should apologize too,” the guy said to me. “Your comment was kinda mean spirited.”

I blushed. “Just... I didn't like someone suggesting my friend wasn't pretty.”

The other students gave me weird looks. I froze.

_Oh goddammit._

“You're friends with Icarus?” the girl with the high voice said, awed.

“I'm gonna walk away now,” I said, turning around.
Do I really think of her as a friend?

“Wait!” the girl said, running to catch up to me. “Did you know?”

I no longer feel bad about thinking your voice is annoying.

“None of your business,” I said roughly.

“Oh come–”

The roar of jet engines cut her off. I looked up to see Brenna flying above. The sound cut out and she circled the school in a glide.

Show off.

The other students oooed and awed. I rolled my eyes and walked inside, nearly bumping into Naomi.

“Oh. Hi,” Naomi said, smiling.

“Hey.”

“She landed on the roof!” someone shouted from outside.

I sighed, Naomi rolled her eyes. I smiled back at her. It seemed she was about as impressed at the show-off as I was.

“Heading back outside?” I said.

“Oh, uh,” Naomi paused, turning around. “Just heard the noise, was all.”

“Yup,” I said, walking forward to her side. “Hardly subtle.”

“And this is all everyone's gonna talk about,” Naomi groaned.

“What did you expect?” I said. “People here are as obsessed with capes as they are about sports, or who's dating who.”

Naomi laughed. “Part of why I like talking to you. You don't care about any of it.”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling. “Why don't you like it, though? Just... wondering.”

Naomi's smile faded.

“Sorry,” I said, quietly. “I shouldn't have–”

“It's fine,” Naomi said, shaking her head. She smiled again, though it was... weaker. “We should probably get to class.”

“Okay.” Stupid Isabelle. “See ya.”

We walked our separate ways and I sneaked a last glance at her just before she disappeared around a corner.

I don't really know much about her, do I?

When I turned my head forward again, Brenna was standing at the other end of the hall, giving me a look I couldn't describe.
Other people noticed her. There were shouts, and Brenna was hidden from view. I sighed.

*No one deserves this.*

I walked up to the crowd.

“Hey!” I yelled. As expected, I was ignored. The small crowd was intent on pestering her.

I shoved past, ignoring the complaints and cursing. Brenna stood in the center, her head swerving as everyone spoke over each other. Her wings were wrapped around her, as if she was trying to hide in them.

Her panicked eyes met mine.

“Hey Brenna!” I shouted. “How's it going?”

“Fine! I'd be better if I could fucking breathe!” she said, looking anything but fine.

“Cool! Hear that everyone? She wants some fucking space!"

A few people had the decency to look ashamed and step back. Too many still wanted to crowd her. I held my hand out to Brenna, and she reluctantly withdrew her metal hand from her wing cocoon, taking mine.

Warm. For some reason I thought it'd be cold. It was metallic, but didn't feel fake. It wasn't entirely like a real hand, but there was something human about how it felt in my grip.

I shoved our way back through the crowd, eliciting more complaints. We broke through the crowd, but irritatingly enough a few started to follow. I let go of Brenna's hand and turned around.

“Seriously? Is this really how you treat a hero?” I said sternly. More of them sheepishly walked off, and the rest looked at the dwindling crowd and reluctantly left to form little gossip spheres.

*Jesus.*

“You okay?” I said quietly. Brenna's wing cocoon withdrew somewhat, enough to see her left shoulder was bandaged, arm in a sling.

“Yeah, thanks.” Brenna looked at me. “And uh, thanks,” she said, more seriously.

I could feel the eyes on us.

“Hopefully they don't do that again,” I said, sighing. “I gotta get to class. See ya.”

“Okay.”

I walked away, ignoring the looks half the people were giving me.

The teachers might have cracked down on the gossip during class, but lunch was another matter. I walked into the lunch room, and I could already hear the whispering. More than a few people were looking at me. Perhaps they were talking about what I did for Brenna. I smirked. Maybe they thought I was a Ward.
I found Naomi sitting alone. A guy was leaning against the table, saying something to her. Naomi said something back, her expression neutral, and the guy walked away.

She noticed me and smiled.

“Hey Isabelle,” she said as I sat down. “I heard what you did for Brenna.”

I rolled my eyes. “You and the whole school by now, probably.”

Naomi smirked. “A few people seem to think you're Eimyrja.”

*Or maybe I'm a supervillain that Icarus is secretly in league with.*

“Maybe you're a cape,” I said sarcastically.

“What if I was?” Naomi said, one eyebrow raised.

*Oh god.*

“Are you really?”

“Yeah. I'm Flashstep,” she said with sarcasm, rolling her eyes.

I mentally breathed a sigh of relief. Naomi was too sweet to be a cape.

“Who was that guy, by the way?” I asked.

Naomi sighed. “Fourth guy to ask me to the junior prom.”

*Oh. Right. Forgot that was coming up.*

I was almost offended no one had asked me, even if I would've said no. I might've been a sophomore, but it was common for junior guys to ask out sophomore girls. Was I really that awful looking, or was I just too obviously gay?

“And?” I said. I was a *bit* too curious.

“As much as I'd love to dance, I'm just not interested in boys. They'd get stupid ideas even if I kept saying I'd only go as a dance partner and not a date.”

*Oh?*

Naomi gave me an odd look. “Not like that,” she said flatly.

“Not like what?”

“Er, sorry. I kinda assumed you thought...” Naomi trailed off and shook her head. “I don't want to date, with boys or girls. I just want to dance.”

I was reminded how little I knew about Naomi.

“Is it okay if I ask something personal?” I said nervously.

“You can ask.”

“Why don't you want to date?”
Naomi looked at the table. She looked almost sad, her eyes seeming to stare beyond the table.

“I don't know,” she finally said, quietly. “I've only ever liked someone once.”

It struck me that Naomi was giving me a glimpse into something deeply personal.

*Maybe I should leave it at that.*

“I'm sorry,” I said, awkwardly. “So, uh, if you wanna dance, why not ask one of your friends?”

“Either they've got dates, or they aren't going for one reason or another,” Naomi said, reaching into her backpack. She brought out her lunch box. “What about you?”

“I'm...” I paused. “Not really interested in any junior boys either. And no junior girls have asked me.”

I could feel my face heat up. I looked down.

*She shared something personal. It's only fair that I do too.*

“I see.” Naomi laughed lightly. “No dancing for either of us.”

Naomi might have laughed, but I could still see the sadness in her expression.

*She wants to dance, doesn't she?*

“Umm. Maybe we could go as friends? I'd kinda like to dance too,” I said quickly before I could hesitate and never say it.

*Oh god oh god oh god oh–*


*I just asked a girl to dance.*

I hid my face by leaning down to find my lunch in my backpack. I found it quickly, but I continued to act like I was still searching for it.

My face had to be too damn red.

**Icarus**

Finally, it was over.

My devious ploy for slipping out of Mr. Jefferson's class early—feigning a most dire need for a bathroom—had worked flawlessly. I was pretty sure he'd known what I was doing, but it didn't matter. I was out ten minutes before the bell.

Ten minutes before hell resumed its regularly scheduled programming.

I shut the door to my locker, breathing a sigh of relief. It was over. I just had to escape. I started walking towards the entrance, glancing down every cross hallway and through every open door. Just in case there was an ambush.

Was I being paranoid? Maybe. It didn't matter though. I didn't want to get trapped again, nowhere to escape, nowhere to hide.
I made it outside, plowing through the entry doors at a run.

Naomi was outside, leaning on one of the handrails on the stairs. She looked up at the sound of the doors opening. “Brenna! You... okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, breathing heavily. “Just... trying to get out before the masses. Don't want another dogpile like this morning.”

“I... heard about that. Did they bother you much after Isabelle stepped in?”

Word had gotten around about Isabelle? That probably wasn't good. “Uh, a bit at lunch, but I think they caught the hint when I flew away. Are, uh, are you doing alright?”

“Yeah,” Naomi smiled. “I have a dance partner for junior prom! I'm really excited. I haven't been able to dance much lately.”

“Oh, that's awesome!” I replied, smiling. Of all the people who deserved it, Naomi was up there. “So who's the lucky guy? Or girl? Or... person?”

“Isabelle.”

What.

Oh fuck.

Oh Jesus Christ my life is an episode from a shitty sitcom.

“Oh, uh. Wow! That's really nice, Naomi.”

On the next episode of: My Best Friend is Dating a Supervillain...

“You okay, Brenna? You're acting weird.”

Okay. Calm down, Brenna. This is fine. They were friends before you knew them, right? Surely they're both decent enough at hiding their identities...

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I replied, giving her a hug. “So she's into girls, huh.”

They would make a pretty cute ship...

As I backed up, I could see Naomi roll her eyes.

“We're just going as friends. Silly.”

What would their ship name even be? Something dorky and cute, probably.

“Oh, that's still pretty cool,” Every relationship starts somewhere. “That's only in a couple weeks, isn't it?”

“Little over a week. Next Saturday.”

“Oh, well that's cool. Hey! Do you have a dress picked out? If you don't, I could totally make one for you.” Nothing can be allowed to get in the way! This ship shall sail.

“You can make dresses?” Naomi asked, almost... awed.

“Yeah! I made all my costumes myself. I used to make my own cosplay outfits, before... yeah. But I
still got it, don't worry,” I said with a smile.

“Sure! I'll be looking forward to the results.”

“Yeah,” I grinned. I could already see it. Something to make Isabelle's heart flutter. “I think I could throw something together that you'll like.”

“I'm guessing you'll be avoiding it because of...” Naomi waved her hand in a vague gesture.

“I mean...” I shrugged, wincing at the spike of pain in my shoulder. “Nobody's asked me, so it doesn't really matter. Not even the cape nerds have asked, and they buy hair off of the Internet.”

“Huh. If I wasn't going with Isabelle I'd have gone with you... oh! I know! Why don't you ask Jordan?”

Naomi was grinning, but I wasn't sure what to think of her offer of a pity date. “I mean... I don't think he'd be interested,” I said, with a sigh. “It'd be nice though. He's pretty cool. But...yeah.”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “He'll say yes,” she said flatly.

“Are... are you sure? I mean, what if, like, he doesn't, and then things are weird between us. What if he decides to transfer away because it's weird between us? I don't want to fuck it up.”

Naomi looked at me with what seemed suspiciously like an amused expression. “Brenna. Do you trust me?”

“Uh... yeah?” Probably more than anyone else right now.

“Go ask Jordan. You'll be fine.”

“You... are you sure?” I asked.

“You don't trust me?” Naomi said, hand on her chest in an exaggerated tone and gesture.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay. I guess. But if he says yes, you need to teach me how to dance because I have no idea how.”

“Yes!” Naomi said, hopping a couple times.

I couldn't help but smile, even if there was no way she would have declined that. “Okay. Hey, you're the best. I'm gonna go bug him.”

I was walking back towards the doors when the bell rang. Change of plans. I spun around, walking away from the entrance until it was clear, then took off, showering everything in dust and jet exhaust. I extended my wings and slipped into a glide, circling the school.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket.

Meh. I'll check it after.

Finally, I saw him, stepping out of one of the side doors below. Time to put my plan in motion.

I shut my engines off and dove down, landing next to him with a thud.

“Hey Jordan.”
“Nice of you to drop by,” Jordan said, grinning.

*What a dork. He had to have been holding onto that line.*

I couldn’t help but blush. “Hey. How, uh, how’s it going?” I was suddenly quite aware of the other students around us, watching. It was a bit conspicuous.

“Uh...I'm okay? Are you okay?”

“Hey so are you doing anything next weekend? Just curious.”

“Oh! The season 8 finale of Black Wings Kaminari is coming out then! Next week's Saturday!”

“Yeah! And uh, well, um.” I took a deep breath. *You can do this.* “I thought maybe if you wanted there's this prom thing coming up and I'm sure everyone's asked but if they haven't maybe I thought maybe if you wanted maybe we could, uh, go together?”

*God why does my face feel so hot?*

Jordan’s face turned a bright red. “Oh, umm, me? I uh... yeah! Sure! I mean I don't know how to dance but uh yeah, sorry, sure!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes!!” I drew him in for a hug, squeezing him tight with my wings. “You're the best!”

“Can't... breathe...”

“Oh sorry!” I left go, stepping back. “I guess I got a bit excited.”

I glanced around, blushing. Oh geez, lots of people watching. Some asshole even had a phone out, taking pictures?

“That's okay,” he said, glancing around, his face still all red. “Uh, see you around? Sorry but uh, crowds...”

“Yeah, I get it,” I said, stepping back and giving him a little wave, my wings spreading wide. “See ya later.”

He gave me a little wave in return as I turned on my jets and took off.

My phone vibrated again. I pulled it out as I flew.

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-0681): hey. Can we talk? I'm in the parking lot.*

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-0681): hey. I can see you. :v*

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-0681): :v :v :v*

I sighed.

I one-handedly texted a reply. *have 2 head downtown, prt being strict, wats up?*

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-0681): stuff. How strict? Can't go anywhere without their say so or what?*
I looked up to make sure I wasn't going to hit anything and tapped a reply. *ya, can only do school without a leash*

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-0681): okay. I'll contact you later.*

I paused, looking at the screen.

_K._

I sighed, looking at the half-assembled mass of metal in front of me. It wasn't going as planned. The energy flow was downright hazardous. If I were to stick this on my arm now, they'd be cleaning me off the walls.

My phone vibrated.

*Oh jeez.*

*New SMS message received from (UNKNOWN +1 (970) 958-2150): hi. Roof.*

I responded. _K._

I stood up and walked to the elevator.

_Time to test my theory._

I was wearing my nice skinny jeans and flannel. I strategically unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt. Just enough. I pulled out a mirror and double checked the tiny amount of make-up I did.

The elevator doors opened, revealing the cloudy night sky. Enough light reflected off the clouds, to make the night just a little less dark.

I stepped out, looking around.

“Hey,” I heard someone say behind me.

I turned around, finding Blink standing only a couple feet away. Her eyes glanced downward a little longer than most would think polite.

_Yup. I knew it. This ship will sail._

“Uh...” Blink said. She coughed. “Interesting fashion choice.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What, I can't look good?”

“You do. Er, can,” Blink said, looking away. “Anyway. Did they tell you I was arrested?”


She shrugged. “It was my choice. Did they... what did they say?”

“Not much. We might have gotten into a proper debriefing, but... well, I had more urgent matters. Sorry.”
“It's fine. Just... the whole thing felt weird, even before Cupid talked to me up here.”

“Wait, Cupid talked to you... up here? That's weird.” I didn't know a whole lot about her, but...
“What, uh, what were you two talking about?”

“She was vague. Something about how this whole thing is bigger than any of us. And she gave me her number.”

“I... I see. That's ominous.” I replied, trying not to ponder the implications of Cupid giving Isabelle her phone.

“Yeah. I'm worried. I'm apparently involved in something and I don't know what. I... was just wondering if you might have an idea.”

Should I tell her?

I paused, looking at her for a moment.

She saved your life, Brenna.

I opened a panel on my arm, Blink tensing up at the sight of it. In the space where the shotgun module had gone, I'd rolled up the envelope Basilisk had sent my father. It wasn't a perfect place to store them, but... I didn't really feel comfortable keeping them anywhere someone could just grab them. Not after outing myself. It just felt weird.

With my other arm in a sling, I couldn't just hand it to her, so I shook it out of my arm, letting it fall to the floor. I picked it up, and handed it to Blink wordlessly.

“What...” Blink trailed off, opening it and pulling out the photos. Her eyes widened, settling into a horrified look as she flipped through them.

“Basilisk had that delivered to my father, before I... before she shot me. Look at the last picture.”

I watched her shuffle through to the end.

“This... Jesus Christ, this was taken in the PRT building?” Blink said. I nodded. “This... I think I'm getting some of an idea what Cupid is talking about.”

“The Ravens have someone on the inside. Either that, or they can somehow get in and out without anyone noticing. I... I haven't had any idea who I could talk to.”

“Brenna, this...” Blink trailed off, handing me the envelope back. “This is a lot of trust you're putting in me.”

“Is there really anyone else I can talk to? Fuck, I've been a Ward for, like, two weeks. There's no way they could plant someone in that time... it could be anyone.”

“You can't trust anyone on your team? Why... why stay with them then, if you trust a villain more?”

“I trust some of them. I just... I want to tell Tank Buster, but she's been through a lot.”

“She? Huh, I thought I saw the Ravens try to exchange a girl.”

The elevator doors opened, because of course the situation had to become worse. Cupid, wearing
green pajamas, ran out. She stopped, looking at me, then looking straight up. Her panicked look slipped, and she rolled her eyes. “You can come down, Blink.”

I looked up and watched Blink plummet, hair whooshing above her before suddenly becoming still as she neared the ground. Her hair fell into its usual form as her feet touched the ground.

“Cupid,” I said. “What, uh, what’s up?” I really wished I wasn't standing on a rooftop, supervillain next to me, holding those photos.

“Blink, you're stupid,” Cupid said. “The only way you could find a worse spot for your meeting is if you went downstairs to use a conference room.”

“Didn't you have a sensitive talk with me here?” Blink said.

“...Touché,” Cupid said. “But seriously, what are you two doing?”

“I'm just trying to figure out what the hell is going on,” Blink said.

I glanced between them. “Cupid, what exactly do you know about all this?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Based on the soap opera of emotions going on up here, I'd hesitate to say. Honestly? I don't know much. More than you lot, but that's not saying anything,” she paused. “Icarus, besides Blink and your family, who has seen those?”

“Nobody,” I said, before pausing to stuff the envelope back into my arm with my teeth.

“Here,” Blink said, apparently right next to me. I held out my arm sheepishly, and she neatly tucked it in, a weird look on her face.

“Brenna,” Cupid said. “Seriously, flannel? I could've told you how gay Blink is. I could feel her checking me out before.”


“Hey, I'm not the only one with an obscure plan,” I grumbled, buttoning up my shirt. I sighed. “But seriously. I almost died, Blink is somehow involved because of it, and...” I trailed off.

Cupid sighed. “Yeah. You need to know. Director Meyer is playing both sides, I think. Maybe Imperium Inceptivus too. At least, that's my theory, since I haven't actually been able to speak to her. Brenna, your fighting against the Ravens has been... upsetting the balance.”

“I can't say I'm surprised,” I said bitterly. “Fucking heroes. Fucking PRT.”

“I can't believe I ever thought going to the Wards was an option,” Blink muttered.

“It's not for everyone,” Cupid said, an emotion I couldn't quite place on her tongue. “But yeah, you shooting Branwen tipped it all ov—” She paused, head swiveling to Blink. “Don't tell me you were... oh fuck me sideways, you helped her.”

Blink didn't meet her eyes. “Yeah,” she said bitterly. “I never... never thought things would go that far. I regret everything about that night.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Cupid shot me a look. Instead, she spoke, “What happened happened. I just wish it hadn't been you two. If the Director was furious about Icarus sparking a war, that's one thing. But... it wasn't that. At least, not just that. She's worried, and if I know anything
about her, that's not an emotion she has very often.”

“So,” I said quietly. “What can we do, to stop this? If it's her, we could, like, go to Washington. Tell the Chief Director what's happening.”

“With how fucked this PRT is, who's to say it isn't fucked farther up?” Blink said.

“It might be. I can't say I've ever met Costa-Brown, otherwise I might have some idea,” Cupid said quietly.

“We could go public?” I asked. “Just release it all.”

“With what evidence?” Cupid grumbled. “We've got nothing physical that we could pin on her.”

I sighed. “So there's absolutely nothing we can really do, besides hope we get a lead.”

“And hope she messes up,” Cupid said quietly. “Yeah.”

“At least we know what to watch out for,” Blink said. “Imperium... I'm already on thin ice with him. Not much I can do right now myself.”

“Well, yeah. You still have my number, Blink? Of course you do. If anything comes up, we all should share our intel. Icarus... don't be an idiot. I'm going back to bed.”

Cupid sighed, and walked towards the elevator without even saying goodbye.

“I was waiting for her to spill any more of my personal fucking details,” Blink grumbled.

“Sorry,” I replied. “But hey, that was a thing that just happened.”

“What even was that about about your flannel and obscure plans?” Blink said, crossing her arms.

“I, uh, heard *someone* was going to prom,” I said with a blush. “*As friends.*”

“And that... somehow prompted you to, what, get me to look at you or something or...” Blink looked away. “Thinkers making everything awkward.”

“I, uh, think you and Naomi would be a cute couple, honestly,” I remarked. Even if it'll make my life a nightmare. “I could totally be your stealthy wingman.”

Blink rolled her eyes. “Honestly? I don't know why she even talks to me. She's... just so *sweet* and *cool* and... talks to me for some reason. Like, I wanna get to know her more, but given everything, I don't think I deserve to. I'm so stupid. Shit, why did I even ask her to dance?”

I thought back to Naomi, how she looked just yesterday. What the Ravens had done to her. I knew where that led, pushing away my friends to deal with it. Maybe it was a huge risk to Naomi's identity, but... maybe that was what she needed.

“Nah,” I said with a shrug. “You two are meant for each other. Trust me. Just, follow your heart, or whatever the sappy phrase is.”

“Brenna. I'm not sure you've noticed, but my life is just the teensiest bit complicated,” Blink said flatly. “Even if Naomi was interested, I'm not going to go *near* stuff like that. Not now. I'd back out of the dance if... if Naomi didn't seem so damn happy that I asked her.”

_Really?_ I gave her The Look. “Go. Have fun. Be her friend. Worst-case scenario, you're her friend.
Best case, I get to figure out a cute ship name for you two.” *Not that I hadn't been doing that anyway. Quickfire for life!*

“No promises,” Blink said quietly. She gave me a look. “By the way, as far as PHO is concerned, you're going too?”

*Oh Jesus Christ, fucking cape nerds.*

“Yeah,” I said with a blush. “Yeaaaaahhhhh....”

Blink smirked. “I think I know of him a little. Massive weeb, yeah? You two are meant for each other,” she said, echoing my previous statement.

I couldn't help but grin. “Yeah, a bit. Thanks, Isabelle. Anyway, I should probably head back downstairs. I have an arm to finish.”

Blink's expression fell. “Brenna? Where does all this leave us? I don't even know what to call this. A part of me wants to call you a friend and the other part still wants to scream at you for doing what you did. Even knowing what I know. Just...” she trailed off.

“Scream at me if you want,” I said quietly. “It's not like I don't deserve it. I mean, after what... what I did, I'm surprised you even want to talk to me. I...” I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say.

“You're the only one who's seen me with and without the mask. Maybe it's as dumb as that,” Blink said quietly.

“Maybe see how things go?” I asked. “Whatever happens between us, it happens.”

“I guess. Just... Brenna, I can't hold back. If we find ourselves on opposite sides, I can't afford to pull punches. I mean, I wouldn't go too far, but... ugh. You get what I mean?”

“Yes. The same with me. If I have to arrest you, I'm not going to hesitate. It's the way it has to be, unless one of us wants to switch sides? And it's definitely not going to be me.”

“I... good night.”

“You too,” I said, walking towards the elevator. *Wait.* “Oh, and Blink?” I turned back around.

She was already completely still, floating just above the ground. “Hmm?”

“What's your favorite color? Just curious.”

“Blue?”

“Cool! Have a good night.” I hit the button for the elevator. Back to making my new arm.
I burst into the Wards common room, breathing hard from the run down the hall.

“Sorry!” I shouted.

Brenna sat on a couch, looking at me with amusement. Her new hand pressed into the armrest where she was leaning over.

“Hey,” she said, cracking a smile.

I took a moment to catch my breath. “Sorry, there was this little event thing I was helping at, they wanted me to use all four of my points at once, so it took longer to...” I shook my head. It didn't matter. “Umm, hi.” I felt myself blushing.

“Well, you missed all the fun slicey dicey bits. Anyway, check it out, it exists!” Brenna said, raising her new arm. It was identical to her other, except that it extended all the way to her shoulder. It looked a little newer, without the barely-noticeable scuffs on her other arm. I wondered how much of her would be made of metal in a year. In five years.

I mentally shook my head at that thought. I would still like her, either way. I still couldn't say why, just that I felt more comfortable and connected with her than anyone else. Maybe just because she watched anime with me. Or was it more than that?

“It does,” I said with a small amount of wonder. It was pretty neat. “How does it feel?”

“Just like my old arm, but stronger. More connected,” she said, flexing her new hand.

A stupid part of me imagined her taking it off and yelling at someone, get away before I beat you with my own arm! I nipped that thought in the bud.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Okay I guess. Ben wanted to talk to me, but I haven't met him yet, so I'm doing pretty good.”

Oh, I'm just standing around looking like an idiot. Maybe I should sit down. I walked over to the couch Brenna was sitting on.

Would it be weird if I sat next to her? But, if I didn't... I mean, she did ask me out. And she sits next to me all the time...

I sat down on the couch with only slight hesitation. I pulled off my goggles, throwing them onto the table with a sigh.

“He asked about you. He was at the event,” I said, dumbly.

Brenna groaned. “What did you say?”

“Just that you were busy,” I said. I left out everything else, like how every so often she'd freeze in place, eyes darting around before she'd seemingly relax.

“Okay, cool,” she said, sighing. “I think he has some kind of plot.”
I shrugged. “He's kind of an ass, but you gotta admit his plots have been pretty fun. Remember the convention?”

“Yeah,” she giggled. “That was fun, but... I think this has something to do with me being out.” Nevermind what being out usually meant.

“Is it... are you adjusting?”

Brenna shrugged. “I guess. It sucks not being able to go places without people pointing and staring.”

“Like wearing your costume, but it's all the time.” I guessed she'd have to wear a costume to not... be in costume? I glanced at her wings. “At least you don't have to hide those. They... they're more you.”

Brenna blushed. *Oh jeez. What did I just say?* “That *is* the nice part. Even if people are noticing them way too much. So much poking and prodding whenever I step outside... God, I don't know how Jade does it.”

“Jade, uh, doesn't let people prod her?”

“Okay, well, it's not like I have any other comparisons in Denver,” Brenna said grumpily. “Except maybe Cupid? Except she can blend in. Even Jade can, if she gets a hat. I... can't. And whatever Ben's plot is, I'm sure it'll ruin whatever chance I have of being normal.”

*She looks so down. What do I say?* “Even if you're not normal, I think you're pretty neat,” I said, blushing.

Her look brightened a little, and she leaned over to give me a hug. I smiled and hugged her back. Being hugged by metal might not sound nice, but Brenna's hugs were warm. I couldn't help but run a finger along the top of her wings, marveling at just how... intricate they were. Her wing twitched in response.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“It's fine,” she replied, sounding a little shaky. She pulled back, her face red. “So, uh, you wanna do a thing?”

“Oh, yes!” I said, excited. “I've been meaning to introduce you to my favorite anime!”

“Oooo yes you have my attention,” she said, just as excited. “What is?”

I let myself relax. Maybe I could go the rest of the night without making a fool of myself.

This was nice.

Brenna's head leaned against my shoulder, and I watched her eyes droop as she struggled to stay awake. I'd be insulted at her wanting to sleep during Fira-mei if this wasn't so comfortable.

Well, it *was* comfortable. Her arm shifted, and something pointy dug into my side. Oh well.

*Bzz Bzz.*
I barely felt the phone vibrate in my pocket. I started to reach over before remembering the weight against my shoulder. *It can wait,* I thought with a smile.

As the show continued, however, I couldn't focus. I kept worrying about the phone. I worried about a lot of things. But what the text might have been bothered me. There weren't many people who texted me.

I sighed and relented to my worries. As carefully as I could, I took my phone out of my pocket.

*New SMS message received from (Nick +1 (303) 499-7111): bro, i know its late, but can ya meet me in our spot?*

Nick. It had been two years.

Brenna shifted and looked at me with her sleepy... pretty eyes.

“What's up?” she asked.


“So early? But this is the only time this week—”

“It's important. Sorry,” I said, wincing when I saw Brenna's sad expression. “Umm, it might be quick? If it is, I'll head right back.”

“Is it something you could use backup on?” she asked hopefully.

“Sorry. It's, uh, personal.”

“Alright,” she said sadly. “Good luck.”

I pulled myself away from her reluctantly, and made my way to my room to grab my jacket, making sure my student ID and taser were still in the pockets. On the way out, I tagged the doorknob.

I gave Brenna a small wave as I headed out. I hurried through the halls, ignoring the odd looks from PRT staff. I took the elevator down to the garage, and made my way through the tunnel connected to Union Station.

Heading up the stairs, the 20 was already waiting. I was in luck, it only ran every half hour at this time of night, and missing it *sucked.* A flash of my student ID, and I was on.

The bus was quiet, thankfully. I had time to relax a little. I let the sound of the other passengers roll over me, looking out the window and watching downtown Denver fade into suburbs. An hour or so later, and I was back off.

Our ‘spot’ was in a park by Sand Creek, close to where our parents lived. It was only a short walk from the bus stop. I remained attentive though; while it wasn't a particularly bad part of east Denver, it was unnervingly close to Ravens territory. I was confident I could get away from any potential danger, but I'd rather not risk my identity in the process. It'd be yet another excuse for Mom to scream at me.

I shuddered.

The park was rather unnerving at this hour. A cool breeze blew past as I walked down a small paved pathway, the branches of the trees casting eerie shadows. I sort of wanted to turn around, but I couldn't do that. Besides, I was a superhero. What kind of hero runs from trees? My brother was
waiting for me, anyway. I couldn’t leave, not without seeing him.

I finally came across a small clearing, but he was nowhere to be seen. I looked to the sides, but—

The soft movement of someone attempting to conceal their footsteps caught my attention. If I wasn’t already on alert, I probably would’ve missed it. As it was, I acted as though I didn’t hear them, waiting for them to get closer.

I turned, grabbed the person behind me, knocked them off balance, and slammed them into a tree. They were bigger by a few inches, but they weren’t going to be able to take advantage of it.

“Holy shit, bro! It’s me!” the man blurted.

*Oh.*

I backed up, and Nick dusted himself off. He was taller than I remembered, with a thin scruffy attempt at a beard marring his chin. He’d always been determined to grow facial hair, and it seemed that hadn’t changed. It’d been a while. We’d shared texts, but he was always cryptic about what he’d been doing since. Between the dark colored jeans and black hoodie, he looked like the type that was up to no good. But this was Nick. The only ‘no good’ he was ever up to was the things he liked to do with...

*Fuck. Brain. Don’t go there.*

I did *not* want to remember walking in on Nick and some other boy. *Ugh.*

“How’d you learn to do that? Never knew you had it in you,” Nick said, grinning.

“I... took some classes,” I said lamely. “Did you really have to sneak up on me?”

Nick shrugged. “I dunno. Just felt like scaring you there. Isn’t that what big brothers are for?”

I rolled my eyes. My heart still pounded, and I flexed and unflexed my hands in an attempt to calm down.

“For real, though,” he continued. “How’ve you been?”

I shrugged. “Mixed bag. Good and bad.”

“Fair enough,” he said, looking around. “Hey, wanna walk? This clearing is creepy as fuck at night.”

“Yeah,” I said, sighing in relief.

Nick started walking away, back the way I’d come from. “Why’d you want to meet here, anyway?” I asked, running to catch up and walk by his side.

“Nostalgia?” Nick said, shrugging. “I dunno. Seemed a good a spot as any.”

“Good spot to get stabbed, maybe,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Nah. There are better places to ambush people. Much better.”

“You say that like you have experience.”

Nick never said much about what he did. I never thought—
“Hah,” Nick said, rolling his eyes. “I’m no pushover, just uh, had to learn a few lessons out here.”

“Oh. Sorry,” I said, a little ashamed. How could I think he’d stoop to that? “You never said much.”

The trees were already a ways behind us. Houses, mostly maintained, sat on both sides of the road we walked down. There wasn’t a sidewalk on this part, but Nick seemed unconcerned with walking in the middle of the road. I kept an ear out for cars, just in case.

“It... hasn’t been pleasant,” Nick said. For a brief moment I could see how tired he was before he smiled. “Better than being with the egg and sperm donors. No yelling at me just ’cause I gave my friend a blowjob.”

“Gross.”

“That's kinda homophobic, bro,” Nick said, giving me a mock offended expression.

“You know what I mean,” I said, rolling my eyes. Nick laughed.

“For real though, you doing okay at home?”

“I... get by. Just avoid them, mostly.”

“Huh. How do you go about that? They had that stupid curfew and, ahem, ‘family time’.”

“I've got a job.”

“Really? Nice. What do you do?”

I paused. Shit.

“Uh.” I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't want to talk about my powers and make it about me.

“Bro?” Nick was giving me an odd look. “If it's something illegal, you know I get it. I uh haven't been doing everything above the table, you know?”

“Oh?” I said, eager to switch the subject off me. “What have you been doing?”

“Nope. Not falling for it. What do you do? Come on!”

“It's... a secret,” I said lamely.

“Hey, I'm your brother. Why keep secrets from me?”

“You keep them from me,” I said, probably a bit more bitterly than I meant to. Nick flinched.

“Jeez. You've really learned to hit hard.”

“Sorry,” I said, looking away.

“You've changed a lot. I hardly even recognize you,” he said, shaking his head. “Tell me you still watch anime, at least.”

I perked up at the mention. “Yeah! I've—”

Nick raised a hand. “Yup, still a weeb. Glad to see that hasn't changed.”

I rolled my eyes. *Nothing wrong with a hobby.*
“Still doing sports?” I asked.

Nick sighed. “I pick up a game here and there. Basketball with some friends from around.”

Nick turned a corner abruptly. I nearly walked straight ahead before realizing and following him. A hooded pair were talking underneath a street light up ahead.

“Nick? Where are you going?”

“Oh, just thought I’d introduce you to a couple friends of mine.”

The pair up ahead turned, and one of the figures waved at us. I felt unease, approaching hooded figures at night. I touched a light post, and I poked Nick. He gave me an odd look.

“You okay, Jordan? Don’t worry, we’re cool,” Nick said reassuringly, returning their wave.

The pair wore dark hoodies, and pants that didn’t fit. One was darker-skinned, with a somewhat-scruffy appearance; the other was taller, her face looking like it had been punched at some point. I swallowed nervously as my eyes fell on the black armband around her bicep. She was with the Ravens.

“Nick,” I whispered. “I think we should go?”

“What? They’re cool,” he said, looking forward. “Hey! Rick, Taylor! How’s it hangin’?”

“Yo,” the guy, Rick I assumed, said. “Who’s your friend, Nick?”

“Oh! This is my kid brother I was telling you about, Jordan.” He was telling people about me?

“Oh, neat,” Taylor said, giving me a dismissive glance before speaking to Nick. “Hey, did you hear? Back in business, baby!”

They were operating again, after only a week?

My hand felt over my taser hidden beneath my jacket. Taylor gave me an odd look and rolled her eyes.

Nick knows them. He’s friends with them.

My heart sank.


No. Goddammit Nick. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?

“Yup,” Taylor said. “Got something for you and Rick. Maybe your kid brother too. Got some supplies to transfer, fast and low-key.”

Dammit, Nick. I couldn’t stay silent anymore. “You’re with the Ravens,” I said, accusatory.

“No fucking shit, dude,” Rick said, rolling his eyes. “Why don’t you shout about it? Sing a song?”

“Whoa, hey,” Nick said, turning to me with a pleading glance. “It’s cool. We just move stuff around, sell a little here and there.”

I backed up. Taylor laughed. “Sounds like your kid brother is a bit of a bitch.”
“Hey. Don't talk about him like that,” Nick said, glaring at the girl.

She raised her arms in a mock gesture of surrender. Her sleeves slid down, revealing a crude tattoo of a raven wrapped around one of her wrists. “Whoa, hey. It was just a joke.”

“You can come with us, Jordan. Get away from our shitty excuse of parents,” Nick said, his expression growing almost desperate.

I backed away more. “Don't you know what they do to people?”

“We have nothing to do with that,” Nick said quickly. “No part of that business. We move boxes, stuff like that. We could hang out again like old times. I've missed you.”

“Speak for yourself,” Taylor muttered.

Rick looked at me, puzzled. “He might squeal on us.”

“What? No, he wouldn't do that,” Nick said. He turned back at me, as if silently asking, Right?

The words, one by one, hit me harder than the last. I looked at Nick, imagining him just two years ago.

You and I both know those old times are gone.

“Screw that. Just being involved... you... you're one of them,” I said, fighting against the tears that threatened to come out.

I couldn't cry here.

“Hey,” Nick said, frustration on his face. “I'm just doing what it takes to get by.”

“Definitely not bringing the kid now,” Taylor muttered. “Obvious liability.”

“Shut up,” Nick snapped at her.

“Okay! I like you, but you need to chill the fuck out. I've punched guys for the amount of disrespect you're showing me right now,” Taylor said, her tone almost threatening.

I can't do this. See my brother turn into this. Be with them. The people who... hurt so many like Brenna. For what? Money?

“I'm leaving. Goodbye, Nick,” I said, turning away so they couldn't see my tears. “If you ever stop being stupid, you know where to find me. If you aren't in jail.”

“Jordan,” Nick said, the hurt clear in his voice.

I hated walking away, but this was not okay. Hopefully he'd realize.

“Jordan!” he yelled as I passed the street light I'd tagged earlier.

I wiped my eyes as I turned the corner. I wanted to look back, but... I couldn't.

Running away was really the only thing I could do.

“Me too,” I replied, my voice shaking.

“You aren't gonna say anything to anyone, are you?” Nick said nervously.

“Is that what you care about? All you care about?”

“Jeez, Jordan. You really go for the sucker punches now, you know that?”

“Just... go. Please. I won't say anything, just... find something else. Anything else. That isn't... this.”

“Dammit, you don't know what it's like!” Nick said, frustration and anger clear in his voice. “What I've had to do just to survive in this shithole town. Why does it bug you this much? I didn't think you cared about stuff like this.”

My fists clenched. “I guess you just don't know me then,” I said, angrily. I still couldn't turn around. “The Ravens? They're rapists. Worse. And you're working for them. Working for the group that's hurt so many. Hurt my friends. Just... just fuck off.”

“Jordan...” he trailed off. He set his hand on my shoulder. I shoved him away and pulled out my taser, holding it between us. Nick stared unbelievingly at the crackling electricity.

Rick walked around the corner, hands in his hoodie pockets. “I thought you said he was cool.”

I moved my thumb off the button and let my arm drop to my side. Nick shut his eyes and looked away. “Fine. Be that way. Bye.”

Rick gave me a sad look. I turned around, setting the taser back in my pocket. Wasn't sure I could have used it against him, anyway.

“Do I need to make a call?” Taylor said loudly behind me, as I walked away.

“No. He won't do anything. Don't think he could,” Nick said.

_He was right._

My eyes itched. No more tears fell.

_I can't do a damn thing._

I was close enough to the PRT HQ that I could teleport in. I appeared without fanfare in my seldom-used room.

I stood still for a moment, eyes adjusting to the tiny amount of light slipping in from the door. The faint outline of the bare-bones standard issue bed slowly appeared. The empty closet would be to my left. Or was it my right?

One deep breath. Then another. Composing myself, thinking of Brenna, of anime, of the dance on Saturday. A smile sat on my face, but it felt strained. Not real.

My hand found the door and I stepped out. Brenna looked at me. “Hey,” she said, smiling for a moment before her expression dropped. “You okay?”
Tears slipped out despite my attempts to stop them. I thought they were done, earlier. *Dammit.*

Brenna vaulted over the couch and ran to me, burying me in a deep hug.

*Why am I so pathetic?*

“What's wrong?” she said, so softly.

*It's no wonder Mother and Father never liked me.*

“Jordan?” she asked, her voice a whisper. “It's going to be okay.”

“I don't know,” I whispered. “I really don't know.”

*I couldn't tell her. Anyone but her.*

“You wanna sit down? Talk it out?”

“Sitting down sounds good,” I said weakly. A smile forced its way on my face. “Maybe continue Fira-mei?”

“Okay, yeah,” she replied. Her fingers intertwined with mine, and she pulled me gently over to the couch, where the last episode was still paused.

*She didn't even binge-watch. She paused and waited for me to get back.*

“Snack?” Brenna offered. I noticed there was a plate of chocolate chip cookies, freshly-baked, on the coffee table. How I hadn't smelled them when I teleported in...

“Sure,” I said. She handed me a cookie with her free hand, licking melted chocolate off her finger as she snuggled next to me. A real small smile crept onto my face.

Tonight sucked... but this? This was nice.
“Naomi! We're going to be late!” I shouted through the bathroom door.

“Give me a moment! I just need... to... adjust... gah!”

“Don't make me call your date and have her pick you up here,” I said jokingly through the door. At least I wouldn't have to tell Isabelle directions...

The door opened, revealing a flustered Naomi glaring at me. I squeed, my work was absolutely perfect. Shades of light and dark blues, flowing down to her knees. Lacy patterns along the edges. The dress hugged Naomi in very flattering ways. Even in this awful lighting, I could see the glint of the sparkly stones I used. A pair of dark blue heels completed the look, giving Naomi an extra inch or so.

Isabelle was gonna love it.

“Not all of us can be out, Brenna.” She paused. “Wait.”

“Says the girl going with another girl to prom,” I smirked.

Naomi rolled her eyes. “You know it's not like that.”

“And that's why I get to be an ass. For reals though, we gotta go. My dad just texted me, he's downstairs.”

“Right,” Naomi said, running for the door. In heels. Not even Tinker-tech heels.

“Show-off,” I groaned, hobbling after her. I had planned on modifying my Icarus heels to look...fancier, but hadn't had time, and now I was paying for it. Why didn't every girl make Tinkertech shoes to get around dealing with inconveniences?

As it was, it was totally worth suffering for. Black heels that gave me an inch or so, with a strapless dress made of a shimmering purple fabric dark enough to get confused with black. A half-length cape of a slightly more vibrant purple, because if people knew you were a cape you might as well own it. I'd even polished up my wings and arms until the matte gray metal almost shone.

Naomi looked back with a smug expression. “Brenna! We're going to be late!”

“I will tase you,” I grumbled jokingly, walking through the door. “But seriously, I used to be good at this. Just give me an hour or two to get used to it again.”

“Hmm. I should've given you a lesson with them just to get you used to it. Sorry.”

“It's fine,” I replied. Late-night dance lessons after patrols. I was pretty sure Naomi wanted to kill me for all the times I stepped on her toes, but she'd been surprisingly patient. I'm sure she wouldn't have been if she'd had to deal with the Heelspocalypse.

“You'll be good, though. Just follow Jordan's lead. He knows what he's doing.”
“Hopefully,” I said as I hit the button for the elevator, “Otherwise we're gonna have a really
awkward time.” Not that I'd mind if we made complete fools of ourselves; we'd be doing it together,
so it was fine.

“Don't worry. Everyone should be focused on each other.”

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped in. I hit the button for the parking garage, ignoring the
weird looks from the pair of PRT office workers already inside. As if it was weird for two random
girls in formal dresses to be heading downstairs.

“Yeah, I guess you're right. There'll be an asshole taking pictures of me for PHO though, I'm sure,” I
said resentfully. Denver wasn't even a proper cape city, and yet people seemed to lose their minds
over seeing me outside of costume. “Oh geez, I wonder how Jordan will feel about more pictures of
us.”

Naomi didn't respond, taking a deep breath as the elevator doors opened again. We got off and were
just about to start hunting for our ride when Dad's car pulled up. He jumped out, beaming.

“You girls look stunning tonight. I'm sure you'll knock 'em dead.”

Naomi giggled. “Thanks. We'll be sure to.”

He opened the car door for us and we piled into the back seat. “Thanks again for the ride, Dad,” I
said cheerfully.

“Well, I do need to meet this Jordan you've mentioned so little of. Kind of an androgynous name.
Hmm.”

“Dad!”

“I'm joking, Brenna.”

“Though there was the time Jordan wore a dress,” Naomi said, her evil smile radiating pure darkness.

I sighed. “Thanks, Naomi.”

“You know your mom and I support and love you no matter what, Brenna,” Dad said from the front.

Naomi cackled, and I tried to see how far I could sink into the seat. I should've flown.

I groaned. “You know, I jokingly kiss a girl one time, and next thing I know, Dad's looking at
rainbow flags on the internet.”

“How is Amy doing, anyway?” Dad asked as he pulled out onto the street.

“We, uh, haven't talked in a bit,” I said, more quietly. “Kinda drifted apart, I guess.” Like everyone
from back then too...

“I'm sorry,” Dad said quietly.

“It's fine,” I said. Then a plan for revenge came to me. “Oh hey, Naomi. Why don't you tell Dad
about your date?”

“What date?” Naomi said, cocking her head. “Isabelle and I are just dancing as friends.”

I snorted. Not if I have anything to say about it.
“You know, Naomi,” Dad said. I grinned, knowing exactly what was coming. “It's not like this is Kansas City or Brockton or something. Denver's a pretty progressive place, you shouldn't be afraid to be yourself.”

Naomi snorted. “Believe me, I conquered that fear a while ago.”

Oh right. That.

“Sorry,” I said after an uncomfortably long pause. “It's probably not something to joke about.”

Naomi shrugged. “Nothing wrong with tasteful queer jokes. Sometimes we just gotta make fun of ourselves.”

I could see Dad make a confused face in the rearview mirror. Then he shrugged. “God knows I get what you mean about self-deprecating humor. I couldn't tell you how many times I suffered through Brenna jokingly asking if we could give her a hand with something.”

Naomi let out a laugh and pressed a hand to her mouth, having the decency to look embarrassed.

“Hey, I'll have you know those were really funny with context,” I said with a smile. “You guys just don't appreciate my humor.”

“Your humor's almost... too self-deprecating,” Naomi said cautiously.

“It cost me an arm and a leg, I'm gonna spin it for all its worth,” I said.

“Wait, a leg?” Dad said alarmed. “Brenna...”

“Dad! It's a saying!” I groaned. God, please end it now.

Mercifully, after a couple minutes, the school came into view. Dozens of other students in various dresses and suits streamed through the doors, or stood around in circles. The lines of cars passing were almost a chaotic mess. Dad pulled into an empty spot, running out to open the door for us before we had a chance to do it ourselves.

“Thank you,” Naomi said accepting his hand, trying hard not to laugh.

I rolled my eyes and let Dad help me out next, as if I totally wasn't capable of getting out of a car myself. Part of me wanted to say something, but he just looked so excited. I heard footsteps behind me, and turned to see... oh wow.

Jordan could really pull off a tux.

“Hey,” he said, giving us all a little wave.

“Hi,” I said back, leaning down to him a hug.

“ Aren't they adorable?” Naomi stage-whispered to my dad.

I stepped back, my face feeling a little warm. “Shush, you. Uh, Dad, this is Jordan. Jordan, this is Dad.”

“Hello... sir,” he said, meekly holding his hand up to Dad, who wrapped Jordan in a hug.

“Handshakes are for constituents,” he said, before stepping back. Jordan seemed dazed for a moment.
“Oh! Umm, you look really nice, Brenna,” Jordan said.

“Oh, thanks!” I replied, doing a twirl and managing to not break my ankle in the process. “You too.”

“Hey!” I heard someone shout from behind us. I turned to see Isabelle running over. She was wearing a suit. Black pants, white undershirt, black vest thingy. Almost too stereotypical, if not for how she had her hair tied back in a purple ribbon.


Isabelle paused, her face growing to be a very obvious shade of red. “Oh, yes, I uh. You look nice too!”

Dad and I shared a knowing look.

“Okay, well, I'm going to get out of here. You ladies have a fun night,” Dad said, giving me a hug. “If you need a pickup, call me. I'm stuck at the office all night anyway.”

“Have fun,” I said back to him. He hopped back into the car, giving us a small wave as he navigated back through the swarm of vehicles.

“We'll see you guys inside,” Jordan said to Naomi and the gay idiot. He turned towards me, his smile becoming a little strained. “So, uh. My parents want to meet you.”

“Oh, yeah, sure!” I said with a smile. I wasn't sure he'd ever even mentioned parents, and I hadn't wanted to bring up anything weird just in case. “Lead the way.”

He walked towards the main entrance, where most of the crowd was moving around. More than a few of the people in it were staring, and some asshole had his phone pointed at me. I wasn't sure I'd ever be used to that.

Jordan paused in front of a couple who looked rather out of place. The woman, wearing an oddly thick purple coat and sunglasses, turned to me and scowled, like she'd never had a pleasant day in her life. The man, hands clasped behind his back, gave me a raised eyebrow. His outfit was a stark contrast to the woman, an immaculate suit adorning his lean form. They must've been Jordan’s parents. I put a smile on my face.

“What is that? Please tell me that's not your date,” the woman grumbled.

Bitch please?

“I'm sorry,” Jordan mumbled, looking down. “Mother, Father, this is Brenna. Brenna, Mother and Father.”

“Close enough,” the man mumbled, barely loud enough for me to hear.

This felt... weird. But nothing a little friendliness couldn't fix?

“Hi!” I said cheerfully, offering a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

The woman ignored me, glaring at Jordan. “She's a real woman, right? Awfully tall.”

I blinked. Did she really just say that?

“Yes,” Jordan said quietly. “She's real.”
The woman looked back at me, eyeing me up and down. “Nice to meet you,” she said, in a not at all nice way. She still didn't shake my outstretched hand. “You can call me Tiffany.”

“Sure,” I said, done with her attitude. “And what should I call the stick up your ass?”

I felt a squeeze on my wrist, but I didn't keep my eyes off Tiffany's sunglasses, like it wasn't 8 pm and dark outside.

“You should learn some manners, Brenda. Especially if you want us to allow you to be our daughter-in-law.”

I blinked. What the fuck even is this shit? “I... what? Did you seriously just...” I realized Jordan wasn't by my side. I looked around, and spotted him walking towards the entrance to the school.

“Have a nice night,” Jordan's father spoke for the first time, in a voice that sounded tired. The voice of a man who was done ten years ago. “Do take care of our son.”

Tiffany looked like she was going to say something else, but I walked away towards the entrance before she could.

Did that seriously just happen?

I caught up to Jordan—somehow not breaking my leg in the process. He was shaking, with what I wasn't sure. “Hey, sorry about that,” I said. “I think that coulda gone better.”

Jordan's hands found one of mine and squeezed. He took a few deep breaths and smiled weakly. “I'm thirsty. Want to try the punch?”

“Sure,” I said with a reassuring smile. Fuck, I wouldn't want to talk about it either.

Together we made our way into the school gymnasium, where some music was playing quietly. Looked like things hadn't really started picking up yet, only a handful of couples were inside. Unfortunately for me, it meant I stuck out more. But at least there was food. And punch. And also food.

Two glasses of punch and a handful of weird cracker things later, and Jordan seemed to have calmed down.

“Brenna?” someone said. I turned around to see Lindsay, in a cute-looking green dress. “Oh, hey Jordan, you're here as well.”

“Hey Lindsay,” Jordan said quietly. “Didn't know you were coming.”

“I do more than read, you know,” she said, squinting at him. Then she shook her head, making her ponytail swoosh. “Sorry, that was rude, I guess. Figured I might as well see if there was someone who wanted to dance.”

“Didn't have a date, Lindsay?” Thomas said, appearing out of nowhere, his arm clasped around the arm of another girl, who was glancing at me with wonder. You know, that thing people do when they don't want you to see they're looking at you. Great.

“No,” she said awkwardly.

I felt a poke on the tip of my wing. I looked over to see Thomas's date turning away sheepishly.

Seriously?
“Hey,” Thomas said to his date. “No touching my friends. Might make me jealous.”

“Sorry!” she said to him. She turned back to me. “Sorry, Icarus.”

Thomas gave me an apologetic look.

I sighed. “It's fine. Don't call me that outside of costume, though.”

“Hey! Those cakes look pretty good. Let's go try some, Alice;” he said, dragging the annoying girl away, giving me another apologetic smile.

I felt Jordan's fingers brush against my own. “You okay?” he said as I turned to him.

“I just want a normal night without people staring,” I said quietly. “But that's not going to happen.”

“Just ignore them. We're here to dance, right? We should dance. Together,” he said, his voice getting increasingly quiet.

“Anyone give you trouble, just punch them in the face,” Lindsay said dryly.

“I... think that'd just make more people stare,” Jordan said.

“Oh, Lindsay, you made it here after all,” Naomi said, dragging a flustered Isabelle by hand.

*Oh my god they're holding hands.*

Naomi dropped Isabelle's hand.

*Dammit.*

“Hi. Is that your date?” Lindsay said.

Isabelle gave a small wave. “Just here as a friend.”

Our eyes met briefly. *I understand your struggle, Isabelle.*

“Just here alone, Lindsay?” Naomi asked.

“Yup.”

“I'll save a dance for you, then,” Naomi said, smiling. Isabelle glared at Lindsay for a moment before looking at me again.

*Oh, do I understand your struggle.*

“Hey, sounds like this song's ending!” Naomi exclaimed, grabbing Isabelle's hand and dragging her towards the center of the room.

“Shall we?” Jordan asked, his arm wrapping around my waist. It would have been smooth if not for his face being crimson and his voice ending in a squeak.

“Sure.” I smiled. He was right. I put everything else out of my mind. For a night, maybe I'd just have fun.

*Blink*
Her sparkling blue eyes twinkled in the revolving lights. 

*Oh my gosh does she have a lot of energy.*

Some kind of trendy pop sounded from the speakers where the DJ sat. Fast music, to which everyone freely danced to. Rather, everyone tried to. Limbs flailed without any real direction, just excitement instigated by the music.

*Twirl into a jump, arms... everywhere.*

Not that I was much to judge. It was impressive enough how little anyone bumped into me. A steady beat, chaos all around. So much movement, so much energy, driving the heat up. Sweat appeared on my face, but I didn't care. *Naomi,* though. Oh gosh, Naomi. Her every movement put the rest to shame. Every outreached limb, every leap, every twirl, it all flowed. Moved with the beat. Her eyes and her smile exuded happiness. I couldn't be embarrassed from my respectively poor dancing. Around her, her energy tonight, I couldn't help but smile too.

*How does she do this in heels?*

The music slowed and quieted.

Naomi slowed with it, and I couldn't help but stop and admire her again. Looking up at her bright, soft, smiling face. Lights casting her hair in a revolving glow. Her grace, the heels she wore not even inhibiting her in the slightest. Her bare arms, showing subtle musculature, her strength obvious when she pulled me around. I knew she must have worked out, an image I couldn't help but see with some guilt.

We danced, sometimes her leading, sometimes myself. It didn't really matter. The twinkle in her eyes making my heart flutter. The feel of her hand against mine, of mine against hers. Then she stopped. The room was filled with a moment of quiet.

The song had ended, and I hadn't even noticed.

The music came back, and Naomi, still beaming, said something to me that I couldn't pick up. I tapped my ear, and she shouted, “It's been an hour already. We should probably get something to drink.”

*An hour already?*

I nodded and followed her through the crowd. A few others had the same idea, but most of the others moved in their respective blobs. A pair of boys nodded to us, their hands locked together.

*Oh jeez.*

The punch beckoned me, but there was no way that stuff wasn't laced with excessive amounts of sugar. No amount of exercise tonight would burn off the weight I'd gain from it. The large water dispenser filled with water, ice, and strawberries would do.

“Good choice,” Naomi said as I filled a cup and promptly downed it. *Damn,* was I thirsty. She had the water as well.

“How'd you learn to move like that?” I finally said, wiping water off my mouth. I was apparently a little too hasty to get a drink.

“I've been taking classes since I was... eight, I think,” she said, dragging a hand across her mouth. “I
just love dancing. There's nothing else like it.”

“I can tell,” I said, smiling.

Brenna appeared a ways behind Naomi, rushing to a snack table, her half-cape, half-shawl flowing behind her. She chowed down on way more than her fair share, her date standing next to her sheepishly. Naomi turned around and giggled.

“She seems to do that... a lot,” I said, hiding a giggle at the sight. Brenna's metabolism was weird. It was a wonder she didn't burst out of her small, pretty purple dress.

“She needs to. Her power source,” Naomi said quietly. I almost didn't hear her.

“How do you know that?’’

Naomi turned to me. “She just told me, out of the blue. Maybe a little self-conscious about it?” she said, shrugging.

Brenna walked towards us, giving a small wave before filling a cup with punch.

I... don't think she's very self-conscious about that of all things.

“How's it going?” Brenna said, smirking at me.

“Great!” Naomi said. “I wish this sort of thing happened more often. You and Jordan working up a sweat yet? I didn't see you two on the floor.”

“Oh, we were there. I saw you, though. Nice moves.”

My eyes met Jordan's. The boy wore his nervousness like his suit. He quickly looked away. Then I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. Who could be calling me?

“I'll be right back,” I said quickly as I ran into a side-hallway to get away from some of the noise.

Unknown number. Probably spam, but I was already out here.

“Hello?”

“We've been attempting to contact you for half an hour now,” the voice said.

Recollect. Recollect was fucking talking to me on my personal cell.

“What the fuck? What are you doing contacting this number? How?”

“If you didn't want us contacting your personal phone, you should have answered your other phone. We expect you to be available at this time.”

“You know who I am,” I said. I thought I managed to hide my identity from them.

“Tomorrow, you will receive a text at exactly 7:30am. Don't miss it.”

He ended the call. I let my hand drop.

I should've known I wouldn't be safe.

“Isabelle?”
I'm not even sure why I'm still doing this.

Naomi stood in the doorway, looking at me with concern.

“It's... nothing,” I said, forcing a smile onto my face.

_Fuck you, Recollect. Tonight of all nights._

“You sure? Isabelle... are you in some kind of trouble?”

“It's nothing, really,” I said forcefully. _Oh Naomi, please don't press this._

“If you need help, or you need to talk... can you talk to me?” Naomi asked.

“I...” What do you even say to that? _God._ “Let's go back to the dance floor.” I jogged over, ignoring Naomi's increasingly concerned look. I didn't need this stupid cape stuff now. I wanted to have just one nice night. I took her hand and lead her back towards the dance floor, just in time for a new song to start. Unlike the first hour, the beat was slower, not the fast-paced pop from before. I could hear lyrics from this one, though I couldn't quite figure them out.

“Follow my lead,” Naomi said in my ear, backing up and taking my other hand.

I forced back the sob I might have let out. A few years ago, a memory I knew like it was yesterday. Mom said those exact words just as she showed me the ropes.

_Deep breaths, Isabelle. Focus on here. You're fine. You're okay._

I made myself smile, Naomi's expression concerned before she started moving. One step, then another.

_I don't remember the name, but I know this dance._

The movements and the music filled my being. Naomi's concern quickly faded, and I smiled for real as the sparkle returned to her eyes. A few dancers looked at us, but that was fine.

The chairs welcomed us as we plopped down. Naomi stretched her limbs, yawning.

“That was really fun,” Naomi said. “But I think I've about reached my limit.”

“Same,” I said, following her example and stretching. “I don't know how there are still people on the dance floor.”

“Oh, Isabelle! Look!” Naomi said, pointing into the crowd. Brenna and her date were close, spinning in slow circles. Hands held, hands on waist and shoulder, they gazed into each other's eyes.

_Adorable_ , I thought with a smile. “Oh gosh, you think they're gonna—” Naomi started to say, as Brenna's date stood on the tip of his toes. His lips met hers.

I glanced at Naomi, a wide smile on her face, intently watching the pair. A part of me still felt some disappointment, but I couldn't deny that this was a good night.

“Congrats!” Naomi said. I turned to see Brenna and her date, standing in front of us with their
hands intertwined. Brenna smirked at me.

Oh jeez. How long was I staring at Naomi?

I sensed someone walk up to me, and I turned to see the girl in the cute green dress from earlier walk up to me and wrap an arm around my shoulder.

Oh jeez. What? What? She's really warm.

“Play cool, I've got a creep,” she whispered. Brenna snickered, as a boy walked over and gave us a disgusted look. He left, and the girl withdrew her arm with a sigh. I felt cold, where she had just been.


Naomi held a hand to her mouth, clearly trying to avoid laughing while Brenna cackled. I buried my burning face into my hands. It was a good night.

“Hey girls!” a boy said. Thomas, the boy with a reputation for how many girls he'd asked out. I couldn't help but notice his date wasn't with him. “And Lindsay.”

“Where's your date?” Naomi asked.

“Uh... didn't go so well,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “Hey! We should all go out for Dragon.”

“Thomas...” Naomi said, looking at him nervously. I looked at Brenna, freezing in place, breathing disjointedly. Her date winced, looking at her in a combination of pain and concern. I wanted to stand up, go to her, figure out what was wrong, but I wasn't sure if it was my place.

“Y-yeah. We should all get Dragon,” Brenna said shakily, releasing her date's hand. Her hands clenched and unclenched.

Naomi stood up. “Hey, we don't have to,” she said, setting a hand on Brenna's shoulder. “We can go to—”

“No, it's fine,” she said, brushing Naomi's hand off. “It's good. Everything's good. Let's go. I love Dragon.”

“Are you really sure?” Naomi said.

“Hey,” the girl said. Lindsay, I think Thomas said. “There's this place I've been meaning to go to. Grease Heaven. I could use a good burger. Why don't we go there?”

The others looked at her as if she grew an extra head.

“Sounds good,” Thomas said.

“F-fine,” Brenna said, showing a hint of relief.

“Sure!” Naomi said. “Wanna come along, Isabelle?”

“Okay,” I said quietly. More and more, I felt out of place.

Didn't I get one of my contracts there once? Staff didn't even bat an eye at the presence of a
“Cool. Let's all cram into my car, then,” Lindsay said, walking off. It struck me as odd that all of them seemed to know each other, yet besides Naomi and Brenna, I hadn't ever really seen them interact. I just knew of Thomas because he asked me out once and I'd laughed in his face.

The cool night air was a welcome change from the heat inside. Almost too cold, making my choice of wearing a suit over a dress a very good one. Brenna shivered, and her jets activated lightly, just enough to make a little heat, humming almost softly. Using Tinker-tech jet engines as a heater. Nice.

“Hey, don't forget to turn that off when we get in my car. I'm not dying from monoxide poisoning or whatever,” Lindsay grumbled.

“It-it wouldn't be from carbon monoxide,” Brenna said.

“So whatever, then,” Lindsay said.

We approached what was possibly the worst car I'd ever seen that presumably still ran. Somehow. Covered in rust, one of the doors a different color, holes everywhere.

“I... don't think this is sealed enough for us to die of monoxide or ‘whatever’,” I said. It barely looked big enough for all of us to squeeze in. I nearly offered to drive half of us there, except Naomi took the moment to step into the back.

Rust bucket it is.

I pushed past Thomas to be the next one in, sitting right next to Naomi poking at a crack in the window. Thomas glanced at me with an amused expression as he climbed in. Brenna and her date huddled in the front as Lindsay shut her door.

When the key went into the ignition, a part of me expected nothing to happen. The engine fired up with a steady rumble, the rust bucket vibrating alarmingly.

Okay, maybe I should've taken my car after all, I thought to myself as I looked down and saw rusted-out holes in the floor, and pavement below.

Lindsay drove off without any fanfare, screeching out onto the road. I was thankful hardly any traffic was out, given the girl's... very aggressive driving. I fell into both Naomi and Thomas far too many times. The rust bucket only groaned and rattled more as she drove. I almost wanted to unbuckle my seatbelt and teleport out of this death trap. I might have if the restaurant was any further. As Lindsay assertively pulled into the parking lot, I almost expected the car to explode. Or maybe not even that, just... give up. The moment the car stopped and Naomi stepped out, I walked free of that... thing.

Probably the fifth most nerve wracking time in my life. I glanced at Naomi admiringly. She didn't seem the slightest bit nervous.

“Well, that was terrifying,” Thomas said, stretching.

“Cool. You can walk afterwards, then,” Lindsay said, walking up to the doors of Grease Heaven and its weirdly '50s theme. Tacky neon sign, cartoon pigs and cows with halos and angel wings. Chicken with an apron flipping burgers.

I sighed. One night of greasy burger and fries wouldn't kill me. As we walked in, a cute bored girl with a plastic halo headband looked at us and put her phone down.
“Welcome to Greasy Heaven! Would y'all like a booth or a table?” she said with a complete lack of a Southern accent.

The waitress glanced at Brenna, but otherwise didn't pay special attention to her.

“Booth,” Lindsay said.

“Right away,” the waitress said, leading us into one of the larger booths near the back. There were a few others eating here, one or two staring at Brenna. I glared at them.

One villain, one hero, and four others. I doubted they'd be as friendly as Brenna had been if they found out, as ironic as that was. Part of me wondered what they'd say if they know about what had happened.

“Can I get y'all anything to drink?”

“Uh, I'd like to order some food if the rest of you don't mind?” Brenna said, glancing around at the menu in front of her.

“No problem! What can I get you?”

“One of those, uh, Sinful Challenge. With fries and a coke.”

I flipped through the menu. Apparently it was a large six-patty burger with heaps of bacon that, if you managed to eat alone within the hour, it would be free. A small part of me wished for Brenna's Tinker-induced metabolism. They looked really good.

“I'll... just go for the junior grease, with water,” I said. It seemed to be the smallest thing on their menu. Tuning out the rest of the orders, I leaned back and rested my eyes. I probably should have declined to come, what with the work I had tomorrow.

*I'll probably end up fired from my weekend legit job,* I thought, opening my eyes to shoot off a quick text. *Hardly any savings. Have to figure something out, before I'm forced to use crime money.*

“Huh. Weren't you the girl who laughed at me for asking you out?” Thomas said, looking at me with amusement.

“Yup.”

“You laughed at him?” Naomi said snickering. “That's not very nice.”

“I mean it's cool. Pretty obvious why in hindsight,” he said, smirking.

*Of course.*

“What's with everyone making such a big deal out of it?” I said, sinking into my seat. Bad enough when I had Brenna and *Cupid* making fun of me. “I mean, shit. I don't make a big deal out of someone being *straight*.”

The waitress appeared, setting down the drinks.

“Wait, so are you and Naomi *really* a thing?”

“No. Just friends. Are you done? Or am I going to pour water on your head?” I said, ignoring the snickering from Lindsay and Brenna.
“Whoa, hey, no need for that,” Thomas said, putting his hands in the air defensively. “Just wanted to see if I need to give Naomi dating advice.”

I had to resist the urge to teleport outside.

“Sorry if we've been going at it too hard,” Brenna said, taking a sip from her date's drink. Her own was completely empty already, I realized.

“If it makes you feel any better, you aren't the only queer person here,” Naomi said nervously. “I totally get where you're coming from. People get way too curious about anything different.”

I glanced at her, then at the rest of the table. *I have so many questions.*

“I knew it!” Thomas said, looking at Brenna's date.

“What?” he said, shifting nervously.

“I mean you do pull off a dress really well,” Brenna said offhandedly. “But hey, you do you. I'll like you either way.”

He sunk into his seat, face beet red.

*At least they aren't talking about me being gay anymore. Still, though.*

“Is... that something to really joke about?” I said.

Naomi gave me an odd look. “Probably not.”

*Naomi did imply she's queer in some form, right? Would it be weird to ask? The burning curiosity almost made me ask, except then I'd be doing exactly what I complained about. It's none of my business.*

I closed my eyes again, tuning out wherever the conversation was going. Already my thoughts were dwelling on whatever Imperium had planned.

Eyes closed, the images of beaming friends fresh in my mind. I opened my eyes, gray and more gray spotted with green stretched out before me. The cool early morning air bit, though not as hard as the guilt did.

*I put on my mask all the time. Why does it bother me so much right now?*

My feet touched the fragmented ground of a parking lot nature was working at reclaiming. Weeds grew from every crack, and I couldn't even hear the sounds of traffic from here. Only the cigarette butts and the occasional needle showed that anyone had been here recently. The lot seemed, for all purposes, abandoned.

I pulled out my phone. 7:55am.

Nothing happened. The message said to be here at 8am, and I made it five minutes early.

*Going to be like that, then?*
A breeze flowed over me, and I activated my power to keep my hair still. I shifted my head around, keeping an eye on the area. Nothing moved. Only distant sounds could be heard. Not only did they call my personal cellphone, but they'd decided they would keep me waiting. A mocking part of my mind brought up the whole ‘be there at 8am’.

A tall brown-cloaked figure stepped out of the building in a crouch, still barely avoiding the door-frame. Light hit their face, revealing metal underneath. Appeared to be one of Imperium's robots, except for its unusual height. Another figure almost half the robot’s height stepped out from behind them—Potion, wearing tight-fitting jeans and a gray tank-top. Dammit, I was ready to yell at someone. But Potion was hardly at fault.

“Hello again, Blink,” Potion said, her eyes gazing into my own from behind her mask.

“What's the situation?” I asked. I was not about to listen to her wanting to lead me into her sanctum again.

Potion sighed. “Business, business. You're much too busy, Blink. But I was told to act with haste, regardless. It's time to break Kaboom out.”

“Okay? Last I saw, he was still in the PRT building.”

“Not anymore. He's being transferred to the Birdcage.”

I nodded. That would definitely make things easier.

Except... maybe he's going there for a good reason.

I shoved that thought back. We had a job to do.

“There's a catch,” Potion continued. “The heroes are keeping a close eye on the transport vehicle. We'll have the entire Protectorate and Wards teams on us if we mess up our timing.”

“I'm guessing there's a plan?” I said, crossing my arms in impatience. Potion might have said she was to act with haste, but she was terrible at following that order.

Potion walked up to me, standing closer than some might call polite. She looked up, still gazing into my eyes. No matter how many times we'd met, I could never quite figure out what her deal was. “You'll fly us nearby, and we'll wait for the signal.” She set a hand on my shoulder. “You'll fly us to the truck after that.”

She's getting weird. Again. I snatched her wrist from my shoulder and flew straight up. “Where to?” I asked. Potion pulled out her phone, showing a point on a map of Denver. North of downtown, along Highway 25, near some creek.

“Let's be high, in the sky. We'll look smaller than a bug up there. Only two capes who could pay us a visit, and the sky's a large place.”

Sure. And we won't see jack shit either.

I glanced at Potion while we flew. No unease or nervousness in her body language at all. Usually, when flying someone they'd be disturbed by the lack of sensation, not to the height. Granted, her full face mask kept me from seeing her facial expressions. Only her mocha-colored eyes showed, not giving any hints to her state. Not that I particularly cared. The woman was weird.

The scenery below was depressing. I hated looking at it, at the crumbling infrastructure. Especially
given how nice Denver was as a whole, areas like this were like a cancer. Slowly infecting the city. Like this world, being taken bit by bit until there will be nothing left. I pulled out my phone, using the map to navigate so I didn't have to see it. The map steadily updated to keep up with me, and I could pretend the bad parts didn't exist. The spot Potion pointed out finally appeared, and I looked down to find we'd made it back into the more upstanding parts of Denver.

“Now we must wait,” Potion said. She took out a couple containers with purple and green liquids respectively. With two fingers, she lifted up her mask. A scar grazed her right cheek. Potion bit her potions open and downed them before returning them to her pouch. “You may let go.”

What?

I let go of her wrist, preparing to catch her and question why she would ask that. Potion didn't fall, floating away with a smirk before readjusting her mask.

“You've made flight potions,” I said dumbly. Didn't Imperium ask about that once?

“Yes. I've had them for a week. Had to attune, learn how to use this power.”

You're leaving out the migraines and puking.

The sounds of jet engines came from the south. Icarus. Hopefully wouldn't be an issue.

“It will last for roughly ten minutes. We should be—ah!” Potion pulled out her phone. “The signal.”

We dropped. As traffic became clearer, I spotted the truck. Nondescript, boring, yet it still stuck out. Potion dropped in front of the truck, and the screeching of tires and honking interrupted the otherwise peaceful morning. I withdrew my tasers, teleporting into the cabin from above and shocking the occupants. I pulled the lever for the brake and teleported out. The truck lost the rest of its momentum before it stopped, blocking two lanes of the highway.

This is the worst way to free someone. All these people here. What was Imperium thinking?

That people would be honking as supervillains assaulted a truck bewildered me.

Potion dropped behind the truck, looking at me expectantly. I teleported into the back. Kaboom's head was visible above a mountain of containment foam. His eyes were closed. After fiddling with the lock, I kicked the door open. Potion flew in, withdrawing what appeared to be some kind of spray. She pointed it at Kaboom, and the aerosol streaming out slowly dissolved the containment foam.

A thump sounded behind us, and I turned in just in time to see a winged figure throw some kind coin at me. Flashstep appeared, crackling taser heading right for me. I teleported away, narrowly avoiding him. Potion tossed a bottle at Flashstep, only for it to hit the wall as he reappeared next to Icarus.

“Hmm, complications,” Potion said, breaking Kaboom's restraints with her bare hands without taking her eyes off the heroes. “Good thing we're prepared.”

I eyed the coin on the ground. Flashstep relied on tagging things, and given he appeared when Icarus threw the coin, it was a safe bet it was one of them.

“Best case scenario, you don't leave with Kaboom,” Icarus said, modules shifting on her right arm. I tensed. “Worst case, you don’t leave at all.”

“Adorable,” Potion said, pulling out a beaker.
Potion flew out the back with abrupt speed, colliding with Icarus. I took the distraction as a chance to pick up the token and toss it out the back, watching as Flashstep teleported an inch. I touched Kaboom and teleported us out above the roof.

_Dammit, she never said whether she needed me to extract her or if she had a plan to escape on her own. Better not leave now, possibly having to make yet another break-out._

A token flew over the truck, and Flashstep appeared again as I flew up. I looked over to Potion, currently flying around Icarus. Her temporary flight power didn’t seem to care about silly concepts like _momentum_, which Icarus had to deal with. Icarus turned to me and with a burst, flew towards me. I teleported to the side, watching as she circled for another dash.

“Let us move. Imperium's drones will be around soon to distract her. At least—”

Potion shrieked as Flashstep fell on her back, driving a taser into her side.

_Great._

I couldn't spare any time to help as Icarus flew past, catching the prone falling Potion.

_Wonderful. Can't assume you're safe enough just by being high up._

Icarus circled down towards the ground, and I followed, Kaboom still in my grip.

_Gotta salvage this somehow._

Moments before Icarus landed, I heard the breaking of glass as Potion kicked her way free. Icarus landed with a shriek, clutching her head, wings wrapped around her. I winced. Flashstep appeared beside Icarus and swung his baton at Potion, hitting her in the side despite her sluggish attempt at a dodge.

_Damn. Something must have ran out._

I dropped Kaboom on the pavement and kicked the back of Flashstep's leg as he moved to taser Potion again. He reappeared again behind Icarus, stumbling.

“Wait!” Icarus shouted. She yelped, holding a hand to her head again. “Truce, just stop!”

I paused, looking between the two heroes. Flashstep held a hand to his ear, but otherwise did nothing.

“What is it?” I finally asked, a little nervous. She would know better than to use that as a trick, right? “If this is a trick...”

“It's—” Brenna said fearfully. “It's—”

A long, whining note sounded from the distance. Sirens.

It felt as if the world froze, listening to those haunting alarms.

“Oh god,” someone said. It took a moment to realize it was me.

As if someone felt a switch, all the onlookers I forgot about shouted. I felt as if a heaviness hit my chest, and I wanted nothing more than to curl up and ignore the sound. I looked into Icarus's mask, the terror evident in her barely visible eyes. These sirens meant one of a few things.
"Icarus," I finally forced myself to shout over the chorus of civilians desperately trying to get away. "What's going on?"

She didn't respond, looking at Flashstep for a moment before looking back at me.

"Talk to me, dammit!"

"E...Endbringer," she finally choked out.

*Oh god.*

The heaviness grew worse. I held a hand to my forehead.

*What do I do? What do I even do?*

"The Simurgh. She's coming."
**Sundering 3.1**

**Siren’s Song**

**Icarus**

“Jump.”

Only a couple feet below me, the rooftop shot past, a flash of green appearing at the last second behind me. Every channel on my comms was blaring: every radio station in the city broadcasting evacuation instructions, air traffic control redirecting flights, PRT troops desperately trying to keep order.

“Jump.”

Another flash of green as I nearly clipped a large air conditioner on yet another roof. My head was agony from the shit Potion had hit me with. There hadn't been time to ask for a fix as she and Blink flew off with little fanfare, dragging a still-unconscious Kaboom between them.

“Jump,” I radioed again, low over a street full of a panicked crowd. Flashstep appeared atop a parked delivery truck. The Simurgh coming here. Denver. In my head, the words of the PRT dispatcher still echoed, *All capes, abort mission and return to HQ. All other units, assist city-wide evacuation.*

Ahead, the PRT Building, the pillar of imposing steel and glass I called my home. I cut my engines, gliding in on momentum to land on the steps. Flashstep appeared next to me with a pained grunt.

“You okay?” I asked. He simply nodded in response. I couldn't tell what he was thinking under his mask. He kept his eyes from meeting mine. Around us, PRT officers and other staff clamored in and out of the building. A block to the south, I could see a huge swarm of people pushing and shoving to get into Union Station, to *somehow* get to safety. PRT officers were forming a large U-shaped barricade in the middle of the street.

“We should go inside,” I said to Flashstep quietly, rubbing my temples in a vain attempt to make the headache stop. “See if there's anyone else here yet.”

“Okay,” he said, almost too quiet to be heard.

Together we walked through the doors. The generic-sounding action movie music of the PRT gift shop was gone now, making the interior eerily quiet save for the sounds of footsteps and shouted commands. We took the elevator up to the third floor, the PRT workers and officers giving us a wide berth. When we stepped out, more PRT were setting up a briefing area. No other capes that I could see.

I sat down, not sure what else to do. Waiting right now felt *stupid.* Part of me wondered why we even had time to prepare. If I were the Simurgh, I'd just show up. I put that thought away.

“Icarus?” Flashstep was holding a pair of large cardboard boxes with the logos of the Protectorate and Guild on them. I grabbed the top one as he continued speaking. “We’ve got to hand these out as people come in.”
I opened the box, peeking inside. Armbands, sealed in clear plastic bags. I took one out, looking at it.

“You did the overview training, right?” Flashstep asked. “I swear I remember you doing that.”

“Uh. Like, when I first joined. It's fine. Pass out the thingies, yeah?” God, my fucking head hurt. I could feel him stare. Thankfully, we were interrupted by footsteps outside. Cupid, Bunker, Chozo, and Jade walked in, followed a few seconds later by an angrier-than-usual Umbra with fang-toothed spirits swirling around her. We handed them armbands.

“Icarus, are you okay?” Bunker asked me, in a brisk tone that suggested business with only a hint of emotion.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Potion just got me with a vial. I'll be fine, or I'll deal with it.”

“There's no shame if you have to check out,” Bunker said quietly. “But... every cape helps. Especially fliers.”

“I'm fine,” I replied, a bit more assertively than I'd intended. “I'm not backing down.”

“I respect that,” Bunker said. Tank Buster, Eimyrja, and Red Light stepped up behind him. “This won't be like anything you've dealt with. Especially when you aren't at one-hundred percent.”

“The scream is the worst,” Tank Buster said, walking to my side. She pulled an armband out of the box, slapping it on her wrist and pressing a button. “Tank Buster.”

“Greetings, heroes,” an unfamiliar voice said as the rest of my team grabbed more armbands. I looked up at the cape who'd arrived. It took me longer than it should have to recognize him as Imperium, flanked by a pair of Roman-themed robots with guns. Blink, Potion, Encore, and... an Asian cape I didn't recognize were behind him.

If this was any other time, I'd be fighting them right now.

Endbringer truces were weird. I handed him an armband, a weak smile he couldn't see on my face. He stepped inside, the rest of his gang following and receiving armbands. The mysterious cape thanked me with a creepily-musical voice, and Blink... Our eyes met. Behind that mask, green eyes set with uncertainty and fear. “You'll do fine,” I said to her quietly.

“Don't die,” she said in response, grabbing an armband and floating away with that weird stillness.

I'll try not to.

Potion thrust a purple thermos at me. “Here. This always helps to take the edge off. Special recipe,” she said with a wink.

I hesitantly unscrewed the lid, looking inside. The pleasant smell of hot chocolate hit me. Was it some sort of trap? Somehow she can work around my filter... No, Imperium was a lot of things, but he wasn't a truce-breaker.

“Th-thanks,” I said, not sure what else to say. I unclipped my mask enough to get a sip. It was pretty tasty.

“Of course. Unfortunately the timing. The effects should subside before too long,” she said before walking off to join Imperium. I watched her walk away.

“Good luck out there,” I said, taking another sip of hot chocolate before screwing the cap back into
place and putting my mask on.

I looked back just in time to see a squad of capes arrive, lead by a blue-suited hero. Legend.

*Oh dear God I'm handing an armband to fucking LEGEND.*

“Thank you,” he said, sliding the armband on with practiced motions, stepping away to speak with Bunker. Cupid said something to him before walking over quickly towards me.

“Icarus, you should probably go upstairs and grab those other wings,” Cupid said, placing her hand on my shoulder.

“Oh, I was going to grab them after—“

Her hand tightened down painfully, and suddenly I was filled with dread. “You should probably go upstairs,” Cupid repeated, her voice carrying a dangerous sharpness.

“Cupid, what the... sure, yeah, fine.” I grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand off my shoulder, still feeling that butthole-clenching fear. I set the armband box down, taking one for myself as I made my way to the elevator. On the way I passed another group of capes, including one girl with wooden armor of all things, who smiled at me shyly.

I took the elevator up to the sixth floor, to the workshops. People were streaming back and forth hurriedly, carrying boxes full of papers and files. Shredded paper littered the ground. I paused, confused at the sight. Then it hit me.

Denver was going to be a quarantine zone. If the PRT building was inside that zone, there'd be nothing stopping someone from getting inside at some point and looking through sensitive shit. Suddenly it all felt *real.* I took a deep breath, and forced myself to keep walking. As I entered the area I shared with Naomi, I couldn't help but notice the Tank Buster mech standing lonely by itself in the dimly-lit room.

*Huh. She's using the other one today?*

I put it out of my mind, walking over to my own, significantly-smaller section in a side room. The engines Torque had given me were there, affixed to an unpolished, roughly-finished set of larger wings. They were far too heavy for casual use, but for a day like today, they'd be more than fine, even if the metal still had burrs and machine markings in places.

I was about to pop my wings off and replace them when an alert popped up on my HUD. I felt all the blood drain out of my face when I read it.

“Hey Dad,” I said nervously, answering the call.

“Brenna... where are you at the moment?”

“At the PRT,” I said quietly. “Where we're staging for the fight.”

“I want to tell you not to go. To evacuate with me. But I know that's not my place. I just want you to know that I love you. And I hope that thing gets taken down a peg.”

“I...” I paused, not really knowing what to say. “I love you too, Dad. You're getting out of town, right?”

“Yeah, don't worry about me. Just keep yourself as safe as you can. Please?”
“I will, I promise,” I said. “They'll probably just have me carry people around, anyway. It's not like a taser will do much against an Endbringer, right?” I glanced down at my left arm.

“You never know. Just... please don't actually try to tase the Endbringer.”

I rolled my eyes, then realized he couldn't see that over the phone. “Okay, Dad. And I'll be sure to eat my green vegetables and change my socks every day, too.”

“Make sure you wear a coat or a sweater, too. It's pretty chilly out there.”

I let out a laugh. “Sure thing. I... should get going. Tell Mom I love her too, when she inevitably calls.”

“I will. Talk to you later?”

“Yeah. Sounds good,” I said quietly, ending the call. I hadn't even noticed my wings were curled around me.

With a sigh I folded them back against my back, popping them off to land on a table. I made my way over to the rack holding the larger wings and guided my back onto them, locking them in place. The sensation was... weird, my senses suddenly feeling much larger than they'd been a few seconds ago. I knew from testing that I'd get used to it in a few minutes, but it didn't make it any less disconcerting.

I made my way out, closing and locking my workshop door behind me. As I was stumbling towards the elevator to head downstairs, there was a quiet thud, and suddenly the lights flickered out.

Everything became eerily quiet as ventilation fans and other background noises died out as well.

“Uh... please tell me one of you guys accidentally hit a lightswitch,” I radioed over the Wards channel.

“No,” Tank Buster's voice came back. “If you got your stuff, come back down. Take the stairs.”

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. No, Naomi, I'm just gonna take the elevator with no electricity.

“Copy that,” I replied, making my way over to the stairwell, using my mask's nightvision to make my way without tripping over anything.

It took a new minutes of stumbling down the stairs, but eventually I made it down to the staging room, lit up with red backup lighting. As soon as I entered, though, I saw why Cupid had had me leave. Among the fifty or so capes filling the room, half the Ravens were standing in the corner, chatting. Black Witch, Papercut, Spellbound, and her. Starving Artist turned around as I stumbled in under the weight of my new wings. I could tell from her eyes that she was smiling behind her respirator-mask. Just like before, I felt paralyzed with fear as she started walking towards me. Couldn't move, couldn't run, couldn't—

Blink appeared abruptly in front of her, facing her. She shook her head, and Alex angrily lifted her respirator to take a sip of something before stalking away like an angry cat. I breathed a sigh of relief, forcing myself to unclench my quivering hands. Someone touched my wing, and I looked over to see Flashstep looking at me with concern. “I'm fine,” I said, swallowing nervously. “I'm not going to break any truces.”

“That wasn't what I was worried about,” he replied.

“She's not going to break any either,” I said. “I think.”
“Either way, we won't give her the chance,” Tank Buster said, resting an uncomfortably-warm hand on my shoulder. “We'll stay together.”

I nodded, breathing a sigh of relief. “Thank you.” I paused, and looked down at the armband in my hands. I fastened it to my wrist and hit one of the buttons, breathing another sigh of relief as the display mirrored itself on my HUD. I'd never had a chance to test the integration, and it would have been a huge pain to learn to use an unfamiliar radio system.

There was the sound of someone clearing his throat, and I looked up to see Legend standing at the front of the room, elevated above us, his blue costume appearing a dark black under the emergency lighting. A pre-battle speech from Legend.

“I'll keep this brief. Based on her trajectory, we have about five minutes before she arrives. We don't know why she's giving us this time. We can only assume it's for nothing good. But it means I can speak to you. And we can prepare, if only a little. With the Simurgh, there's no good day. We survive the best we can, disrupt the best we can. Keep her meddling to a minimum. The Simurgh is not like Leviathan, or Behemoth. But make no mistake—a good number of you won't see tomorrow.”

*Nothing like a little optimism before a battle.*

“Unlike with the other two, we are *not* throwing everything at her at once. Look at your armbands. There will be a timer, letting you know how long you can endure her song. We will be coordinating via these armbands to minimize your exposure as much as possible. If you can't get out and still have time, use the armband and we'll recover you. If you don't have time...” he trailed off. “We don't often get to warn brave capes willing to step up and fight. Too often we're thrown into the fray immediately. The message I wanted to convey, even more than briefing you on her abilities, is that I do not want you to underestimate her. I have seen too many good heroes... and villains, die.”

Legend paused, allowing the capes to quietly whisper among themselves. I looked at Tank Buster, but she wasn't saying anything, silently looking to the side. Eimyrja had pulled out a book at some point, but I never saw or heard her turn a single page. Red Light placed a hand on Flashstep's shoulder.

“The Simurgh was the third to arrive, the younger sister. She doesn't have the raw killing power that Behemoth and Leviathan possess. She's not the Hero Killer. She doesn't shatter landscapes. She *shatters* us. She's a force of cunning, of chaos. Her song, or scream, or whatever you want to call it—it's pervasive. Digs into your mind. You've heard the stories. Entire towns of people, turned into ticking timebombs. The effects of which may happen hours, or days, or even years after. This is why we minimize exposure.

“Even so, the Simurgh is still an Endbringer. Impossibly dense, physical abilities far above anything else you could encounter. Her telekinesis, which is *not* Manton-limited, will grab you and slam you into the ground. Unique to her is what we believe to be perfect clairvoyance. Thinkers can disrupt this, can allow us to hit her, but I must stress that she is smarter than you. Underestimate this aspect of her power, and she will catch you off-guard.

“This fight warrants a show of force like today because we can *not* allow her to operate any longer than possible. I won't elaborate any further—everyone here knows what is at stake. Our best chance at reducing her influence rests in containing her, and dealing enough damage that she has to retreat. Assisting in that matter, you all should have received armbands from the Denver Wards by now. They—”

“Sir!” An extremely nervous PRT officer ran up to Legend. “She just sped up! She's—”
A high pitch tone, almost a scream. Almost a melody. It shifted, as I tried to understand it. I looked around. *Just where is it coming from?*

“Strider! Get us out of here!” Legend yelled.

An electric feeling, almost like being tasered, but *not*. A more instant blast, the air from my lungs being sucked out before I could even comprehend what happened. I caught myself as I fell to the ground, looking up at the PRT headquarters. And a winged figure, flying away before I could get a good look. Shouts, everyone trying to be heard over each other. Capes picking themselves up. I spotted Legend, speaking to a cloaked figure in black, a familiar symbol on her chest. Alexandria.

Someone grabbed my arm, and I looked over to see Tank Buster.

“Come on!” she shouted, pulling me to my feet.

The persistent noise stopped. The shouts didn't.

“She's gone!”

“What's going on? Do we follow?”

I tuned them out as Tank Buster lead us to the rest of our team, standing next to a large mech I almost didn't recognize. It was taller than before, possibly taller than her namesake mech. It was leaner, less bulky. Almost graceful, despite the homogeneous dark-gray.

“You're bringing out the other mech,” I said.

“The Torunn isn't finished, but it's better equipped for this than the Tank Buster.”

“TB, what's going on?” Red Light said nervously as Tank Buster walked to the back of the mech.

“I don't know yet,” she said. The air felt warm abruptly, and I stepped back from Tank Buster. “We've gotta wait for—”

“Capes!” Legend shouted. I turned back to see Alexandria take off. “The Simurgh has passed over Denver. She's continuing south.”

*What? She's not attacking?*

“Prepare to move. We're pursuing.”

*Initiating full hardware diagnostic check...complete*

*ACESO Mk 3 Blood Filtration System - nominal*

*ACHILLES Mobility Enhancement System - nominal*

*ERIS Mk 2 Radio/Navigation/Combat Interface - nominal*

*[Error: Undefined value moduleName] Biomechanical Flight Apparatus - nominal, fuel and power subsystems at 100%*

*XIAOLONG Mk 5 Weaponized Forearm Replacement - nominal, 2/3 installed weapon modules fully armed*

*THORSVARME Mk 1 Weaponized Wholearm Replacement - nominal, capacitors charging (at 67%)*

*Current system time is 9 May 2010, 8:55:12 AM*
The Siren's song filled my mind. A dull, pained noise that I couldn't shut out. I landed in the street. The semi-familiar surroundings rose around me, although it was all different now. Colorado Springs. I'd only been a couple times, tagging along when I was younger with Dad, for his work. Hadn't really cared for it. Certainly didn't now.

“Icarus, status update,” Tank Buster said over the radio, her voice crackling with static.

“Looking for him,” I replied. One of ours, with only a couple minutes left on his timer. Batted away by the Simurgh. Armbands said he was injured. “Nosedive!” I shouted, my voice amplified by my mask. What a shitty, and apt, name.

My HUD was pointing towards one of the buildings, some fast food burger place. I walked over, turning sideways to fit through the entryway. Inside, it was eerily quiet. The backlights on the menu behind the counter were flickering, it looked like someone had hit them. Quiet music played, a nightmareish contrast to outside. I spotted my target, a huddled figure in a golden costume, a few bystanders kneeling around him. They looked up as I approached. A man and a woman, the woman carrying a small child.

“He’s dying,” the man said simply as I knelt next to them, looking at Nosedive. His leg was twisted around to face backwards, bones jutting out. Lots of blood.

“Take off your belt,” I said to the man, moving Nosedive's leg slightly to get under it. The wounded cape's screams made the baby start crying.

“What?”

“Tourniquet,” I replied simply, not wanting to waste the time explaining.

“I didn't think of that,” he said, pulling off a belt and handing it to me. I didn't respond, simply wrapping it around the guy's leg and pulling tight. With two mechanical arms it was no problem. More screams from Nosedive. I picked him up carefully, and started walking towards the doorway.

“Wait!” the woman shouted. I paused, and turned around. She was holding out her kid. “Take her. Please.”

They won't make it in time. Their time's probably already run out.

“One minute remains,” Nosedive's armband blurted out helpfully.

You can't save them all.

I shook my head, not able to respond.

“Damn you then,” the woman said, shakily. “All you capes are the same. Can't even deal with your messes.”

The kid was screaming again, crying. The father looked at me, eyes pleading. The mother's angry glare.

I took a deep breath, and walked through the door, taking off into the sky.

“Icarus!” Tank Buster's voice came over. “Why haven't you been responding? Get out of there!”
“Responding to what—” I cut myself off as I was hit with a barrage of notifications from the armband. Dead capes, down capes. Simurgh movements. The red dot on my HUD was rapidly getting closer. I spun around mid-air to see the Simurgh, floating towards me.

“Run!” Naomi screamed, barely audible over the sounds in my head. Cold emotionless eyes staring at me, surrounded by orbiting debris. A hunk of metal—it maybe had been a car at one point?—split off abruptly, shooting towards me. There was the sound of an explosion behind me and below, and the projectile vaporized in front of me, a few specks of shrapnel pinging off my wings.

I flew backwards, hurriedly, towards Tank Buster. She was a few blocks away, atop an apartment building, crouched down. A massive cannon, almost half the size of her suit, protruded from her back, smoking. “Thanks,” I radioed to her, punching my engines to get to the safe zone.

As I was soaring away, Tank Buster fired another shot, the entire building she was on shaking, bits of concrete falling to the ground from the recoil. It hit the Simurgh, causing her to reel back for just a moment, a shower of white feathers covering the area beneath her. An opening the capes around her took advantage of, leveling a few powerful hits into the Endbringer.

And then I was gone, away from the fighting, suburban houses below me, until I passed over one street strung with soldiers standing guard. There were a handful of bodies a short distance away from the line, people who'd tried to escape the quarantine. Too slow to make it out in time. I landed in a city park-turned-impromptu field hospital, setting Nosedive down on a gurney as he was wheeled away. Around me were medical staff, PRT troops armed with assault rifles instead of confoam launchers, troops in military fatigues giving me sideways glances. A pair of Humvees painted in green rolled up to the parking lot at the edge of the makeshift hospital, followed by a line of unmarked white semi-trucks. Completely unmarked, I idly noticed, not even a badge on the grille declaring who made the trucks. They rolled to a stop, the sound of airbrakes venting filling the air. I watched as purple-armbanded drivers got out, not quite in unison, and walked to the back of the trailers and threw the doors open. Packed like sardines, hordes of Imperium's robots fell out of the back. There had to have been hundreds of the things, forming up into neat parade formations next to the trucks. Flying drones took to the sky, shooting off towards the battle.

“Icarus,” an accented voice said behind me. I turned to see Jade standing here, looking at me with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah?” I asked. “Why?”

“Because you are looking into nothingness, and...” she gestured at me. I looked down at myself. Oh.

“I guess... I guess that guy bled a little,” I said forlornly. “Are you headed back out?”

She nodded, and a little bit of dirt fell up to the sky as she began floating. “There is work to do. Fly with me.”

“Sure,” I replied, flaring up my jets and taking off. It was slower going, since Jade's gravity manipulation had a limit, but having an ally in the sky who I knew was worth it. We were far enough away from the Simurgh that we didn't have to worry too much about debris just yet, only the ceaseless howling, singing, screaming in our heads. Below us, I spotted Potion and that weird musical cape helping survivors out of a building, a pair of animated concrete statues sifting through rubble.

There was a crackle in my ears. Naomi's voice, almost entirely comprised of static. “Icarus, I'm pinned down here. The other Wards have already made it out, but—ah! Fuck—I don't have much time left—” Her voice cut off entirely into static.
“Tank Buster?” I radioed back. Jade looked back at me with concern. The armbands hadn't said anything about her being down… or worse. I mentally switched to the armband's radio. “I need the last known location of Tank Buster.”

A few seconds later, a dot appeared on my HUD, up ahead… ominously close to the Endbringer. “Jade, we have to get her out of there!” I shouted, flying over to her and grabbing her tightly, before punching my engines to max. Between that and her gravity manipulation, we shot ahead, the song getting louder, more chaotic, every inch we got closer to her.

I spotted TB first, backing away down a street away from the Simurgh, her mech dented and scuffed. The gun on her back was still smoking from her latest shot. Above her, that fucking monster floated, her halo of debris and shit orbiting around her. Alexandria was there, flying in for a punch that knocked her back, the shockwave of the hit running through everything nearby.

“I will get her, you watch for debris,” Jade ordered as we roared over my teammate. She let go, somersaulting down to hover at Naomi's head-height. Jade raised her arms, and suddenly there was her own orbiting cloud of debris, with Tank Buster lifted off the ground. She raised TB up, making a beeline away from the Simurgh.

“Naomi, how much time do you have?” I asked, flying a circle around them, even as my eyes stayed locked on the Endbringer. Alexandria had pulled back for now, another flier I didn't recognize taking her place for a brief moment.

“Five minutes at this proximity,” she replied, her voice laced with relief. “Thank you.”

We slowly pulled back, gaining a bit of distance. The flier hit the Simurgh with something, but it didn't do much damage. It didn't even look like she'd noticed his hit. I stopped, hovering in midair.

“Icarus, what are you doing?” Tank Buster asked. “Pull back!”

I glanced down at my left arm. Back at the Simurgh. I'd been expressly forbidden from making anything lethal after Branwen. But I obviously hadn't listened. And this situation called for it. I punched my engines to maximum.

“Dammit, Icarus! I'm ordering you to pull back! This is not the time for whatever you think you're doing.”

I shot ahead, flying low to the ground, the buildings shooting past me. My larger wings filled the entire width of the street, the engines screaming. I shot underneath the Endbringer, pulling up on the other side. She was maybe a hundred feet away, facing sideways from me, a cacophony of wings surrounding her. This close, her scream—her almost-voices song—was deafeningly loud. I couldn't hear Naomi on the radio, even, and my HUD was flickering. It didn't matter, I didn't need help aiming.

My left arm split apart into three segments, surrounding a central cylindrical core flickering with electricity. The three segments began to rotate, electricity arcing between them and the core. My throttles were still punched to max as I flew in a tight circle, centrifugal forces tearing at me, trying to get me to pull back. I ignored them, even as I could feel my vision starting to go dark at the edges. Had to get my shot off, somehow.

One of my wings clipped something, knocking my aim off, but I pulsed one of my engines to correct myself. Arm leveled at her wing-covered chest. I fired.

Almost in slow-motion, I saw the arc of lightning hit the Simurgh, dead-center. My vision went
white, and a sound loud enough to completely overpower the Simurgh's song just for a moment—and then no sound at all, only the song. The whiteness faded, except for an arc across my vision. I was flying, hard away from the Simurgh, who'd been knocked back a bit. I couldn't tell how much, but didn't matter, I'd have to let my arm recharge. The HUD flickered back on as I got further away, and I noticed the icon was on for the radio, but I couldn't hear anything except for ringing.

I circled back, to where Jade was still flying Tank Buster away. Engines on her mech's feet and hands were deployed, pushing her along with a strange greenish hue, although it seemed like she wasn't doing the steering as much.

I shot past them, and saw the indicator light up again. I pulled it up and saw that it was from Tank Buster, but even with my mask's volume set to max, I could only hear an unintelligible whisper in my right ear, while in my left I could only sense a bit of wetness. Maybe I should have tested the lightning gun beforehand.

“I can't hear you,” I radioed. At least, I hoped that was what I was saying. I tapped the side of my head to get the message across visually. The whisper got a little louder, a little sharper, but I still couldn't hear anything except faint screaming.

I hovered over to Jade, and glanced back at the Simurgh. The flurry of shit had intensified, a greensuited Eidolon shooting little balls from his hands that stuck everything nearby, making them shimmer and glow with some ethereal force that he then flung towards her. Every bit of debris that hit the Simurgh exploded in a somehow-glowing black energy that pulled everything nearby into it.

I turned back to see Tank Buster. She was flying along, not looking at me. Or, she might have been, I knew enough to know her head wasn't anywhere near the mech's head, and that she saw through cameras. My radio indicator flashed, Jade was saying something, but I still couldn't fucking hear. Abruptly, Tank Buster angled over in her flight, veering towards me, but something pushed me down, a force that slammed me into the asphalt below.

The Simurgh's song was the last thing I heard before I went under.

**Tank Buster**

I ran towards the still form of Icarus, dust billowing out from where she slid on the asphalt.

“Icarus! Are you okay?” I screamed. *Dammit, Brenna. Don't die here of all places.*

She slowly rose to a kneeling position, coughing. “What... happened?” she said loudly and unsteadily, turning slowly to face me as I ran behind her to shield her from any further projectiles.

“Can you move? We need to go. I'll carry you if you can't.”

“What?” she said, confused eyes looking up at me through her mask. “I can barely hear you.”

“We need to go!” I shouted. Icarus nodded at that, and her engines pulsed, steadily lifting her further in a cloud of billowing dust.

“Where's Jade?” she asked again in that too-loud tone.

“Dead,” I said simply. No time for emotions right now. “Let's go.”

“I...”

“Come on. I don't mean to be heartless, but there's a time and a place to mourn. *Let's go.* Before you...
add yourself to the body count.”

She probably couldn't have heard me, but apparently my teammate caught the hint. She took off entirely, hovering just above the ground, shaky and unstable. Her costume was torn, drops of blood falling to the ground. One of her wings was bent at the end, scruff marks scattered all along them. She moved, though, flying at a slow pace—at least, slow for her. I ran to keep up with her, activating my thrusters to help keep up.

I glanced at my local map. The ominous red dot was far behind us, the mental noise steadily weakening. Ignoring the blue dots of allies, I looked to three green dots close by ahead of us—my team. One blue dot was with them.

“Red Light. Status update?”

“We're fine. Though uh, we have a situation. Is Icarus with you?” Red Light responded.

“Yes, though injured. What's going on?”

My interface informed me that Red Light switched to a private channel just between us. “We found Starving Artist wandering alone. I... wasn't too sure that was a good idea, so we're keeping a close eye. She claims she has no idea where her teammates went.”

My heart pounded just a little more. Dammit.

“Icarus,” I said out loud.

“Yeah?” she asked. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least her hearing was starting to come back.

“Can you make it to the hospital alone? You need attention ASAP.”

“I don't...” Icarus trailed off, her words pained. “I don't know. Can't fly quickly, not this soon.”

“Okay, hang in there. And... Icarus, Starving Artist is ahead. I won't let her touch you so... please, stay focused on staying awake.”

“What? What the fuck?” Icarus yelled, her exclamation sending her into a coughing fit, her flight wobbling dangerously.

“S-class situation. Starving Artist is an ally right now, remember.”

I could barely hear Icarus start breathing faster. Her flight wobbled even more as I ran to keep up, one of her wings dangerously close to skimming the ground.

Shit, she's hyperventilating.

“Icarus, stay with me here. Deep breaths. This is only temporary. We will be between you and her the whole time. Please, Icarus. Deep breaths.”

Icarus's flight stabilized slightly, her breathing beginning to return to normal. “Why is she here?” she gasped out.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. We came around the corner, and ahead I saw my teammates, standing around Starving Artist warily. Her arms were crossed, her foot tapping.

“Wards. Stay between Icarus and Starving Artist at all costs. We might be in a truce, but...” I trailed off. They understood.
“Icarus!” Flashstep called out, worry plain in his voice. He ran up to Icarus as she landed near the others, leaning down next to her. Icarus ignored him, staring at Starving Artist even as she fell to her knees.

“Sylvi,” she said, surprisingly genuine nervousness in her voice. She started walking over to her, but Red Light grabbed her wrist. She pulled, glaring at Red Light when she realized she was trapped.

“No,” he said. “Don’t say one more word to her.”

Fire appeared in Eimyrja's hands as she glared at Starving Artist, but otherwise she stood still. The villain turned her glare to me, before muttering something to Red Light. He let go, and she tore her hand back, rubbing at her wrist before lifting her mask to take a sip of something.

The ground rumbled as a chunk of debris slammed into the ground, a block or so away from us.

“We need to get moving,” I said, for what felt like the hundredth time. “Icarus, are you okay? Can you still move?”

Icarus stood slowly, her breathing slightly ragged but otherwise normal. “I'll be fine,” she said, not breaking eye contact with Starving Artist.

I started moving forward again, looking back at the distant fight. Keeping my arc-cannon ready just in case, I motioned to the others. Icarus flew lazily to my side and landed on the shoulder of my mech, Eimyrja and Red Light walking in front of Starving Artist. Flashstep walked at the end, nodding to me.

A groan interrupted a several-minute long silence. To our left, a man laid down, hand over a bloody wound on his side. Dammit.

We don't have the time, my rational side said. Our timer was steadily going down, our exposure rising to dangerous levels. Leaving him behind was the safest option. He was doomed anyway, trapped in the quarantine.

“Red Light, Flashstep. How are your first aid supplies?”

Flashstep appeared beside the man before I could even finish my sentence.

Look at me. Seriously considering walking by, and my teammates head over without any hesitation. Some hero I am.

“The man is bleeding out,” Starving Artist spoke up, walking towards him. “Am I allowed to help, or are we going to just bandage his wounds uselessly while patting ourselves on the back?”

“You're not going near him,” Red Light said, reaching over towards the villain.

“You're not going near him,” I said. Looking closely at the man, I couldn't help but agree with her. This time.

“Are you seriously gonna let her turn him into one of her fucked-up experiments?” he retorted back. There was a screeching sound as Icarus clenched her fist on my shoulder, as if trying to grab a handful of a shirt's fabric. If she noticed the action, it didn't show.

“That's enough, Red Light. We are in the middle of a class S situation. Now is not the time.”

Why can't anyone fucking listen today?
Red Light shot me an unbelieving look as he stomped away. Starving Artist pulled her respirator up and gave me a smile before rushing over towards the man. Flashstep was in the middle of cleaning his wound, before the villain knelt in front of the man. She grabbed Flashstep's wrist and moved it before unhooking her bucket and taking out various chemicals.

“Hold this,” Starving Artist said without looking up, handing him a vial filled with a fuming brown substance. “Don't spill any on your skin if you like having it.”

“Oh... okay,” Flashstep said quietly, barely loudly enough for me to hear. He held the vial with two hands, as far from his body as he could manage.

Starving Artist furiously mixed chemicals from her belt vials, even scraping a drop or two of the man's blood and adding it to her mixture. Flashstep winced as she took the vial from his hands, poured some in, and stuck it back on them.

I could almost smell the fresh rain. Her work bringing me back to that night. The drop on my tongue, the same drop I've felt every night since...

“Fire girl,” Starving Artist said, thrusting a triangular flask out without looking up from her bucket. “Heat this until it bubbles.”

Eimyrja grumbled something and walked over, swiping the flask from the villain's hands and setting a single finger alight. Starving Artist continued working, dipping a finger into her mix and tasting it, before spitting off to the side with a smile. She held out a hand to Eimyrja, making a clasping gesture, seemingly oblivious to the hissing sound the flask made as she took it and poured the contents into the bucket.

Then she was tenderly applying a puke-colored putty mixture to the semi-unconscious man's injuries, gently working it into his wounds as it hardened. I turned away, taking a glance back behind us at the fighting. The Simurgh, ringed in her crown of debris, a trio of capes pummeling her with dazzling flashes of sound and color. Something happened, I couldn't see exactly what, and the Endbringer's debris was telekinetically thrown outwards from all directions. Pieces flew everywhere, smashing into buildings, flying over our heads, one piece heading—

“Take cover!” I screamed, grabbing Icarus off my shoulder and flinging her into the air away from us. I spun to face my back to the oncoming debris, shielding the rest of my team as best I could. As best as I could brace myself, I was still knocked forward by the collision, my face smashing against the viewscreen in front of me.

I blinked back tears as one hand went to clutch my nose, which hadn't fared well, based on the pain and the wet feel of blood running down my face. My sensors had gone offline, leaving the screen in front of me black. Thankfully, I was still secure in my cocoon inside the Torunn mech. I flipped a couple switches, and breathed a sigh of relief as, one by one, the minicameras, sonar, and other sensors all came back online. The Wards were circled around someone, with Icarus circling above in the sky. The microphones were the last to switch on, and abruptly I realized who my team was surrounding.

Starving Artist was screaming, agonized wails I couldn't shut out. Green-gloved hands clutched at her face. Flashstep was holding an empty vial, a horrified look in the eyes behind his mask.

“Does she have a way to counter it?” I asked hurriedly. Nobody answered, so I shoved my way in and knelt down. She was in a puddle of chemicals; her vials had been smashed when she'd fallen.

“Dammit, we need to get her out of here,” I said, mostly to myself, as I saw between her fingers for a
second. There was the sound of breaking glass as Flashstep teleported away, leaving the vial behind. Whatever he was doing, it could wait. I keyed the radio, “Icarus! Can you carry her?”

“Carry who?” she radioed back, circling down to land nearby. She limped over, worry clear in her stance and in the eyes behind her mask. Eimyrja stepped back, letting her take a look.

Icarus froze. I could see her eyes widen as she realized who was screaming. “Alex?” she whispered, barely audible.


“What if it's a trap?” she asked, fear joining the worry in her tone.

“It's not. She could die, Brenna.”

She looked up at me, not saying anything for a second that felt like a minute. Then she nodded. “Okay. I'll fly her back.”

“Hurry,” I said simply as she took off into a hover. I picked up the still-screaming villain and handed her over carefully. And then, with a roar of engines, they were gone.

**Blink**

I sighed in relief as I left the zone, the... the song gone from my mind. The rattled breath of the cape floating beside me by my touch almost sounded like relief, too. The city stretched before me, utterly empty despite the daytime. Not even the night felt so empty. Only lights in the buildings showed there was even any life recently, a consequence of the evacuation. Only the sounds of the distant battle behind me and the helicopters ahead broke the silence.

“We're almost there,” I said to the unknown cape. Electric yellow stripes on an otherwise black bodysuit, fitted so tightly as to leave nothing to the imagination. He looked at me, eyes filled with pain. With his chest crushed, it was a miracle he even lived still. Some kind of brute. “What's your cape name, anyway?”

A rasping sound left his lips, reminding me that with his crushed chest, he was physically unable to speak. I shook my head.

“I must be rattled,” I said out loud. The cape let a series of short raspy sounds. Laughter? I rolled my eyes. “Trying to talk to a cape who can't speak.” Not to mention thinking out loud. Was it so hard to internalize my thoughts, even with the scream gone?

I looked back down, at the line. The border. Razor-wire, quickly placed up. Soldiers pointing guns into the zone. The area past the line contrasted sharply against the evacuated zone. A torrent of activity, soldiers and tanks and other military vehicles driving around. They weren't here in these numbers when I last passed over. The National Guard. Too late for any civilians to evacuate if they hadn't already. At least until the fight was done, if they wanted to accept what that would bring. A beep alerted me to the armband on my wrist. An arrow on the map, pointing slightly to the left. I adjusted my flight to point towards a large building. A helicopter took off from the roof, exposing the red ‘H’ of a hospital landing pad. Avoiding the helicopter, I flew down towards the ground where a group waited, gurneys and ambulances at hand.

“Set him down,” an elderly man said sharply before my feet even hit the ground.

“My power keeps him completely still. I can transport him to a room,” I offered.
“That won't be necessary. We have it,” he said, pointing to a gurney with one finger.

Well fine. Jostle him on your gurney as you move him, then. I set the cape down, and he was wheeled away.

The electronic voice of the armband spoke, reminding me of the battle. More deaths. I wished I could say I felt anything. That these names even held meaning, instead of being yet another statistic. But for what felt like the hundredth time, I thought about Jessica.

This cannot be delayed anymore. I have to make sure she'll be okay if I...

I shook my head and pulled out my phone, tapping in Brenna's number.

Brenna. I'm sorry to ask this, but I don't know who else to tell. Saint Anthony's Hospital, ask for Jessica Hernandez. If I don't make it through this, I want her to know, if nothing else. Not about my identity, but that I passed. If I survive, please please forget I ever sent you this text.

My finger hovered over the send button as I hesitated. Finally, I pressed it. Even knowing I could trust her, though... fucking Endbringers.

“Please hold,” the armband said as I floated up. I paused, staring off into the distance. Smoke rose from the fight, casting the horizon in a grayish hue. Almost as if the smoke was made of blood.

“Blink,” someone said from behind, a man. I turned, looking down at Bunker and Cupid. “We need transportation back. Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” I said, floating down to them. “Are you ready now?”

“Yes,” Cupid said.

Nodding, I took hold of their wrists and floated into the air towards the battle.

“I can give you a morale boost,” Cupid said. “Feels like you could use it.”

“Sure, whatever helps,” I said, only slightly nervous about willingly letting a Master affect me, even one who was a hero.

Cupid pinched me hard on my forearm with her free hand, and the trepidation I felt melted away.

I'll get back to you, Jessica. I won't fail.

“Just keep out of direct harm and you'll be fine, Blink,” Cupid said reassuringly. “The Simurgh preys off getting people to make stupid mistakes. Keep your wits about you.”

“You don't need to reassure me. I'm fine,” I said.

The hero simply raised an eyebrow. “Okay. But if you need—” she was cut off by the beep of a message coming from all three of our armbands.

“—verride. I'm going in! I need all the attention you can give. She won't know what hit her!”

“What in the fuck? Encore?” I said.

“Bring us closer,” Bunker said.

The Simurgh floated with her rotating pile of debris, perfectly still. Eerie, almost like a portrait. Fast
moving orbs flew around. It took me a moment to realize they were Imperium's drones.

“What is he doing?” Cupid said. I followed her gaze to find Encore running up the street towards the Endbringer. He leaped, jumping twenty feet high like it was nothing, and he was now running across rooftops, making the hop between streets easier and easier with each passing second. A handful of Imperium's drones surrounded him, struggling to keep up.

Dozens of capes stopped. Most kept some form of forcefield between them and the Endbringer, but for the most part gave Encore the attention he requested.

“Imperium must be broadcasting this,” I realized out loud. “Giving him as much power as possible.”

“That's not seriously going to work, is it?” Cupid said.

“Can't hurt to try,” Bunker said. “It's his own life he's risking. Go ahead and set us down on that building, and stay near.”

“Got it,” I said, flying over to the pointed building. Some high rise apartment complex, somehow standing among the rubble. Smashed-in shops lay everywhere below, along with debris and what looked like sleeping bags and old tents.

The Simurgh remained still, but chunks of concrete and crushed cars launched towards Encore. With a speed beyond anything I'd ever seen from him, he dodged one and leaped onto another. He continued, leaping from one projectile to the next, steadily closing the distance. Every step he took caused small shockwaves to ripple out from his feet, concrete crumbling and steel tearing apart from his footsteps.

Shit. He's really gonna make it.

Dark blue forcefields cropped up, blocking some debris. Encore used them as footholds, taking more ground with each leap. The Simurgh still did not move, or otherwise do anything but fire off debris, her perpetually still expression almost radiating boredom. What was she planning? Encore's face was lit up in manic glee, as if he was laughing. His face took on a bluish hue as more forcefields rose up around him and the Simurgh, and he leaped the rest of the distance, fist held back. The Simurgh simply looked on as Encore punched her in the face, flinging her against the forcefield with a resounding crack that echoed through the city. Another platform appeared as Encore fell, giving him another foothold to punch the Endbringer again.

The Simurgh's wings shifted, and Encore fell through a shattered forcefield. What looked like a car flew into him, slamming the cape into the ground.

There was a few seconds of silence, interrupted by a familiar voice. Encore down, AF-3.

Yeah. No fucking shit, armband.

The forcefield extended around the Simurgh as she attempted to fly away. A cape I didn't recognize intercepted her with a punch before jumping away. Other capes threw what they could at her, what looked like beams of light, rocks, ice, or whatever it was they had.

“Blink,” Cupid said. “Take me down to the street.”

Debris struck the forcefield, cracking the concrete below as it shattered. Small pieces of concrete and metal flew into the nearby forest, shredding trees. I set Cupid down on the street, and as she ran off towards some capes I floated towards where Encore landed, keeping an eye on the battle. The Endbringer flew up, intercepting or ignoring further fire. Legend appeared from above and shot a
laser at her, cutting through several trees as she dodged. My armband mentioned the dead and injured again as she retaliated against a group with a barrage of scrap. The Simurgh was playing with us. She probably only even let capes hit her. What the hell were we doing here? Legend's words floated back to my mind. Containment, doing what we can. My powers couldn't hurt her, but at least I could support those who could.

Encore lay in a crater, sheets of scrap metal covering most of his body. I started to wonder if Dragon's system made a mistake, listing him only as down rather than deceased. Something struck the ground near me, and I teleported behind the scrap to avoid the potential shrapnel. There was the sound of coughing below me, and I looked back down to see Encore shifting slightly. His power could be stronger than I ever thought, it seemed, but he was still covered in scrap I couldn't hope to lift.

Pressing a button, I spoke into the armband, “I've got an injured cape that needs attention, but I can't move him with this scrap in the way.”

“Hah,” Encore said weakly. “Did I even scratch her?”

“Not really,” I said bluntly. “But you're alive. Don't waste your energy.”

“Damn. I've never felt more alive. So many eyes around, millions that had to be viewing the broadcast... dammit... worth nothing in the end.”

“Ah, Encore,” a voice I didn't expect said from behind. A pair of Imperium's bots marched from his side to the scrap and lifted. “I am pleased to see you survived.”

“I didn't think you were the type to appear personally,” I said as I reached down to Encore. His body looked remarkably intact considering what happened, but there was no telling what had happened internally.

“You assume I'm of any sort of type, Blink,” Imperium said, his eyes meeting my own. “Assumptions are as dangerous as they are useless.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” I said hesitantly as I floated Encore up, ignoring his choking laugh. Sometimes, I never knew what to say to Imperium.

Taking my eyes off Imperium, I looked towards the fight as I flew up. The Simurgh floated over the outskirts of the forest now, as capes pelted her with attacks. As I watched, vines sprouted underneath her, rising rapidly up and enveloping her. Floating debris crashed through the vines, severing the hold. In the shadows of the forest behind her, I spotted a figure, one I almost mistook for a tree. It had to be tall, covered in so many moss-covered branches it somewhat looked like a tree itself. An antlered skull sat where its face would be.

*Treant.*
Again. They deleted it again. Whoever they were, the URL only came up with a message stating that there was nothing there. Even the posts. I was beginning to think I’d gone insane, having memories of something I never actually did. All I wanted to do was announce to the world of my cape identity. I had the perfect name. Cauldron. A pang thudded through my mind, as if I had ran head first into a brick wall. Aftereffects of my brew.

Despite the migraine, I giggled. Brew. As if I was truly a witch, except I stirred my concoctions in a stainless steel pot meant for making soup. And I hated soup. Would I get a cauldron if I were a hero? They’d probably want to do something stupid with my image. Maybe I’d have to be an independent hero.

Being a villain would pay more, though, if only so I could get a real cauldron. Couldn't name myself Cauldron without a cauldron, and that much cast iron would be expensive. Not to mention heavy.

Of course, moral implications and all. I didn’t want to be a bad cape, so I’d have to be careful as a villain. Imperium had shown us that there were good villains out there, after all.

“Kiko!” someone shouted from below. The migraine pounded ten-fold.

Go away.

Sharp knocks pounded against the door. Super pointy knuckles, hitting at the perfect angle to generate the worst sound in the world.

“What? I didn’t say you could come in. What if I wasn't wearing a shirt?” I said, glaring at him.

Damon rolled his eyes and walked away.

“We've got a guest. Dad wants us to be a little more presentable than usual. Says someone very important is visiting.”

“Ugh, did he say who?” I said, facepalming. Damon was already out of earshot, having left the door open. The motion only brought more pain.

Sighing, I stood up and stumbled over to the door, slamming it closed. An action full of regret. A sniff of my shirt suggested I should probably change. I'd rather take a shower first if we were receiving a guest, but some deodorant would have to do. Smirking at my Eimyrja poster, I pulled my shirt off, tossing it in the hamper. Some deodorant, an actual bra, and a fresh shirt later, I could say I was somewhat decent. My jeans were already perfectly good. Unlike my brother, I had some sense not to wear ripped pants.

I considered applying makeup before cringing at the sight of my face in the mirror. Ugly red scar on

My face hit the pillow before I could breathe again, my heart pumping as if I'd been running a marathon. No. Don't. It wasn't even the worst moment. Just the start. I threw my pillow at a wall, wincing as it collided with the poster of Cupid. Mint condition, autographed! Turning my eyes away, I glanced at the vial. Strength. With it, I could break a man's arm with just my hand. He'd be crippled, and I'd only have a headache. And nausea. Maybe I'd puke if I had eaten too much.

“Kiko!” my brother shouted. Again.

Rolling my eyes, I walked to the door, vial slipped away in my pocket. At least my damn migraine was calming down to more of a dull thump than a piercing stab. Damon fell slightly as I opened the door, barely catching himself.

“Really?” he said.

“Your fault,” I said with a smirk.

“I guess,” Damon said, shrugging as he walked towards the stairs. “So uh, turns out it's Dad's boss. Well, boss's boss's boss. CEO I think they said?”

“Whoa. What for?” I asked, following him down, hand gripping the rail. My movements were slightly clumsy.

“Some crap about getting to know employees. Like I know how suit people work.”

“Suit people,” I said deadpan. “You have a way with words.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The scent of Dad's pot roast stew filled the air as we stepped into the living room. Mom walked around the dinner table in the living room, shifting silverware, a frantic look on her face. Her auburn hair clearly had been set in a bun at one point, only for hair to spill out as she jerked her head around trying to make sure the table was fine.

“Mom?” Damon said. Mom looked up at us.

“Not now, Damon. Dr. Fadel will be here any moment. Everything must be perfect. Everything.”

“It's fine, Mom. The silverware couldn't possibly get any straighter,” Damon said, rolling his eyes. I snorted.

“I think I'll go see if Dad needs any help,” I said. Mom was a bit too difficult to get into when she went into that mood.

As I approached the kitchen, I heard a loud crash of something metal. Dad let out a string of curses, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes at the sight of him bending down to pick up a metal bowl. He looked fairly silly with an apron tied over a suit, also.

“You tripped over the bag of rice again, didn't you?” I said, leaning against the entryway. The bag of rice was still there, leaning against a cabinet. Dad couldn't move it, what with his back; Mom didn't seem to want to bother with it; and Damon had pointedly ignored it after he brought it in from the family grocery trip a week ago. I sure as hell couldn't lift a fifty pound bag.
“No! I've got everything under control. Just... testing the structural integrity of our cookware,” he said hurriedly, setting the metal bowl in the sink.

The vial rubbed against my leg as I shifted in place. Tempting.

“You sure you don't need help?” I asked him as he lifted the lid of the pot, using a spoon to taste as he squinted from the assault of steam.

“It's almost done. Why don't you help your mother set the table?”

“Damon's helping her.”

“Right,” he said, rolling his eyes. The ring of the doorbell startled him, nearly causing Dad to drop the spoon. “It's Dr. Fadel! Kiko, go answer the door.”

“Oki doki,” I said, sighing. Mom and Dad never ceased to be dramatic.

“Christ, Mom. It's fine!” Damon said as I walked past them.

“Is my hair fine? How is my hair?”

“It's fine.”

“Fuck. God. I gotta head to a mirror one second.”

Hissing as my feet touched the cold floor right by the door, I opened it. A man stood there, wearing a business suit with his arms clasped behind his back. He glanced down at me with hazel eyes, dark brown hair resting just above them.

“Hello,” I said simply. The man was probably Dr. Fadel, but I hardly had any reason to panic at the thought like my parents were.

“Greetings. You must be Kiko,” he said, giving me what felt like a calculating look.

“Yeah? Did Dad talk about me?” I said.

The man smiled. “You should try a name besides that of Cauldron. Anything else. Maybe even Potion?”

What.

“What?” I said. What?

“May I come in? I'd like to speak to your father.”

“Y-yeah. Sure,” I said, stepping to the side. My legs felt heavy, and my heart thumped as the man walked past.

“Dr. Fadel! It is an honor to have you here,” Dad said, walking out of the kitchen with his spoon one hand, the other reached out.

My dad's boss's boss's boss knew I was a cape. About my attempts to cement my name.

“Mr. Henderson. A pleasure,” Dr. Fadel said, shaking Dad's hand.

Admittedly, Potion wasn't a bad sounding name.
“Oh, this is Damon,” Dad said, gesturing with the spoon.

I only just then remembered to close the door and walk over.

“Yo,” Damon said, giving the man a bored glance.

If only my family wasn't around, I could question him. My fingers traced the vial in my pocket.

“I've just finished preparing dinner. Would you like to have a seat?” Dad said nervously.

“That would be lovely. It smells delicious.”

As Dad lead the man over to a seat, I found my own, keeping him in my view.

“And this is Kiko. She opened the door for you,” Dad said, glancing at me.

“Yes. We have been acquainted,” Dr. Fadel said, glancing at me again.

“My wife should be out shortly,” Dad said, moving to the kitchen.

The man pulled out a small book, with scribbles that I couldn't quite figure out. Another language, probably. Damon yawned and tapped his fingers on the table, and the man shot him a brief irritated glance.

“Dr. Fadel! It's a pleasure,” my mom said from behind me as the man snapped his book shut and stood up.

“A pleasure, Mrs. Henderson,” he said, reaching his hand to shake Mom's as she rounded the table.

“Damon! I need you in the kitchen!” Dad shouted from the kitchen.

With a sigh, Damon stood up and walked over. Dr. Fadel pulled out his book again. This was going to be an awkward dinner.

---

Dr. Fadel was very good at saying or gesturing just enough to contribute only the bare minimum to a conversation. Dad yammered on something at the door, which I couldn't help but tune out. I kept my eyes on the strange man, shivering every time he made brief eye contact. There was a sort of feeling from the man, a sense of superiority and power. That at any moment, if he wanted me dead, I wouldn't even get my vial half-way to my lips.

Damon wandered off at some point, and Mom was busy listening and nodding at Dad's side, so there was no one to notice me slip away towards the back door. The night air chilled me, and I cursed my lack of shoes as I stepped through the back yard and through the fence gate. Wet grass was gross. I felt the vial in my pocket, pumping myself for what I was about to do. Leaning against the wall, I watched the porch, waiting for Dr. Fadel to walk out.

The neighborhood was quiet at this hour, the one advantage to Dad talking forever. A car slowly passed by, and I pulled out my phone so I'd look a little less silly, standing out here like this. The sounds of the door opening startled me; I nearly dropped my phone jerking forward.
“Have a safe drive home!” Dad said from inside.

“Thank you. I wish you a wonderful night,” Dr. Fadel said, just out of view.

The door closed, and I watched the suited man walk away, eyes firmly glued to his hand. Taking a deep breath to calm my beating heart, I stepped forward.

“I am not an easy man to sneak up on, I must warn you,” Dr. Fadel said without moving his eyes from his phone.

“Wh-what?” I said stupidly.

The man turned around, smirking. “In your pocket must be one of those vials you've boasted about.”

“Who the heck are you?” I said, reaching into my pocket.

“Dr. Ammar Fadel.”

“That's not what I meant.”

The man cocked his head to the side. “Then you should choose your words better.”

“How do you know I'm a cape?” I asked nervously hushed.

“Sources,” he said, smiling. “Connections.”

This wasn't going anywhere.

“What do you want with me?”

“Your services would prove useful. Especially if your vials work on others. Of course, this depends on you. My chief motivation was to alert you that the name Cauldron is unavailable.”

He wants my services? For what?

“Why, though? What's wrong with Cauldron?” It was such a good name.

“Take my advice. I don't give it lightly. Don't use the name, and don't question why.”

A part of me wanted to put my foot down and use the name anyway. Except, the article was deleted. My posts were deleted. And here was this random man in a suit, Dad's boss's boss's whatever, out of nowhere telling me not to.

“Fine,” I said grudgingly. Potion was too good of a name, anyway.

“Excellent,” the man said, handing a card with some weird symbol. A circle of leaves. “Rarely does a cape survive on their own.”

On the back was a number.

“Good night, Miss Kiko,” the man said, climbing into his vehicle.

I flipped the card several times, but there was nothing besides the symbol and the number. The engine of the car started up, and I watched as he drove away.

Who in the heck was he?
I half fell, half pushed through the fence gate, barely catching myself on the fence. My body ached, my head ached, and my backpack felt as if it was loaded down with bricks. My heart had long since settled from the fight. The terror, the exhilaration clung to me. I’d never consider myself an adrenaline junky, but there was something to be said for having power and strength, and using it.

I slid the back door open, just enough to tip-toe through. The door always sounded too loud at this hour, but I knew from experience they wouldn’t wake up. A box of doughnuts sat on the kitchen counter, and I eagerly grabbed one for a late-night snack. Lights flickered on as I stepped through the kitchen, pain slicing into my head from the sudden brightness.

“Kiko, we need to--are you alright?” a man said. Dad.

*Shit. They’re awake. Think!*

Something touched my shoulder, and I looked up to see Dad looking down at me with concern.

“Yeah, sorry. I just have a headache,” I mumbled, not meeting his eyes.

“Kiko…” he trailed off, shaking his head and walking towards the living room. “Please, have a seat.”

“Okay,” I said nervously, joining him on one of the couches. *Please be about the late nights.*

“You know you can talk to us about anything, right?” he said.

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“Even if we aren’t related by blood, you are my daughter and I will always love and care about you.”

“Where are you going with this?” I asked, looking away.

“Kiko… you’ve been sneaking off for a while, haven’t you? Not to mention the random texts about saying you’ll be out with friends.”

What could I even say? I stayed silent. He continued, “At first I was glad that you were finally getting out, socializing. But… sometimes you don’t seem well. And I’m worried.”

“I’m fine. Just tired,” I said lamely.

“Kiko, you’ve been coming home late. Often with headaches. Some days you barely eat at normal times. And I’ve seen bruises, occasionally, when you don’t bundle up.”

I should’ve known I couldn’t hide it forever.

“I can explain,” I said quietly. God, this wasn’t how I wanted to tell them.

“Please. Whatever is going on, these drugs are bad for you. I don’t know what this Starving Artist puts in them, but it can’t be good.”
The corners of my mouth twitched.

“T’m not—I—what?” I said, glancing at him. “Why would you think I’d be taking that shit?”

Dad grimaced and pulled out a vial. One of mine. By its color and symbol, it would’ve been from my fifth rotation batch of speed.

“Did you go through my room?” I said. Of all the things he could’ve done, he had to invade my privacy.

“I’m sorry,” he said regretfully. “I never would have done it, but… Kiko. This crap is horrible, and seeing you like this just…it pains me. I’ve heard how addictive this stuff can be and, and I think about what you’re doing with—”

“Okay, no,” I said irritably, cutting him off. “Why does everyone freaking get my concoctions and Starving Artist’s crap mixed up?” I winced, having realized what I just said. That sure was one way to come out.

“What are you talking about?” he said, giving me a strange look.

“Fifth batch, speed. If you take this, you will be granted the power to move more quickly. Though your brain will process the same. It’s a little wonky taking alone,” I said.

“Speed? I don’t keep up with Starving Artist’s--”

“Gah!” I half yelled, pressing a hand to my mouth. For being an engineer, Dad was dense sometimes. “Sorry. Just, give me a moment.”

Reaching into my backpack, I fished around for my mask and hat and pulled it out. It only took a moment to set up from its compartmentalized form and set on my head. Dad’s eyes widened.

“That’s Potion’s mask. From Imperium’s group.”

“I am Potion,” I grumbled, impatient.

“Oh,” he said, glancing at me, then my potion, then back at me.

“I’m not doing drugs,” I said, pulling off my mask and looking away. “I brew potions, concoctions that grant a variety of powers, in return for some temporary side effects.”

“That’s why you have headaches sometimes?”

“Yeah.”

Dad didn’t say anything for a while. We sat in silence.

“I think I’d be more comfortable if you were in the Wards,” he said, breaking the silence.

“I think I’ll pass on being some government sponsored pet.”

“Kiko…”

“Who saved us when they attacked?” I said, glancing at Dad. He looked away.

“Imperium,” he said quietly.
“That’s right. The whole hero villain thing is a joke,” I said bitterly. It only got worse as a cape, when it became obvious how much of a game it all was.

“I don’t like seeing you get hurt.”

“I’d get hurt either way.”

“But…” he trailed off, clutching his forehead with a hand.

“At least I’m not doing drugs?” I said in a small voice.

---

The building shook, and shouts reached me past the constant head noise. My chin ached, and it took me a moment to realize I collapsed.

“Potion? Potion!” Woodwind shouted.

“I’m fine,” I groaned, steadily rising to a standing position. “I’ve just... I’ve used too much in too short a time.”

Woodwind's beautiful song started back up, one of her little golems helping me up.

“Thanks.”

“There is no need to thank me. We are a team, after all,” she said melodically.

“Yeah, we are,” I said with a smile, wincing at the jackhammer in my head. My stuff hasn’t hurt me this much since... since I started. “Umm, we were evacuating people from this building, right? Sorry, I'm... woozy.” Woozy with a case of flashbacks.

“It seems our way out has been blocked,” she said. “My golems have been unable to break out.”


“Not enough,” she said simply, her voice slipping into a minor key.

“Is... is there something through a ceiling, maybe? I've got flight potions still. You could get out.”

“We're underground.”

“What, really? When...” I trailed off, shaking my head, wincing with regret at the motion. “Never mind. So what now?”

Woodwind's armband crackled. “I am sorry,” a woman's voice said. “But there's no way we could reach you in time. Is there a message you would like passed on?”

“Oh god. We aren't really gonna die, are we?” I said, my foggy mind finally working through the mud.

“There is no one who would want to hear my final words,” Woodwind said softly into the armband.

“Damon. Mom. Dad. I... they... but...”
Woodwind pulled me into a hug. She smelled familiar, like of incense I used to have. I took a deep breath. No use panicking in the end.

“My name is Kiko Henderson,” I said into the armband. “There’s probably no one else with my name. Please tell my family... that I'm sorry.”

There was another rumble, the ground shaking again, but Woodwind held me steady.

“How long do we have?” Woodwind asked. It took me a moment to realize she wasn't talking to me.

“Approximately ten minutes,” the armband droned.

“Ten minutes,” I whispered. “That's the rest of my life?”

I sure as hell wasn't living as the Simurgh's puppet.

“Every song must come to an end,” Woodwind intoned.

Even after we'd worked together, I still never got a chance to get to know her. She'd turned down my sanctuary invitations.

“Umm,” I said, hesitantly. “If you have last words, I wouldn't mind hearing them.”

Woodwind stepped back, her lips pressed against her flute. Her music flowed, and golems formed a bench where she sat down, legs crossed.

“What is there to say? I'm afraid I don't have a line prepared for this.”

“May I?” I said, gesturing towards the bench.

Woodwind scooted over, and I sat down next to her. After a moment, I pulled my mask off. There was no further need for it. Woodwind glanced at me and pulled her own off. Her face was soft, unblemished. A scar sat just below her right eye, barely visible. Her eyes, a deep dark brown like my own, met mine. My cheeks felt oddly warm.

“Can you sing?” I asked nervously.

A long, quiet note sounded from her lips, and she sung, words which I couldn't understand. Yet they felt familiar, somehow. Familiar and sad. Her song bounced off the walls, a section sounding almost like a cry. She finally stopped, and I had to wipe tears from my eyes.

“That was beautiful,” I said. “Thank you.”

Woodwind glanced at the armband. “I thought it was fitting.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Hey, I'm sorry to ask for another request, but...” I trailed off.

Woodwind raised an eyebrow. It was a struggle to meet her eyes again, my cheeks even warmer than before.

“I've... well, I mean. Uh. I'd hate to—”

Woodwind's lips met mine mid-sentence. I froze, and she pulled back.

“Umm,” I said.
It didn’t feel at all how I expected. Probably because I froze up. Stupid Kiko!

“Uh?” she said. “Was that not what you—”

“It was,” I said, looking down. “At least I got to do that one time before...”

Woodwind glanced again at the armband, wincing.

“How long?” I asked.

She hummed, and I could hear rocks moving from above. I glanced up. Oh.

“That’s one way to go,” I said, glancing at her lips.

I leaned over and pressed my lips against hers for a too-brief moment before leaning back. Woodwind didn’t stop humming, wrapping her arms around me, pulling me in tightly.

Her humming never stopped.
Icarus

The wall against my back was cold against my bare skin, providing respite from the unforgiving warmth of the rest of the room. The lights were dark and I was alone in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar place. Someone was playing music in the next room over, which was nice; it helped cover up the other sounds. What it didn’t cover up was the smell of nicotine and weed and other stuff that permeated the house. It didn’t stop the itching in my arm where they’d shot me full of god-knows-what.

Nothing I’d done had stopped any of that.

It was raining outside, light patters splashing against the window. The illumination from the streetlight outside projected shadowy rivulets that ran down the glass onto the ceiling above me. In any other situation it would have been nice.

I heard the sound of footsteps outside, and I had just enough time to pull the sheet over me when the door opened. Three figures, two shorter, one taller, silhouetted against the hallway light “Stay back!” I shouted, my fists clenching, the scabs on my knuckles cracking open. It stung as my sweat mixed into the wounds.

“Told you she was stubborn,” one said to the others. I felt my heart clench at her voice. Branwen.

The bitch that had started all this. One of them flipped the light switch, and I had to fling a hand up to shield my eyes. The motion made me whimper with pain, the infection in my arm throbbing at the stress.

“You told me you were treating them well, Branwen,” the taller figure growled. With my eyes still adjusting to the light, all I could see was his silhouette, a towering figure with jagged footlong claws instead of fingers Another cape? “She does not look like she’s been treated well.”

“I can’t treat this one well. Fucking whore won’t play nice with anyone ,” Branwen grumbled. The third cape, the shortest, had a black and green costume on, with some sort of gas mask on her face. She was staring at me.

“This is not how we operate,” the clawed cape said.

“It’s how I operate, then!” Branwen shouted. “She gets treated better when she learns her pla—” She was cut off as the man backhanded her, sending her flying into the wall.

“She clearly knows her place better than you know yours, Branwen. Leave us.”

Branwen glared at him, hand covering her bleeding cheek, before fluttering out of the room in a burst of feathers. I was so busy watching her leave that I almost missed the footsteps of the green girl getting closer. I shuffled away, putting myself in the corner of the bed away from her, whimpering at the pain the motion brought.

“It’s okay,” she said, looking me over, her voice muffled by the mask. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled. “You’re with them .” I jerked my head in the direction Branwen had gone.
“Bloodletter, I think she will be more comfortable with you… not here,” she said to the clawed man. Bloodletter. Leader of the Ravens. The pieces were coming together.

“What, you’re shy? Don’t want to rape me in front of your boss?” I said to her, my voice cracking partway through.

Bloodletter simply grunted, and walked out of the room, leaving the door open. The green woman stared at me, a curious look in her eyes. I met her eye-to-eye, trying not to blink even as my eyes stung.

“I’m not going to rape you,” she finally said, her voice quiet. She glanced down, pulling a jar of something from her belt. “Can I help clean your wounds? And I can make something for that infection in your arm.”

“Am I allowed to say no?” I asked, as she opened the jar to reveal an ointment of some sort. Still… it wasn’t possible for much worse to happen, at this point. I extended a hand warily, and she took it. She scooped a green-gloved fingertip of ointment out and began rubbing it into my bleeding knuckles. It left a tingly sensation.

“Who are you?” I asked, pulling my hand back.

“Starving Artist,” she replied. She slowly sat down next to me on the bed, holding my other hand, her touch gentle.

“You’re a Raven,” I growled. I would have put distance between us, but I was already cornered.

“Yes.” She was working the ointment in, now.

“Shouldn’t you be, I dunno, kidnapping girls?” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Starving Artist paused, her free hand lifting up her respirator, so she could take a drink from one of the vials on her belt. She took a deep breath, setting the respirator on the bed between us. “I don’t deal with this side of the business,” she said, grimacing. “Between you and me, I don’t like… this.”

“Then why are you here?” I asked flatly.

She didn’t respond, instead moving her grip up my arm, to the assorted needle marks I’d gained over the past few days. With the light on, I could see how red and inflamed it was. Just looking at it made me want to scratch it, but I pushed that away.

“I’m here because I want to help you,” Starving Artist said after the pause.

“Oh? Taking me home?” I asked. It was sarcasm, but… more than a little hope that that was it.

“...No. But I can get you out of here. I need an assistant, to help me create my art.”

“I don’t want to be your assistant. I want to go home,” I said, my voice cracking again. “I want to see Mom and Dad and—” I cut myself off with a sob, my vision blurring with tears. “I… I want to see Amy, and Sam, and Taylor, and… go back to being fucking normal!”

“It’s okay,” she said softly as I continued sobbing. I was crying into her shoulder, I realized. “Just let it all out. It’ll be okay.”

Sometime later, I wasn’t sure how long, I stopped crying, rubbing the salt away from my eyes. Starving Artist was still there. “I… if I help you, can I go… not here?”
“Of course,” she said reassuringly. “No more of… of this.”

“Okay,” I replied, hugging myself tightly. “Can we go?”

---

_Potion deceased, A-3. Woodwind deceased, A-3._

The wind blew through my hair as I flew. Everything hurt, but it didn’t matter. My implant’s not-nanobot nanobots were stopping any bleeding, and other than what I suspected was a broken rib, I was probably fine. Probably. Starving Artist, on the other hand…

She’d stopped screaming, but now it had become something between a whimper and a gargle. Part of me wanted to let go. It would be an accident, no questions asked. Turbulence, or even a stray bit of debris bumping me. _Starving Artist, deceased_. That simple. One quick motion, and the monster in my arms would be gone. The woman who’d hurt me, and so many others, just like that.

Instead, I continued flying.

“It’ll be okay, Alex. We’re almost there.”

---

“Fuck, that hurts,” I gasped out, clenching my teeth at the pain. The buzzing stopped, and Alex looked up.

“Sylvi? If it’s too much we can—”

“No, it’s fine,” I said reassuringly. “Just… hurts, is all. Do you have…?”

She passed me a small flask, and I took a sip, sighing in relief as contentedness filled me, washing away the sting of the tattoo needle-thing. The cloudiness went away, too, the need to have her drugs.

“Thanks,” I replied, taking a deep breath.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want, Sylvi,” Alex said, her free hand finding mine.

“No, I do. I like your design, it’s pretty.” That made her smile. A very pretty smile. She’d shown me her own tattoo, a single black feather tucked behind her left ear. All of the Ravens had one in one way or another, except Branwen because, well, yeah.

Even thinking about her, though… it made me sick. Alex didn’t seem to like her either, but hadn’t really said why. Not that I really needed any reasons to dislike her further, after…

Alex started up again, making me jump. Why she’d suggested my thigh was beyond me. I took another sip from the flask to quell the pain. Part of me wondered what Dad would think of me getting a tattoo. Probably a stern talking-to, and send me upstairs…
I paused. Send me...

“Sylvia? What’s wrong?” Alex asked. I was crying, I realized.

“I can’t remember, what… what home looks like.”

She swore under her breath, wrapping her arms around me. “The memory loss again?”

I nodded, holding her tight, trying to quell the flood of tears. “I don’t… I don’t want to forget any more, Alex. It’s scary.”

She was silent for a moment, hugging me as I sobbed. Finally, she spoke. “Sylvia… I’m going to fix this, I promise. We’ll get through it together, okay?”

I pulled back a bit, looking at her. Our eyes met, and she smiled reassuringly, before leaning forward to kiss me softly, leaving behind a trace of tingling peppermint on my lips.

“Oh,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Sylvia?” she said in a stammering tone. I noticed she was blushing a bit.

“Oh?” I asked.

She pulled a vial out, looked at it, and put it back. Then she spoke, her words shaky and unsure.

“I love you.”

What?

There was a pause, the air stilling between us. “Anyway, I should finish your tattoo,” she continued hurriedly.

I blinked. The words caught up to my brain, finally. As she busied herself with the tattoo thing, I took a deep breath, drew upon my courage. Finally, just before she started with the ink, I found the strength to whisper.

“I love you too.”

---

I landed just outside one of the medical tents, stumbling a bit as weight returned to my legs. The action caused Starving Artist to cry out, but I pushed that away. A nurse came over, carrying a gurney alongside one of Imperium’s robots.

I set her down gently, careful not to jostle any of her vials. I turned to limp away, but stopped. There was a quiet sizzle. One of Starving Artist’s hands had grabbed mine, holding it like her life depended on it.

“Please don’t go,” she whispered.

I jerked my hand away, taking a step back as she was taken inside the tent. Part of me felt bad. The rest of me remembered what she’d done.
I should have dropped you.

With a shaky sigh, I turned away from the tent, walking until I was out of the way before shutting my engines down entirely. The weight caused me to crumple and fall to the ground, but after everything I barely noticed.

I could barely hear the Simurgh’s song now, as far away as I was. I mentally pulled up the armband map onto my HUD, glancing over it. I’d liked to have thought that maybe I’d made a difference, with my arm-cannon, but…

“Icarus to Flashstep,” I radioed over the Wards frequency. I didn’t see him on the map, only a clump of three dots working their way back towards the border. TB, Eimyrja, and Red Light.

There wasn’t any response. I sighed. I would have heard if his name came up on the kill feed. He’d be fine. The rest of my team was on their way towards me. I would have gone back out, but I was already nearing the limit of my exposure. Any more, and…

Instead, I fell backwards, folding my wings so I could lean back on them and still remain upright. I let my eyes close, the sounds of the radio traffic and kill messages washing over me.

Please don’t go.

---

Even with the warmth of Alex dozing next to me, I felt cold. Things were… different now, ever since…

Ever since I’d triggered.

I hadn’t told her, or any of the Ravens. Why would I? After all they’d done to me…

Alex’s bare arm wrapped around me, and she spoke, her voice drowsy, “Sylvi? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly, swallowing. “Just couldn’t sleep.”

“I could make something to help?” I simply shook my head in response, and she continued, “Is everything alright, love? You’ve been… different, and your chemistry has been off for a few weeks now.”

“I just…” I just realized you’ve been using me this entire time, you rapist bitch. “I just miss my mom and dad, is all.”

“We could—”

“No. I don’t want them to see me like this,” I cut her off, pulling the sheet up to shield me. “I don’t want them to—”

Upstairs, I heard shouting, and the sound of gunfire. Alex bolted up, leaping out of the bed with a growl. “Something’s happening, Sylvi, find a place to hide, okay? Stay there until this is all over.” She started throwing on her costume from the scattered bits around the room.

I nodded, pulling the sheet around myself as I crawled out of bed. Alex threw a bandolier of vials
over her shoulder, and was turning to run out the door when she stopped, and turned to face me, pulling a sealed vial off of her belt and holding it out to me.

“What is this?” I asked shakily as I grabbed it. Warm to the touch, a glistening deep blue fluid that felt heavy and thick.

“If someone tries to hurt you,” Starving Artist said. “Throw that at them and run. I love you, Sylvi.” And then she was gone, running out the door towards the continuing sounds of a shootout.

I stared at the open doorway, thinking. Would I have another chance? It was… It’d be risky, but it was my only chance. I threw the sheet down, setting the blue vial on a table, and started getting dressed from the random clothes strewn about. It all smelled like Alex, but that didn’t matter right now. Bigger problems.

I grabbed a backpack, dumping the contents—several bricks of drugs, and a plastic case of vials—onto the ground before making my way over to the workshop side of Alex’s room. I opened one of the drawers on a desk, reaching into the back until I felt it. Half-built, pieced together from what I could get without her noticing. Once it was done, it’d cleanse my body of all the shit I’d been dosed with.

But right now it was junk. I threw it in the backpack, along with a vial of the pink shit. Alex was calling it Heartbreak now, apparently. I grabbed one of the drug bricks off the ground and threw it in too. Worst-case, I could sell it or something. Grabbed the blue vial but kept it in my hand.

I glanced around the messy room. There was nothing else for me here. I shut the door behind me, Alex’s spare costume boots making a clicking noise against the cheap linoleum of the makeshift Ravens hideout as I ran down the almost pitch-black hall. Behind me, I could hear gunfire still, the sound of footsteps rushing down the stairs.

At the end of the hall, one of those half-window things to provide a little light to a basement room. I grabbed a table and dragged it over to the window, climbing atop it to start pulling myself out…

“Freeze!” someone shouted behind me. I turned my head slowly. A person, a woman by her size, covered in black body armor with PRT written across the chest. A gun in her hands, pointed at me. “Step back from the window. Hands up!”

“I’m not one of them,” I said, feeling a bit of a panic. I held my hands to the side, not wanting to move.

The PRT officer kept the gun pointed at me, using her other hand to key a radio. “This is Space Cat. I need a cape downstairs ASAP. Raven out of costume.”

“I’m not a Raven!” I shouted at her. She ignored me. My hand twitched, and I realized I was still holding the blue vial. There was the sound of more footsteps behind her.

Fuck.

I threw the vial, hitting her in the chest. The thick blue fluid splattered all over her armor, and the air was filled with a terrible sizzling sound. Then it caught fire.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuck.

I leaped for the window, trying to ignore the screams as the officer tried to put out the fucking flaming acid substance. Pulled myself through just as a bluish barrier popped into existence where the window had been.
I ran out the back yard, the sounds of PRT sirens echoing through the quiet Arsenal neighborhood. Down an alleyway between two apartment buildings, past a junkie with a needle. Ran until I could barely hear the sirens, adrenaline carrying me the entire way.

Eventually it was too much, and I found myself sitting with my back against a dumpster, heaving for breath with my heart pounding. They’d thought I was a Raven. I looked down at my trembling hands. Had I been, at the end? I was all-too-aware of the tattoo Alex had given me.

I couldn’t run right now, even though I probably should have. Instead, I cried. I’d deal with it later, I told myself. Not now.

Blink

“Help!” a cape screamed amidst the raining debris.

So many injured. So much moving around. Moving capes around, injured and not. I stopped paying attention to the costumes long ago. The cape looked up at me pleadingly, arm outstretched.

Was it bad that I stopped feeling for them at some point? Going through the motions. An instinctual beat, almost like an orchestra or a marching band reverberated through me. Pushing against the Simurgh’s siren, her scream. Carrying past, taking me with it.

Rubble crushed the cape’s leg. Could’ve been worse, looking at the damage. Ignoring the expression on their face as I approached, I pushed at the rubble, attempting to make it budge just enough so I could move them. Dark blue shimmered above us as rubble crashed into it, and I let out a silent thanks to whichever Shaker helped us. The debris was heavy, but I only needed to shift it a little. A moment later, and I teleported the cape away.

“Put me down,” they said, their breathing almost jittery. “I’ll be fine from here.”

“You sure?” I said, glancing at their leg.

“Yeah. Put me down,” they yelled, their voice shaky.

They hopped away the moment I set them down, glancing at me before jump climbing up the side of a building. Always with the weird powers. The cape slipped on a vine briefly before catching themselves and climbing the rest of the way.

Vines. Flowers. Shrubbery. Even trees were taking root, as nature reclaimed the area alarmingly quickly. The Simurgh and Treant had shifted locations in their fight. A crack thundered behind me, a house having been split apart by nature.

With the brief pause in moving capes around, I floated up to see how the distant fight was going. The Simurgh was clearly visible, assaulted by a barrage of life. I couldn’t see Treant among the forest, which appeared thicker than it had previously.

Debris floated up to the Simurgh and shot into the forest. The assault of nature ceased, even as she continued firing into the same spot.

“Pick up requested, AB-8,” the armband said, pointing me towards the fight.

It never ended, did it? Except for the brief rest I took to reduce exposure. The call, the song crashed through my mind more and more as I approached, starting right where it had left off. My heart hammered again as I approached. I doubted I’d ever get used to approaching an Endbringer.
The cape waiting for me stood beside a cluster of trees, and waved as I approached, seemingly unperturbed by the Endbringer attacking a group of capes nearby. They didn’t appear injured, and their dull gray armour wasn’t damaged in the slightest.

“You need a pickup?” I asked.

“Equipment is fucked. Mind getting me out before I get impaled? Or crushed. Or worse,” they droned.

_Every damn cape is a weirdo._

Vines sprouted out of the ground, growing in random directions. Some of it headed directly for us. Grabbing the cape’s wrist, I teleported out of the way and flew off. Treant still lived, somehow. I caught a brief glance at them, standing tall with small pieces of metal sticking out, before they faded from sight.

The Simurgh turned in our direction and slowly floated over, shifting debris intercepting any attack heading towards her. Golden light appeared, a man of gold flying past me towards the Simurgh.

I turned to see Scion floating close by in front of me, looking at the spot where the Simurgh was previously.

“Late as always,” someone grumbled next to me. Bunker, I realized, walking with Cupid alongside him.

The golden man turned, glancing in my direction. Except, not _at_ me, but near me. I couldn’t articulate how I knew. He flew away a moment later, turning into a golden blur.

Numerous capes shifted over to look at a different spot. Over in the trees, slight movement with a glint of metal.

“Treant was there too long,” Bunker said. “This isn’t good.”

“What do we do then?” I found myself asking.

“I’m getting out of here,” the cape I was carrying said, shrugging off my hand and falling the rest of the way to the ground. “Fight’s over, right?”

Watching the cape as they ran off, I turned towards Bunker. “Is it?”

A drop of water fell on my face, and I looked up to see a cape standing on a platform of ice, surrounded by spears of ice. Tundra. She flew towards Treant, ice spears launching toward them even as she formed new ones.

“Tundra!” a woman’s voice shouted. Cupid ran forward, over towards where Tundra was attacking from. “Please, stop!”

A forcefield cropped up in front of Cupid, and she slammed into it.

“Elaine!” Cupid shouted, pounding her fist against the forcefield. “Elaine!”

Vines reached out towards Tundra, but were pinned down by falling shards of ice.

“Get a hold of yourself, Cupid!” Bunker shouted, walking over.

“Fuck you, Bunker!” she screamed. “Blink, please. We need to stop her!”
The steady drumming flowing through me shifted into urgency. I floated over to her.

“What do we do?”

The forcefield extended, blocking Cupid in.

“Just... stop her! Please,” she said. Continuing in a whisper, she said, “Please.”

“Blink!” Bunker shouted. “You’re under her power! Whatever you do, remember that your emotions aren’t your own right now!”

I ignored him, floating up and past the forcefield. Needed to get Tundra out. Needed to, didn’t want to see her die. Why? Didn’t matter. Needed to —

Vines launched behind Tundra as she continued her assault. I tried to shout a warning even as they wrapped around Tundra’s limbs and throat. A sickening crunch echoed, and the cape fell.

A scream pierced the air through the chaos, raw and pained. Horror and despair blasted into me. The urgency twisted into rage, rage against the thing responsible for killing her. My ankle ached, from where I’d fallen in place. Why or how I fell didn’t matter.

I charged Treant, the one scream joined by my own and several others. Vines sprouted out of the ground, and I teleported through. Pain went through me as a vine wrapped around my injured ankle, cutting off any escape.

*What am I doing?*

The air flew out of my lungs as the vines flung me into the air. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t even shout. All at once, my head cleared up. Real horror. I was about to die and — Cupid, why did she do this? Capes who had charged with me were either escaping or organising, launching a proper assault.

*I’m so sorry, Jessica.*
Music played in my ears. It was necessary to break up the monotony, otherwise I’d go insane. Below me, razor-wire and chainlink were being replaced, under the supervision of uniformed men and women carrying rifles. Massive concrete walls put up in its place.

“Icarus, status update,” someone said over the radio, interrupting my music. Today it was a stern-sounding man. Couldn’t be worse than yesterday’s pick—a woman who I was certain moonlighted as a drill sergeant.

“All quiet. Couple people watching the construction over here, but they’re keeping distant,” I radioed back.

“Understood. Continue your patrol.”

I sighed. *As if I wasn’t going to do that anyway.*

Director Mayer hadn’t taken kindly to my arm’s weaponry, and as punishment I’d been assigned to the newest PRT special project—the quarantine zone around Colorado Springs. Instead of patrolling with my team, here I was, babysitting soldiers.

I couldn’t help but feel a bit bitter about that. I’d fought an *Endbringer*, and my reward was this? Making sure unarmed civilians didn’t get past razorwire and assault-rifle-wielding soldiers?

“Icarus,” the babysitter radioed again. “Return to HQ. Needed for a project inside the quarantine zone.”

“Uh… copy that?” I said back, banking around until I was headed back north, to the headquarters and control center for the zone. Even at my relatively slow pace, it only took a couple minutes for me to get there, as I flew over silent houses where only a handful of people lived now.

I landed outside the squat concrete structure, built into the side of the high walls that were being put up. One of the pair of soldiers guarding the entrance opened the door for me, and as I walked in I couldn’t help but give him a smile behind my mask.

Inside, it was as depressing and monotonous as its outside appearance suggested. Drab concrete walls, with light fixtures on the ceiling that looked more fit for some third-world dictator’s bunker than for an installation in the heart of America. There was a bank of retinal scanners right at the entrance, and I stuck my face in one, letting it read my eye through my mask for a few seconds until it beeped. I’d been told it would be a “very bad idea” to forget to do that, even if I’d only been gone for a second.

I stepped past the machines and made my way down one of the halls, past a pair of soldiers sitting on a concrete bench, and past all the doors made of solid steel with their hastily stenciled on room
numbers. Even in the summer, the entire place felt uncomfortably cold, and it made me glad I’d decided to wear leggings under my costume’s dress today. Eventually, I found my destination, room 142, guarded by a pair of PRT officers and a pair of soldiers. Everyone was in pairs, I’d noticed.

I stepped through the open door, giving a cursory glance at the large display occupying the wall. Most of it was taken up by a map of the Colorado Springs Exclusion Zone, with various points of interest highlighted in a myriad of colors that I didn’t pretend to understand. The rest alternated between various pictures, mostly video feeds of key points in the building, the cameras on the wall portions that’d been put up already, and a couple of slowly-rotating views from drones flying high overhead. There were five or six people working on the various consoles and workstations here, and I’d been told that somewhere in the building there was an identical, redundant room with the exact same staffing. I couldn’t help but feel like it was drastic overkill.

“Icarus,” a familiar voice said, and I looked over to see a face for the stern-sounding voice. A middle-aged man in a camouflage army uniform. His velcro nametag said “Johnson” on it, and while I had no idea what the insignia on his shoulders meant, it looked pretty important.

“Hi,” I replied. “You called?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone a little more terse than before. “We have orders for you. Simple enough that you shouldn’t be able to fuck it up.” Fuck you too. “A humanitarian convoy was scheduled earlier today, but it’s been delayed due to insurgents at the entry point.”

“Insurgents?” I asked, deadpan.

He picked up a remote and hit a button, and one of the feeds on the screen wall enlarged. I recognized the view, as the inner-wall portion of the complex I was in. Twenty or thirty soldiers stood in formation, behind a wall of sandbags and razorwire. On the other side, a huge group of people shouting and yelling at them. It had to have been at least a hundred, protesting being walled away and forgotten. Insurgents. I bit my lip to avoid saying something I’d regret.

“While most of it wasn’t mission-critical, one of the care packages had medicine for a patient inside the zone. We’ve had to cancel convoys for the last three days, but this can’t be delayed. You will fly it to the drop-off point and ensure that the patient’s needs are adequately met. I trust your… ability… will be enough?”

“Sure thing, dude,” I replied. Before he had a chance to respond to that, I continued. “You got the location?”

He grabbed a piece of paper and shoved it in my general direction, not saying a word. I glanced it over. An aerial shot, with an apartment block at a street corner circled in yellow. Below it, a printed-out set of coordinates that I promptly entered into my mask’s HUD. Apt 3-A was written below the picture in marker.

“Cool,” I said, handing the piece of paper back to him. “The medicine?”

“At the inside entrance. Talk to the officer running the convoy duties today. Do you have any further questions?”

“Nah, I’m good.” I’m not your fucking child soldier, asshole.

“You’re dismissed, Icarus. Fly safe,” he said, sounding almost monotone at the end.

“Thanks, you too. Peace out!” I said, making a V with my fingers as I turned and walked out of the room. Was I being a passive-aggressive bitch? Definitely. Did I start it? Definitely not.
I made my way through the halls, mentally commanding my mask to play the Black Wings season four soundtrack while I navigated through the idiotically-designed maze of a building. I was fairly certainly it was designed stupidly on purpose, either for the sole purpose of making it confusing to navigate, or, more likely, to cause any would-be infiltrators to give up and go home. Either way, it took me ten minutes before I was back to breathing the fresh outdoor air of Colorado, this time on the inside of the quarantine zone.

There was a staging area in between the building and the soldiers and razorwire, and parked there was a convoy, machine-gun mounted vehicles parked at the front and rear, with three big army trucks in between them. Besides the pair of soldiers manning the machine guns, the rest were sitting back in the shade of the trucks, one or two even had phones out.

“You must be Icarus,” someone said, stepping out of one of the vehicles. A woman, maybe in her twenties, walking towards me with a camouflage duffelbag in her hands. Her insignia was fancy, but not as fancy as the babysitter’s, and her velcro nametag said Richards. “I’ve got the medicine here.”

“Oh hey, thanks,” I replied, grabbing the bag when she held it out.

“Be careful in there, okay? We’ve got most of the troublemakers here, but there’s been reports of gunfire further inside the zone all day.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. I’ll try to keep safe.”

“See that you do. If we have to mount a rescue operation with these dipshits rioting outside… there’s gonna be a lot of bodies.”

“Yeah,” I replied quietly.

“Good luck out there, okay?”

“Thanks. You too, I guess?” I gave her a nod, and walked back far enough that I wouldn’t be showering anyone with dust. I took off, rising up into the air, orienting to fly towards the waypoint I’d set. It only took a couple minutes, and I was set down in the street in front of it.

This part of Colorado Springs had been at the core of the fighting, and it showed. There was the faint smell of char in the air, and wrecked vehicles all over. The asphalt of the street was split open, with weeds two feet high already sprouting through the cracks. While at one point it might’ve been a nice neighborhood, it was clear those days wouldn’t be coming back anytime soon. The pointed stares I got from the people lounging in the shade felt more like they belonged in the heart of Arsenal rather than what had once clearly been country club territory.

I stepped through the doorway to the building, careful not to trip over the cinderblocks being used to keep it open. The inside was dark, the couple candles placed here and there were not enough to do much good. I switched to my nightvision and took the stairs upwards. The few people I passed glanced at me weirdly, but I paid them no heed.

The third floor of the building was empty and quiet, except for the sound of a crying baby somewhere. I made my way down the hall until I found an ajar door with 3A attached to it in fancy-looking brass letters. I pushed the door open, knocking loudly on the doorframe. “Hello?”

There was no response after a few seconds, so I stepped in. Inside the apartment, it was like every stereotype of an old lady. Dust and faded lace everywhere, and I could smell the reek of cat piss through my mask.

“Hello? Icarus’s Super Prompt Medicine Delivery?”
I sighed, and started working my way through the apartment. Kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, all empty.

“Icarus to HQ,” I radioed. “That was 3-A, yeah?”

“Aaffirmative,” the reply came back. It wasn’t Angry Babysitter Man, at least.

“Okay, well. There’s nobody here. I dunno if our patient went to the bingo hall or something, but…” I trailed off.

“Copy that. Stand by.”

“Sure. I’ll hang out,” I grumbled to myself, plopping down on Grandma’s fifty-year-old couch. I set the bag next to me, and leaned back, ignoring the grumble of my stomach. An irritating reminder that I hadn’t eaten all day.

It was maybe ten minutes of reading the last month’s TV Guide before I sighed and stood up. Whatever was going on, their meds would be on the couch for them when they got back from shuffleboard night. I stretched, and radioed back. “I don’t think they’re coming back. Is it cool if I just leave ‘em here?”

“Uh… affirmative. Return to base.”

“Cool,” I said, already walking out the door. I left it ajar, and started making my way down the hall, giving a polite nod to the guy resting there. I walked over to the stairs and down.

“Hey!” Someone shouted, below me. I looked down to see three men, brandishing what looked like steel baseball bats. One of them was gesturing my way, and all three started running up the stairs towards me.

Fuck.

I glanced back behind me, only to see the guy I’d passed in the hall standing in the doorway to the stairwell, pulling a pistol from his waistband. As he started to point it down at me, I dove towards the other three. One of them swung their bat at me, but I managed to block it with my arm, wincing at the loud ring of metal on metal. I swung my free fist at him ignoring the crunch as it smashed into his jaw.

My mask’s HUD told me the guy behind me was getting closer. I dove forward, shoving broken-jaw guy aside as I stumbled past them to the next landing. I turned back, deploying my tase—

There was a deafening bang, and something punched me in the torso, knocking me back. My back hit the wall, and my hands clutched where he’d shot me. *Fuck fuck fuck. Don’t black out.*

“Frank, what the fuck? You said it was unloaded!” someone shouted. I couldn’t tell who.

“I lied.”

“You shot her, asshole! A fucking kid!”

*Yeah, Frank, what the hell,* I thought bitterly to myself as I started coughing.

“She’s one of them. Walling us up. And now she’s our ticket out.”

Slowly, I opened my eyes. I was on the floor, halfway--leaning on my back, propped up by my wings. Three of them were looking at me, the fourth I could see crumpled up on the ground behind
them. He wasn’t moving.

3/4 tracked entities target locked.

I let myself fall forward, landing on my stomach. The motion brought a whimper from me as it put pressure on my torso.

“Pull her up, we need to get out of here,” Frank said. One of them grabbed me from behind, and started to pull me up.

I punched my jets to maximum.

There was a scream, and he let me go, just as I brought my arm up to fire my taser into Frank’s stupid face. The other guy, with his barbed-wire-wrapped bat, swung at me, but I blocked it with my wing.

As the smell of cooking flesh hit me, I swung my wing at the last guy, pinning him against the wall with a painful-sounding thud. I mentally cut the taser electrodes and brought my right hand around, lowering my wing just as my electrified fist collided with his stomach.

I didn’t look at the scene. I didn’t want to. Instead I fled, taking the stairs three at a time until I was running out of the building, nearly tripping at the entrance. I fell to my knees outside, looking down at where the bullet had hit. The outer layer of fabric was shredded, but underneath… it was fine. Thanks, strategic kevlar.

There was a bit of a breeze, I realized, loose papers and trash blowing past me as I looked down at the ground, somewhat in shock.

“Icarus, status update,” the bored voice of the babysitter came over the radio. I didn’t answer right away, distracted by something that had blown to rest in front of me. A pristine white feather, about as long as my finger, managing to look soft and sharp at the same time. I picked it up, looking it over. “Icarus, come in.”

“I’m here,” I said, trying to sound like I hadn’t just been shot.

“Status report?”

I sighed, and put the feather in my pocket. It’d make a nice memento, if nothing else. “Nothing to report. Mission is complete.”

“Copy that,” his voice came back. “You’re done for today. Bunker wants you back in Denver ASAP.”

I pulled myself to my feet, wondering if I’d made the right choice.

“Copy that.”

**Blink**

*Beep.*

A familiar sound, too familiar, steadily repeated itself.

*Beep.*
My eyes opened, only for painful light to shine through. I tried to move my hand to shield my face, only to realize I couldn’t. My hand didn’t even register. Nor my arms, or legs, or… anything except for my head. My mouth felt like cotton. Water, I needed water.

Beep.

My eyes blinked rapidly, steadily adjusting to the light. A sterile white ceiling came into focus. Very slowly, I shifted my head around to get a better view. My body rested beneath a blanket in some hospital room. One of my wrists was handcuffed to the bed. Memories flooded my head. Simurgh. Treant. Tundra dying, and Cupid screaming. Emotions that weren’t my own driving me to a suicidal charge. I thought I was going to die. Did I not?

My head pounded, my throat felt parched, and I could feel myself breathe. The rest of my body though just would not respond. Treant flung me to the ground. The crack…

Oh god. Please no. Please anything but…

I couldn’t move.

Beep beep.

“Some—” I rasped. “Someone? Anyone?” I needed to know. If my body was paralyzed, I needed to know.

A woman in blue walked in, looking at me with wide eyes.

“Please. What’s going on?”

She turned around, the rapid footsteps indicating she was running.

“Stop,” I said weakly.

Move.

My body refused my desire to move. My body remained still and unfeeling.

Move!

“Please,” I whispered to no one. Tears fell down my face, but my hand wouldn’t move to wipe them off.

God. No.

A woman in a white coat walked in, looking away from her clipboard to me.

“Can you… tell me what’s going on?”

Can you end this nightmare?

“Ma’am, my name is Dr. Fowler. We are currently within a private PRT-owned clinic. Do you remember anything?”

I remembered death.

“I… the Simurgh. She was fought off.”
The doctor nodded. “Yes, that’s correct. We’ve had you in a medically induced coma for the past two days. That you’re awake at all is astounding.”

“Please tell me I’m not...” My words were shaky. More tears fell down my face.

*Beep beep.*

She paused, looking at me with some slight pity. “I’m sorry, but your spinal cord was snapped. We couldn’t fix the damage.”

“I’m stuck like this,” I said. Jessica, oh god. How would she get care?

*Beep beep beep.*

“What happens now?” I said, between tears.

“Do you know of the Kimberly Wolf Act?”

I tried to shake my head, but the motion was too stiff.

“No?”

“Villains who are permanently disabled while participating in an S or A-class threat fight are essentially pardoned as acknowledgement of their sacrifice, if they haven’t done anything too bad.”

“Like that matters. I might as well be in a real prison for all the difference it would make.”

“Nobody’s going to come throw you in jail. We can release you to someone of your choosing, or —”

Her words turned into a vague semblance of talking as I tuned her out. Paralyzed, for life. Phone, I needed my phone. I’ve lost control all over again. No control, as if I ever had it to begin with. Jessica... I hated bringing Brenna into this, but I didn’t know who else to—

“That will be enough, doctor. I have it from here.” I couldn’t immediately tell who he was.

“Of course,” the doctor said, stepping out.

Bunker walked into view. I glared at him. “I forgot to ask. Why in the heck am I handcuffed to the bed when my entire body is paralyzed?”

“Standard procedure,” he said, pulling out a key and undoing the handcuffs. “Carried out no matter how stupid carrying it out is.”

This was a waste of time. I needed my phone. “Why are you here?”

“There is someone here to see you,” Bunker said, turning around and walking away. “Good night, Blink.”

Before I could say anything else or ponder on just how quick that exchange was, Brenna walked in, her mask in one metal hand. Her movements were stiff, and I spotted a brief wince. She looked at me with concern.

“Hey, Blink. How are you doing?”

“Did you get my text?”
“Yeah,” she said awkwardly. “It’s already deleted, don’t worry.”

“Can you maybe take me to her? I… don’t have anyone else I can ask, I’m sorry.”

“Why would I…” she trailed off, and I saw her glance down at the foot of my bed. Her eyes returned to mine, but there was something different in them now. “Oh… Jesus, I’m sorry Blink.”

“They said my spine was snapped. That I won’t ever move again,” I said quietly.

“Snapped? Fuck, that’s…” she trailed off again, that look still in her eyes. “That’s not good.”

“No fucking shit, Brenna.”

She didn’t respond, instead sitting down with a wince in a chair next to my bed. She set her mask down on the bed, touching my leg, but her eyes were on me.

“That’s… awfully forward of you,” I said nervously. This was starting to get creepy. “Brenna. For real, what the fuck?”

Brenna said something under her breath, like she was thinking aloud, but it wasn’t in English. After a moment, she spoke again, this time in something I could understand, “Can you feel?”

“No. Nothing at all. Can you stop?”

“Okay, good,” Brenna replied. She blinked, her eyes losing that glazed-over look, and she glanced back at the closed door. “I’m not going to take you to see your sister. You can do that yourself.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused. “Stop fucking beating around the bush.”

“You saved my life, Isabelle. The least I can do is fix you. If you’re okay with that, of course.”

“Fix… me…” I whispered. She couldn’t mean that. “What do you mean?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“It’ll have to be between you and me, for obvious reasons. If the wrong person found out… well, I’m too cute to go to jail.” She laughed nervously. “But I can do it. Fix your spine, I mean. It’ll be tough and might take some getting used to, but it’ll work.”

I wouldn’t have to be paralyzed? Still able to take care of Jessica, to take care of myself.

“I didn’t know your power worked on other people,” I said stupidly.

“It’ll work,” she repeated. “I mean, after all, why wouldn’t it? It’s not like you have a drastically different nervous system than I do, right? We’re both human girls around the same age, right? My power doesn’t even know the difference.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m a human and a girl,” I said dryly. “But Brenna… are you sure you want to do this? Risking yourself for someone like me?”

“Uh, yeah? Why wouldn’t I? You’re my friend and you saved my life. Plus, I’m not gonna be able to get it out of my head until I build it, so it might as well get put to use anyway.”

Friend. My only real friend in the world. How fucked up was that?

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Okay.”
“Neat!” she said with a smile, giving my body a hug. “Oh! So I didn’t know what had happened, but I figured you’d want something to keep you from going insane with boredom. So I brought you some entertainment.”

“Uh huh.” I’d honestly rather get out of here under my own power as soon as possible. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know, I’ll figure something out, call in a few favors, whatever it takes. It might take a little bit to set up, but I’m not going to let you down.”

“I have money, too,” I said. I didn’t like the idea of using crime money for myself, but considering the situation, I would just have to deal with it. “Laundered money. From… well, you know.”

“Don’t worry about that right now. Just… I dunno how, but be ready. Does your power still work?”

“I can sense the area. Move my blanket off of me.”

She raised an eyebrow, but at least tried to hide the smirk as she threw the covers off. “There.”

My face heated up as I realized the implications of what I asked. Thankfully they gave me a gown. I teleported a few inches above my bed and floated for a moment before dropping back down.

“Yeah. It works.”

“Sweet! Okay, so I don’t have to bring the big wings,” she said with a smile. She paused, and pulled a stack of discs out of her costume. “Anyway, while you’re waiting, I picked out some choice shows for you to watch. I’ll make a weeb out of you one way or another.”

I caught a glimpse of a pair of cutesy anime girls locking hands together on one of the disks. That’s gay.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked.

“Like I said, one way or another.” Brenna winked, then stood up. “I should probably get out of here before Bunker gets suspicious. See you around.”

Brenna walked away, leaving me with a stack of discs I had no way of doing anything with by myself.

Thanks, Brenna.

**Tank Buster**

Thomas and I walked up the gravel trail, heading up towards the ridge of the hill ahead. It had only been a week and a half, and things were still being worked on. Still, the memorial—the reason we were even here—was built, and that was the important part. It was small, simple. Not like the massive monuments the other two Endbringers left in their wake. Certainly smaller than the only other one I’d actually visited—the one at the northern edge of the New Mexico exclusion zone.

At the top of the ridge was an area ringed by just-planted trees that would one day tower over us. There were a couple benches, some facing out to look out towards the city proper, others facing in. In the center stood a simple granite column engraved with a list of names. A man crouched by the monument, the sun shining off his bright, shiny head. He turned to us, his short white beard swaying slightly in the wind.
“Hey kiddo,” he said, standing up.

“Hey pop,” Thomas said, walking up to the man and leaning down to give him a hug.

“And who’s this lovely young lady?” the man asked.

“Oh, this is Naomi.”

“Hello, sir,” I said, giving him a small wave.

The man chuckled. “Just Dave is fine.”

“I don’t mean to be a third wheel,” I said nervously. “I can wait my turn to pay respects.”

“It’s no problem. Thomas has said so much about you, you might as well be part of the family.”

“He did?” I said, eyebrow raised, at an extremely nervous Thomas. “Just how much?”

“That information is confidential,” Thomas said quickly.

I couldn’t help but snort at Thomas’s forced response. Dave looked back to the monument, his expression falling into something more neutral. Thomas set his hand on Dave’s back, and the two walked over to the monument, crouching beside it. I walked to Thomas’s side and crouched with them, still unsure if I should’ve even been there.

“You were a jackass, Nathan,” Dave finally said after a pause, tears forming. “I know we shan’t speak ill of the dead, but you never once accepted me. Even until your bitter end.”

“Pop…” Thomas said, trailing off.

“I still love you. Even when you refused to see me as a man, I loved you. So take your respects, you fucking jackass,” David said, setting down an open box with a pair of rings neatly sitting inside. He stood, and stepped back, leaving myself and Thomas.

“Hey Pops,” Thomas said to the memorial. “Remember the time we went hiking two summers ago? Just us two? I remember the picnic. Subs and coleslaw and purple for a drink. We came close to accidentally littering when a wind blew our paper plates off a ways.”

Thomas took a deep breath. “It was the last time you seemed to give a damn. Even if you and Pop weren’t together, and you wouldn’t give him the time of day, you at least tried to care about me. And then you just stopped. Why? I was gonna ask you. I was. But then the Simurgh finally took you out, when you had been part of dozens of Endbringer fights. Maybe I should’a asked earlier. Before I learned that sometimes there isn’t a tomorrow.”

I felt like an intruder, sitting with them during such a personal moment. Even if Thomas was my friend. At least I could support him now, as he supported me three years ago. I wrapped my arm around him, and he leaned into me. There weren’t any tears in his eyes. Just a blank stare.

“I guess it’s my turn,” I said quietly. “I didn’t know you like these two. Hardly at all, really. Only knew you by Focal Point. I think we spoke maybe four sentences to each other. But you saved my life, once. Back during… back then. Still felt like I should pay my respects. So… thank you, I guess.

“And Jade. I always wanted to get to know you. I thought I’d get the chance when I joined the Protectorate. Always so distant, but… every so often I saw a spark in your eyes. I wanted to know where it was from. I guess I’ll never know, though.”
We sat in silence, enough time passing that my legs stiffened. My body ached to move, but my body would just have to deal with it.

“I think that’s enough gloom for now. How about wings?” Dave said, attempting to sound jovial, even as he hid his face from view.

“Sounds good,” Thomas said, standing up to walk to his side.

Dave started back down the path, and I moved to follow before I realized Thomas was still looking back at the memorial.

“Hey. Are you doing okay?” I asked, wincing at my dumb question.

“Yeah,” he said, his eyes still on the memorial. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

There was the sound of gravel crunching under footsteps, and I glanced over to see a lone figure walk over to the memorial, kneeling before it. Her face was covered in bandages, and in her hands was a bouquet of flowers stuffed into a makeshift vase made from a chemical flask.

Thomas realized who it was in the same moment that I did. He tried to stand up, but I grabbed his wrist, stopping him. “That’s—” he whispered, but I cut him off.

“Starving Artist, I know,” I said, just as quietly. “Don't.”

She said something, I didn't hear what. It took me a moment to realize she was talking to the memorial. Talking to whoever she'd lost. But... the Ravens hadn't lost anyone, had they?

Then I heard her cry. I stood up, walking over hesitantly, squatting next to her with my hand on her shoulder. She looked up at me, brown eyes filled with anguish. A stark contrast to the curiosity from before.

What the hell am I doing?

“Here,” I said, offering her a kleenex. She took it, dabbing at her eyes, glancing between myself and Thomas.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“You lost someone?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. I knelt down next to the supervillain, letting my hand drop from her shoulder.

“I did,” she whispered. “A rival, of sorts. She tried to kill me, many times, but... I will miss her nonetheless. Every time we met there was passion in her eyes.” I could see her throat clench, and she let out another sob. “She-she would have said the same thing about me, I suppose. That was our... friendship.”

A choked, somewhat shrill cry left her throat, and I tensed as she wrapped her arms around me, sobbing into my shirt. This girl had hurt so many. Experimented on my friend. On me. So why did I want to console her?

I set my hand on her back awkwardly, watching as her tears soaked into my shirt. “It doesn't really get any easier,” I said, quietly. The girl looked up. “But we move on anyway. With those we care for.”

“Who are you here for?” she asked.
“No one I was close to, this time around, anyway,” I said, looking over the names. “Jade largely kept to herself. I didn't really know Focal Point, but he saved my life once. I just... felt I needed to pay my respects.”

The girl pulled back. “Thank you, umm...” she trailed off.

I sighed. “I'd rather you didn't say that. And I'm not about to give you my other name.”

“Of course,” she said quietly, a little hurt.

*What was she expecting?*

The girl stood up, walking away without another word. She paused, giving me a glance before starting down the hill.

“I can't believe you did that,” Thomas said once she’d gone out of sight. I couldn't figure out his expression.

“We don't start fights here. Not by this,” I said weakly.

“Yeah, sure. I get that. But *consoling* her?”

“A girl was hurt, and crying, after losing someone,” I said quietly. “I know what it’s like.”

Thomas sighed. “Sometimes you’re too kind for your own good, Naomi.”

“Maybe.”

“Hope she didn’t recognize you.”

“I think she did. Not that it matters. She’s too far gone to take advantage of it.”

Thomas looked at me with concern. “I hope so.”

I took a deep breath, unclenching the fist I hadn’t even realized I’d made.

“Hey,” Thomas said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s start heading back. She’s probably gone by now.”

“Yeah. Okay.”
Blink

“T’ve still got a little power in me. Just wait here for me! I’ll beat them!” Yumi said, raising her staff and walking away.

“No,” Aiko said, grabbing Yumi’s hand from where she sat. She stood up shakily, using her own staff as a clutch. “We will beat them. Together.”

“Oh just fucking kiss already,” I groaned. This anime was the most teasing bit of gay trash I’d ever seen.

The pair looked into each other’s eyes, their hands clasped together.


“Hey Isabelle,” Brenna said. I would have jumped if I was physically capable.

“Shush!” I scolded. Couldn’t she see I was busy?

“Not hiding anymore, are we?” the villain said dramatically. Whatever his name was.

“Not anymore!” Aiko said, pointing her staff at the villain, her other hand still holding Yumi’s.

The music for the ending credits started up.

“We’re taking you down!” Yumi said, raising her staff high, sparks of magic flying up and forming a sphere around them.

“Try me,” the villain smirked, just as the credits started playing.

“These episodes feel two minutes long,” I complained.

“Yeah,” Brenna said shrugging. I could just see her mask in her hand. “Well, actually it’s twenty-three minutes, but close enough. How are you holding up?”

“Considering I can’t physically hold anything up, I’m doing okay,” I said dryly. It was strange, how after the initial panic, I found myself settling into boredom. Except for every morning that I woke up. If it wasn’t for Brenna… I didn’t know what I would have done. “It’s only a little embarrassing to get sponge baths from a nurse now.”

“I thought you’d be more bothered by the bedpan,” Brenna said.

“It’s not like I can even tell when I’m shitting,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I can barely even smell it.”

Not going into detail of the… first time.

“…on that lovely note, it’s time for us to go,” she said, walking over to my bed and throwing the blanket off.

“Uh, if it’s no problem, can you wrap me up in a sheet or something so my butt isn’t presented to the
world while I’m moving?” I said nervously.

Brenna rolled her eyes and moved her open palm up and down, and I got the hint. I floated up as Brenna wrapped a blanket around me, ignoring the tiny part of me screaming oh god she’s seeing my butt and it’s probably gross because I can’t take care of myself.

“Okay,” Brenna said, stepping back. “Can you make it to the roof and I’ll meet you there? I’d rather not smash a window to fly out of here, I’m already in enough trouble as it is.”

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll head to the roof now,” I said, floating over towards the window.

“Cool,” she replied, putting on her mask and stepping out of the room, closing the door behind her.

In just a few moments, I floated up from the side of the building to the roof, hovering just above the concrete. It was nice to finally move, even if it was only through using my power. Icarus appeared a couple minutes later, spreading her wings and climbing atop the little ledge around the rooftop.

“Where are we headed?” I asked.

“Not too far, actually. Surgical place only a couple miles south of here. Uh, you wanna just follow me, or...?”

“You’re a little loud. It might be better if I do the flying for both of us. Just, like, hold onto my arm or something and point me in the right direction.”

I didn’t want to mention how likely she would be to kill me if she flew me herself.

Icarus rolled her eyes, and grabbed onto me. “Head south. I’ll tell you when to turn.”

Yeah, sure. Wherever south is.

Floating up, I set off in a random direction.

“Left. No, little more left. Little more right. Yes! Good. Keep straight.”

“I’ll try,” I said dryly.

“Couldn’t leave that one be,” she grumbled.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lied.

We flew in silence. Icarus’s arms twiched somewhat, her other hand clenching and unclenching.

“You okay?” I finally said after a minute.

“How do you fly like this?” she groaned. “My sensors are f*cked up and it doesn’t even feel like I’m moving!”

“I’d say you get used to it, but that’d be a lie.”

“Okay, sometime, I’m figuring out a way to take you actual flying, not... this. Turn left a bit.”

“I look forward to it,” I said, smiling, as I adjusted our course.

“You can start heading down now,” Icarus said after another minute. “Uh, at an angle. Fuck. I forgot you could just drop straight down.”
We approached the ground in a familiar area. I recognized the clinic. It was one I’d visited on a few occasions.

“Huh. I’ve been here before, actually,” I said, floating just a couple feet above the ground.

My power usually was enough to keep me from getting hit, but I’d still been injured enough to go three times. Once from Icarus herself. It felt like a lifetime ago.

“Oh, neat! Yeah, Larry’s hella cool, he helped me get set up with my implants when I was first starting out. Come on, let’s get situated.”

*Really? First name basis?*

“Okay,” I said, floating after her as she walked towards the entrance.

It was sort of funny. When I first heard of this clinic that serviced villains, I expected something more. Instead, it was entirely generic, up to and including motivational posters and outdated magazines.

“Hey Larry!” Icarus said as she entered, running over to give the man *a hug*. “Thanks again for letting me use the place. Sorry for the short notice.”

“When you said you needed to borrow my facility and equipment, I wasn’t expecting you to bring in a villain,” the doctor said, faint amusement in his voice.

“Hi again,” I said, stuck staring at the ceiling since I was unable to turn.

“It’s a long story, but… I owe her,” she replied. “Anyway, you okay if we get started? Sorry, but I’m technically patrolling right now.”

“Of course. I’ve prepped the room for you. Now, about payment…”

“I can take care of that,” I spoke up. “Just bill any cost here to my account.”

*Larry* nodded and walked into the back, leading us to one of the rooms inside. An operating table sat in the middle, surrounded by tables covered in medical tools and electronic equipment. A pair of adjustable lights hung above the table. A cardboard box sat on one of the tables, bits of metal hanging out of it.

“Here it is. I’ve also set your… equipment on the table there. Do you need anything else, Icarus?”

I could sense Icarus looking around the room. “No, I think I’m good. Blink, get over here so I can start chopping you up.”

“Sure thing, doc,” I said, rolling my eyes as I dropped onto the operating table.

“Thanks,” she said, taking off her mask and pulling her hair up into a ponytail before she started attaching medical things to me.

“Am I, uh, gonna be awake for this whole thing?” I said nervously.

“God no, I’m the only person allowed to stay awake and bug the surgeons,” Brenna joked. “Don’t worry, you’ll be breathing in funny gas and the next thing you know you’ll be in recovery. Unless something goes wrong, in which case, well, you probably won’t wake up at all.”

“Well… still a better option than being paralyzed for life,” I said quietly.
“I dunno, you really seemed to be enjoying *Valkyrie Memories*.”

“It’s not like I had anything better to do,” I grumbled, unwilling to admit just how nice it was. I’d have to acquire those DVDs once I could move.

“Well in that case you won’t mind if I spoil the ending—”

“Just put me to sleep already. Jesus Christ.”

“You’re no fun, Isabelle,” Brenna said, putting some sort of mask thing on my face and nose. “Deep breaths, please.”

---

*Huh.*

The ceiling was above me, and I blinked slowly from the bright lights above. My world was a cloud; I laid there contently unthinking. Awake, but not really. My nose itched, and I moved my hand to scratch it. The movement was stiff and slow, but eventually the itch was taken care of, and I went back to not focusing on the ceiling.

“Oh,” I slurred. “I’m kinda thirsty.”

I shifted my head, seeing Brenna dozed off in a chair, one of her arms hooked to tubes that lead into my own arm. Memories slowly flowed into me.

“Whoa,” I said, this time a little less slurred. My stomach grumbled at me. “Hey, Brenna?”

She didn’t stir. I slowly shifted myself into a sitting position, taking care not to jostle the tubes poking out of my arm. It was slow going, stiff, but I managed without too much effort.

The thought struck me. *Holy shit. I can move!*

I moved my arm in front of my face, flexing my hand and shifting it around. I swung my legs, which were similarly stiff. I poked myself all over, my smile growing wider as I realized I was feeling the pokes.

The stiffness slowly improved, to be replaced with a full body soreness, particularly on my back. I resisted the urge to poke at my back and, taking care to grab parts of the table, attempted to stand up.

“Oh god,” I said, nearly collapsing immediately before I could activate my power to keep me upright. I shouldn’t have expected to be able to walk straight away. That I was able to move as much as I could was… there wasn’t really a good way to put it. Amazing felt like too weak of a word. I moved my hand (*Yes!* ) to wipe away the tears.

There was a grumble from the chair, and Brenna stirred a little, yawning and stretching her arm and wings. It was surprisingly adorable. Her eyes flickered open, and she sleepily raised an eyebrow. “There’s clothes on the counter for you. You should, uh, put them on I guess.”

I looked down and comprehension dawnd. Shrieking slightly, I quickly covered my… unmentionables.
“Why am I naked?” I said quickly as Brenna pulled herself up and starting taking the needles out of my arm, an embarrassed look on her face.

“Sorry! I uh, thought it would be weird, and I wasn’t expecting you to just get out of bed!”

“I was a little out of it a few moments ago. Guessing you filtered that,” I grumbled as I floated over to the spare clothes. “Please look away.”

“I’m already looking away!”

“Okay!” I said as I dressed myself. It was slow going and awkward. My movements were stiff and slow, and I doubt I would’ve been able to dress myself if I wasn’t floating. The feeling of the shirt on my back felt a little… off, but I paid that no mind.

Once dressed, I looked around, relishing that I could move and actually look around. I tried standing again, only to wince and go back to floating. Still, even being able to do anything put a grin on my face.

“Hey, Brenna?” I said as I floated over to her.

“Hey,” she replied, from her position looking very interestedly at the wall.

“You can turn around now,” I said, amused. The moment she turned, I fell into her in a hug.

“Oh, hi,” she replied nervously, returning the hug gently. “You should probably take it easy for a couple days until the self-calibration is complete and your stitches heal the rest of the way.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “For real, thank you. I don’t know what I would’ve done. About myself. About Jessica.”

“Don’t worry about it, Isabelle. That’s what friends are for.”

I pulled back, looking at my arms as they moved. At my hands as they clenched and unclenched. If she could do this for me…

“I hate to ask you this, after what you’ve done for me,” I said hesitantly. “But, there’s only so much the doctors can do for my sister. No matter how much money I’ve donated. She’s dying and—”

“I can try,” Brenna interrupted. “But you should know my power’s not a cure-all. If it’s not something I can fix… but I can try. There is one thing, though…”

“What’s that?” I said when she didn’t continue.

She looked away. “Tinkertech is like anything else, it breaks down over time and needs maintenance. I spend hours every week working on my arms and wings and other stuff. I tried my best to avoid too much complex stuff, but… I’ll need to take a look at you every week or couple weeks, to make sure it’s all working properly.”

It was a small price to pay for my life.

“I understand. And… thank you again. I don’t think I can say that enough,” I paused. “Brenna, if you can help my sister, I’ll owe you for the rest of my life. I mean it. Whatever you want me to do.”

“Does she know? About you?”

“No. But I’ll cross that bridge if I get to it. Hopefully never.”
Maybe I could just stop being a cape.

“Okay,” Brenna said quietly. She cleared her throat. “Like I said, take it easy. If you start feeling twitchy or shaky, let me know. Don’t lift anything heavy until your back is healed. Um, I’m sure you felt this already, but don’t go shirtless around people you don’t want to know you’re a cyborg now.”

“Oh. Fun,” I said. Should’ve known there’d be some cosmetic differences. I’d have to look in a mirror at some point. My stomach growled again, remind me of priorities. “I think right now I could go for some real food. Not the slop the hospital was feeding me for a week straight.”

“I’d offer to take you up on that date,” she replied sarcastically. “But I am on the clock right now. I guess Bunker really wanted you on your feet again, for some reason.”

“Bunker? He knows about this?” I said, alarmed.

“I was patrolling the quarantine zone when he ordered me to fly back to Denver to see you. And then scheduled a patrol with me today, and five minutes in told me to ‘do what I needed to do’. Yeah. I think he knows.”

“What. So the team leader of the Denver Protectorate actively helped you to fix up a villain? I can’t even try to wrap my head around this.”

“It’s some sort of move, but I don’t really care what he thinks he’s playing at. We got you fixed, that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Whatever it is, it’s worth being able to move again.”

A bacon cheeseburger sounded amazing right about now. After that, maybe a good long bath. At some point being able to take care of my own bathroom business. I could put in my own damn DVD, watch whatever trashy show without the judging eyes of old nurses.

“Hey Isabelle?” Brenna asked.

“What’s up?” I said, shaken from my internal thoughts.

“Don’t fucking scare me like that again.”

“I…” I paused, thinking back to the fight. Blinded by anger and grief that weren’t my own, stupidly charging Treant. “What happened to Cupid, anyway? I didn’t get much news from my bed.”

“She’s on ‘paid leave’ for now, apparently. Haven’t had a chance to talk to her though, since they’ve put me on wall duty for the foreseeable future.”

“When you do, please ask her why,” I said quietly.

“Uhhh, sure, yeah,” Brenna said awkwardly.

It struck me exactly what I asked her to do.

“On second thought, nevermind. I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Maybe I would ask her myself.

“The Simurgh’s scream makes people do weird shit, I guess. I’m sure she’s not exactly feeling great about it. Capes died, and what do we have to show for it? Treant still got away.”
“That can’t be good. It’s always something with the Simurgh. Just didn’t think it would be so obvious this time, or maybe that’s just one other way she’s fucking with us.”

Brenna snorted. “Maybe we should stop second-guessing every fucking thing we do, as if that feathered bitch hasn’t planned for that too.” Her hand went to her chest, clutching something underneath her costume.

“It’s the only thing we can do,” I said, frustrated. Life was simpler when Endbringer attacks were something that happened to other people.

Brenna shook her head. “We just wall off a huge chunk of city with the people within, simply because she was near them. Fuck, I almost got killed by some of them, and I can’t blame them for it. Has nobody ever thought, hey, maybe her plan is to make us wall all these people off?”

“I haven’t thought about it much,” I admitted, somewhat guiltily.

“Neither did I… It’s easier when it’s Madison or Switzerland or… not here. Not home.” she sighed, and grabbed her mask off of the counter, looking down at it. “I know that sounds stupid but when you’re flying over it… it’s so different.”

“It makes sense to me. Hell, a lot of kids at school are even willfully ignorant of just the things happening in Denver. Arsenal is only discussed in quiet whispers, and the Ravens only in reference to the heroes dealing with them. It always strikes me, the difference between living in Arsenal and living in Lakewood. But now I’m just rambling.”

Brenna nodded, and clipped on her mask. “I really do have to go. Larry said he could give you a ride if you’re too woozy to make it home.” she stepped forward to give me a hug. “Just… be careful, okay?”

“You too, Brenna,” I said, returning the hug.

**Tank Buster**

*It's gone. Been gone. All gone.*

Muffled bass thumped from the building even as I approached. The building was worn down, its washed out bricks covered in graffiti. What appeared to be an apartment complex stood next to the club. A man stared at me from a balcony, a cigarette hanging from his hand.

*I can’t. I won’t.*

A large man by the club door crossed his arms as I made my way over, his eyes slowly moving up and down. I shuddered, even though I knew he was probably just sizing me up as a potential threat. My baggy clothing didn’t exactly show much off, but on my right arm I wore a tinker-tech glove that extended over my entire arm. The metal hand extended slightly past my real arm, and the creation was overall barely in the range of what my power could do. That and my mask should’ve clued him in that I was clearly a cape.

*I need. But I can’t. But I need.*

“The fuck do you want?” the man said as I walked closer, unimpressed.

“I have business inside,” I said, which was somewhat true. I only had rumors to go on, but my gut urged me to go inside. A burning need to go inside.
“Don’t think I’ve seen you around. You even a real cape?”

“Want to find out?” I said, clenching and unclenching my fist. My arm moved with it, a slight hiss accompanying the motion.

“You’re in Ravens territory, kid. New cape causing trouble only gets a bullet in the head. At best.”

“No trouble,” I said, irritated. “I have business with a certain artist.”

The man smirked. “I gotcha. Step inside, and just keep in mind where you are.”

The bass tripled in intensity as the bouncer opened the door, and I had to struggle not to wince. My heart thumped, my senses conflicted. Danger and need. Go, don’t go.

The club stunk of booze and weed, dizzying lights rotating from above. It was surprisingly clean inside, though with the lighting it was hard to tell. I glanced at a woman screaming for another drink, and at the bartender motioning with her head at someone.

Ignoring whatever was going on there, I walked through the section with booths. Surprisingly, no one bothered to even notice me, but most of them seemed to be either high or busy with… interactions with… other people. I glanced away from that particular booth and the number of empty vials sitting on the table.

I finally found her at a booth on the far end, furiously making out with a man. Her arm was steadily moving up and down, and I found myself thankful that the table was in the way of seeing anything else.

“Oh for fucks sake,” I whispered to myself.

Before I had a chance to look away, Starving Artist froze, pulling away and bringing an ungloved hand back over the table. The man tried to pull her back, but she put her hand in his face and shoved him back into the booth, before standing up, curious eyes looking at me. Her face was partially covered in bandages like before, but I could see the edges of what looked like a horrifying burn.

“I didn’t expect you to come back so quickly,” she said as she pulled her green glove back on.

“I need to talk to you. In private,” I forced myself to say.

Starving Artist grabber her respirator from the table, putting it on to hide the smirk that had appeared. “Very well, then. Follow me.”

What the hell am I doing?

The girl stepped out of the booth, sparing me a glance before sauntering away. I followed closely, shoving away my thoughts and doubts and oh god why am I doing this what am I doing.

She lead me through a door into some kind of conference room, standing by the door with an intense stare as I walked through. She closed the door and stepped uncomfortably close, one hand pressed against my leg. I caught a whiff of something minty before stepping back.

“What have you done to me?”

“All I’ve done is help you. Do you not feel… happier, now? More complete?” the supervillain leaned back against the wall, her eyes piercing into me.

“After a while I kinda did,” I admitted quietly. “I could see little changes in the mirror. Face just a
little softer. I don’t even have to shave as often. Even my boobs have…” I shook my head. Getting off track. “Then I ran out and it all came crashing down. I feel nothing but pain when I look in the mirror. I spend hours curled up crying until I can’t cry anymore. And I just want it to go back to normal! I don’t want to go back to hating myself, to being hideous. Fix this and I’ll leave and never bother you again. Please.”

I didn’t mention how I’d betrayed Brenna. How I betrayed everyone I loved, everything I fought for, just by being here.

“Do you want more?” she asked. I didn’t notice when she’d moved, but she was much closer now, looking up at me with concern. “I can make more, of course. Without any of the side-effects from that… hasty work.”

“I… I want… “To go back to normal. To forget all about this. Just fix me I don’t want to be dependant on— “Yes,” I whispered.

Starving Artist got up on tiptoes to look at me intently, close enough that I could hear her breathing through the respirator mask. For maybe ten seconds, she stared at me, clearly contemplating something.

“Good,” she finally said. She pulled a vial off of her belt, something bright green and syrupy inside, and held it out to me. “Drink this.”

This is stupid. Why would I willingly take a drink from a crazy villain?

I downed it without thinking, alarm bells ringing through my head as I felt my eyelids droop. The sound of broken glass came from below as I tried to raise my arms, only to fall into the arms of her.

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Loud noises, words that I couldn’t understand pierced my fog of sleepiness. I stretched in the silky soft sheets, clutching something soft to my chest. The clinking of glass and the smell of strange chemicals and a bunsen burner greeted my senses. There were more words, urgency and alarm in the voice.

“…this could land you in the Birdcage! Are you even aware of that?” someone said, a woman.

“She came to me willingly, Kate. I’m not Bloodletter, I don’t kidnap people.”

Alarm surged through me as I slowly woke up, realizing that the admittedly comfortable sheets weren’t my own. I tried to open my eyes. Pain stabbed through my brain from the light, and I immediately closed them again.

“Why did you have to get a Ward addicted? You need to tread very carefully, Alex.”

There was a brief lull in conversation. I could smell something strangely fruity.

“I gave her every choice. She chose to have more, not me.”

“You enabled her.”

My eyes had finally adjusted a little to the light, enough for me to look at my surroundings. It looked
like a laboratory of sorts, combined with someone’s room. A pair of women were arguing. Starving Artist stood to the left, her respirator nowhere to be found. Her bandages were off this time as she spread a creamy green substance over the ugly black and red patch covering half of her face, wincing slightly. An oddly shaped piece of paper sat on a table nearby, amongst the cluster of chemicals. I pushed away the pillow I’d been holding.

*If I’m quiet, maybe I can…*

My attempt to stand resulted in me face-planting into the floor with a loud thunk. Any pain was more of shock than anything, and I looked up to see the other woman, now wearing a simple mask made of paper, looking at me with shock. Starving Artist rushed over to me.

“Is your face okay?” she said as she pulled me to my feet with surprising strength.

It struck me that I was both not bound, and that my equipment was leaning against the wall in easy reach.

“Y-yeah,” I said before backing up to sit on the bed. My head was swimming too much for me to stand, I realized.

“If I would’ve known you were coming, I would have formulated something that wasn’t designed to take down Brutes,” Starving Artist said, pulling out a vial with a clear teal mixture and offering it to me. “This might help, or it will wear off in a few minutes.”

I watched puffs of cloud forming above the vial, wondering why I felt the immediate urge to drink it. As if everything would be okay. As if the mixture would solve my problem and make everything right. Why had I even taken the last thing she’d offered me? What was I doing here?

“No thank you,” I said, taking a deep shaky breath. “It, uh, seems to be clearing up.” *Good, finally getting some sense back.*

“Fine,” the supervillain said, taking a sip of it for herself before putting it away. “While you’ve been napping, I’ve been working on a replacement for you.”

“Is this really happening?” Papercut whispered to herself.

“How long was I out?” I asked, crossing my arms and giving a brief glance to my gear. I might have enough time to grab it before they reacted, but hopefully that wouldn’t be necessary.

Starving Artist sniffed. “In order to make sure there weren’t any traps.”

“Excuse me?” I said reflexively, then realized. My stupid brain clearly wasn’t awake yet.

“In order to make sure there weren’t any traps,” she repeated, punctuating it with a sip.

“I guess that makes sense,” I said. Couldn’t really blame them. What kind of hero approaches a supervillain like that?

*What am I doing here?*
“If it didn’t make sense I wouldn’t do it,” she replied, earning an eyeroll and a snort from Papercut. “But I’ve been told you weren’t tailed, so welcome to my studio.”

“Will I be free to go?” I finally asked, looking around.

“You are free to go whenever you’d like!” Papercut said loudly and strained, glancing nervously at Starving Artist. “Isn’t that right?”

“Of course,” Starving Artist said, taking a sip.
Blink

One step at a time. I can do this.

Other students glanced as I hobbled along, using my cane to compensate for the difficult task that was walking. I wanted nothing more than to lay at home uselessly in boxers, watching stupid stuff and eating quesadillas, but my grades weren’t exactly great enough for me to miss school. Even if it was the first day of school since the attack. No way was I going to get held back just because a giant tree freak snapped my spine.

A heavy thump sounded behind me, and I didn’t need to look to know who it was.

“Nice of you to drop in, Brenna,” I said, continuing to hobble along.

“Too late, someone’s used that one already.”

“Darn. Guess I was sniped on that one.”

Brenna walked past me, giving me an odd glance as she headed for the entrance.

“Hey wait,” I said, walking as fast as I could with a cane, like the old lady I apparently was. “How’s it, uh, going?”

“Well, other than being stuck on wall duty basically every waking moment since the attack, I’ve been doing okay.” She sighed, and shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t mean to take things out on you. I’m just… stressed.”

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to find something to say that wouldn’t be stupid. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Brenna glanced at me for a moment. “Maybe? But… it’s PRT stuff, and I’m already in trouble as it is. Oh! How is—” she looked around, and then continued in a whisper. “—your back?”

“It feels kinda weird,” I said quietly. “Is it supposed to feel like, I dunno, like there’s some sort of lag when I move?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, giving me a reassuring smile. “It’s not supposed to do that. But it’s an easy fix, I’ll bring all the tools in tomorrow, okay?”

“Where are you gonna fix it, in the bathroom?” I said sarcastically.

She paused, putting a metal hand to her chin in the stereotypical ‘thinker’ pose. “That’s actually a pretty good idea. Just meet me at lunch, in the restroom over by the science labs. It’ll only take a couple minutes.”

“I—okay, sure,” I said. “Do you happen to share any classes with Naomi? I haven’t seen her or talked to her since… since the dance.”

“I don’t,” Brenna replied. “But I, uh, texted her the other day. I guess she’s got stuff going on?”
“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “Maybe I can see her tomorrow?”

“Hopefully. I mean the *there was an Endbringer attack* excuse only works for so long, especially when you don’t even live where she attacked.”

“Maybe she lost someone to it,” I said quietly with a shrug. “I just hope she’s doing okay.”

“Yeah, me too.” Brenna looked away.

I sighed. “I guess I’ll see you around?”

“You too,” she said, a weak smile appearing on her lips.

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I felt weirdly naked, floating through the parking lot on the western edge of town. Wearing black pants and a black hoodie with my spare mask, I might as well be some edgy teenager sneaking out to smoke pot. The bright lights illuminated the patches of grass staking their claim on a seemingly maintained lot. It was almost surreal, weeds forcing their way through a freshly painted and paved lot.

Out of the few cars present, only one had its engine on. A black sedan with tinted windows. Imperium leaned out of the nearest window, motioning at me with his index finger. At least it wasn’t yet another factory meeting. Still, to be so brazenly in open sight. Did he own the building he was waiting by?

As I floated over, Imperium rolled the window up. The passenger door opened, and I floated inside, trying not to wince when I sat down and shut the door.

“Good evening, Blink,” Imperium said.

“Hi,” I said flatly. Maybe I shouldn’t be so short with my crime boss, but I’d literally had surgery two days ago.

If Imperium cared about my attitude, he didn’t show it. “I am relieved to see your recovery for myself,” Imperium said as he shifted gears and started forward. “The loss of Potion and Woodwind was... tragic.”

“Seems everyone but the Ravens lost someone.”

“It hasn’t helped Bloodletter’s reputation that he didn’t even bother showing up, though his subordinates did appear,” Imperium said, almost smugly. “There is opportunity amongst tragedy, Blink. You would do well to learn how to seek it out.”

“Oh huh. So what are we doing?” Maybe if we finished whatever this was, I could go on my date with a tub of ice cream and the couch.

“We are paying one of our dear heroes a visit,” Imperium said, turning onto the C-470 highway.

I tensed in my seat, then had to suppress a wince from the twinge I felt in my back. “Who? And why?”
“You ask a lot of questions, Blink.” Imperium accelerated to just under the speed limit. “One might say you have an inquisitive mind. A well meaning trait to understand the way things work. One might also allude to the oft used ‘curious cat’ idiom.”

Was that a threat? “Is there a reason I shouldn’t know the details of this mission?”

Imperium sighed. “Perhaps the fault lies with me for not establishing this sooner. While I prefer someone with actual thought and the ability to ask questions, as opposed to a lump of muscle, there is a time and place for actually doing so. The rest of the time that someone should know their place and understand that details will be given as they are needed. No sooner.”

“I understand,” I said, looking away. My cheeks were a little warm from the embarrassment. A memory of Jessica putting a ‘Y’ on my last birthday cake to symbolize my favorite letter. It had taken me way too long to figure out why.

“The hero whom we are visiting is Cupid,” Imperium said after a pause as he took an exit. “She is essentially under house arrest by a different name. A permanent vacation so generously granted by the PRT.”

I caught myself before I could ask why. “She broke the truce.”

“In a way. Circumstances and the presence of the Simurgh herself, however, turned what might have been a trip to the Birdcage into a simple dismissal.” Perhaps I’d get to ask her myself why. Imperium must have noticed my body language change, because he added, “Do have some restraint, Blink. I understand she was involved with your injury, but I have business with her.”

“I understand,” I said simply. As if I ever intended to do something rash. I just wanted to know why.

Imperium continued driving in silence as we moved up the mountain. What looked like a cross in neon lighting shone from the side of the mountain, disappearing as we went through a pass. It was tempting to close my eyes, but somehow I doubted falling asleep next to Imperium was a good idea. How would Imperium wake me up if I did fall asleep? He probably had a small robot that sprayed water or something, knowing him. Eventually, we left the highway and made a turn onto a long dirt driveway. The car jerked around slightly as it squished through a patch of mud.

It was Cupid’s home, a small, snug-looking cabin made of logs, with an older-looking car parked next to it underneath a tree. Cupid herself was standing on her porch, in jeans and a t-shirt, but holding her bow at the ready. Imperium cut the engine and stepped out. I teleported out so not to deal with the door, settling into a float just above the ground.

“Greetings, Cupid,” Imperium said, raising his arms slightly in a placating gesture. “I wish to speak with you.”

Cupid’s gaze flickered between me and Imperium. “I suppose you want to come inside,” she said.

“If you don’t mind. I find a more comfortable location makes one more amenable to discussion. And I assure you, a discussion is all I am here for.”

“Whatever,” she replied. She opened the door to her cabin and stepped inside, leaving it open.

We followed her in. It looked as cozy as it did on the outside. Clean but clearly lived in. A beautiful fireplace dominated one part of the living room. There was a faint and familiar scent in the air, and it didn’t take long for me to realize it was weed.

Cupid lead us to a dining room with a small table, papers strewn about on it. She hastily picked them
all up, but not before I caught a glance of the PRT logo. After settling the stack down somewhere and leaning her bow against the wall, Cupid sat down, gesturing at the table.

“I imagine you wish to skip the pleasantries and get to the point, so to say,” Imperium said, sitting down as I did. “I am sorry for your loss, Cupid. I was indebted to her, and I felt it right for the debt to be passed on to you. In short, I have a proposal.” Cupid’s loss?

“Elaine!” Cupid shouted, pounding her fist against the forcefield. “Elaine!”

She took a deep breath. “Tundra was a villain, and a murderer. Whatever blood money you owed her, I don’t want.”

*Vines launched behind Tundra as she continued her assault. I tried to shout a warning even as they wrapped around Tundra’s limbs and throat. A sickening crunch echoed, and the cape fell.*

“Nothing so base as that. From what I understand, you are for all intents are purposes off the team. The PRT does not want you returning to the Protectorate after what happened, regardless of the circumstances.” Imperium paused.

Tundra was somehow important to her. Then she died. And Cupid just went nuts and tried to get us all killed? But why?

“I’m not going to join your creepy Roman LARPing club,” Cupid said flatly. I had to resist the urge to giggle, even given the situation. “So that better not be what you’re building up to.”

I could just barely see Imperium roll his eyes. “Of course not. I wish to provide you with the resources to start your own team. A hero team, I imagine.” I glanced at Imperium. What?

Cupid blinked. She shook her head. “Fuck me, you’re serious. You actually believe all of it. You know you’re a villain right? You’d be funding a group that would at some point target you, right?”

“That is my status as a cape, yes,” Imperium said patiently. “I understand your team might clash with mine at some point. I’d hardly ask you to avoid that. I have just one stipulation. Every so often, I might ask you for a favor. A legal favor, mind you. If that is acceptable, then you will have all the resources you need to kickstart”—he pronounced the word like it was foreign—“your team.”

Was this really happening?

“I assume you’ve covered your bases, that these funds won’t be tracked back to me? Actually, don’t answer that, I don’t need the monologue.”

“I can provide some documentation, if you need reassurance.”

Cupid sighed. “No, it’s okay,” she said, glancing down at her bow for a long time, her face expressionless.

“Why?” I realized I had spoken out loud when the two glanced at me.

“Tundra was my little sister,” she said quietly, looking down at the table. My eyes widened. “She triggered before me, and I tried to get her to join the Wards, use her power for good. It wasn’t until after I’d gotten my… senses, that I figured out why she started doing… the whole assassin thing. Part of me always thought she’d go back to being herself, but Treant closed that book.”

“I…” I paused, hesitant, before remembering Imperium knew all about me anyway. I spoke quietly, without accusation. “I have a sister too. She almost lost me when Treant snapped my spine. From
“And you would do anything to save her, wouldn’t you? Well, you obviously have.” She gestured at myself and Imperium. I looked down at the table.

“Do we have a deal, Cupid?” Imperium asked, as if the interruption hadn’t happened.

“Yes,” she said, after a pause. “Fine, you bastard. If you want your god-damned guilty conscience to go away that badly. Fine.”

“Excellent. Shall we work out the details, then?”

It struck me that I might not be able to sleep for a long while.

**Icarus**

I shut the door to the stall behind me, giving Isabelle a nervous smile. She didn’t meet my eyes, looking extremely interested in the door behind me. Isabelle almost seemed a little embarrassed.

“Let’s get this over with,” Isabelle said quickly, as I took out a hex-drive screwdriver and my mask from my backpack.

“Okay, sure. Um, can you take your shirt off?”

“So quickly?” Isabelle said, turning around. “Do you treat all your girls like this?”

“Like what?” I asked, confused. “Dude, do you want me to fix you or not?”

“I… yeah, don’t mind me. Just cracking stupid jokes,” she said, pulling off her shirt. “Do I need to unhook my bra too?”

“You should be fine,” I replied with an eyeroll, before turning to hang my backpack on the little hook of the stall door. “Don’t worry about your modesty, that went out the door when I spent an hour and a half looking at your spine.”

“What do you mean? Is there something wrong with what it looks like?”

“I mean, everyone’s spine is ugly, that’s why people put skin on top of them,” I said, suppressing a giggle. Instead, I placed one hand on her shoulder to brace her as I started unscrewing the access panel on the tee-shaped implant sticking slightly out of her back.

“I guess it doesn’t matter anymore, now that I’m a cyborg,” Isabelle said quietly. “I don’t know how I’d ever explain it if…”

“Pfft, being a cyborg is cool.” I worked the panel off and held it out to her. “Hold this. If someone has a problem with you being half-robot, they don’t deserve you, Isabelle.”

“It’d probably be the other way around.”

I sighed, and started plugging wires into the diagnostic port. “Don’t say that. Anyone would be lucky to have you. I mean, who wouldn’t want a cool cape girlfriend?”

“Ah, yeah. Who wouldn’t want the creepy floating villain who steals stuff and punches thugs?”

“Hey, if the double-amputee girl with the wings can get a boyfriend, you’ll be fine.” I grinned, even though she couldn’t see. *Even if I haven’t seen Jordan since the fighting. At least I had the day off*
today, so I could drop by and see how he was holding up.

“Yeah, well, you happen to be a hero. And neat. And pretty.”

“Hey, two for three isn’t that bad you know,” I said, putting my mask on to hide the heat in my cheeks from the eyes in the back of her head. I plugged the other end of the wires into my mask’s data port and grinned to myself as my HUD lit up with fun new screens.

Isabelle sputtered. “I, well, maybe when everything is over.”

I flipped through my diagnostic pages, scanning over the numbers it was giving. Other than picking up an unusually-high heart rate, everything seemed to be fine. I started mentally disabling some of the redundant systems that were slowing everything down. It was in essence the same tech I’d used for my arms and wings, effectively treating her entire body as one big prosthetic, but as it turned out my friend’s body didn’t have the same reaction times as my prosthetics. That was the irritating part, I shouldn’t have missed that.

Still, it was an easy-enough fix. I silently thanked my foresight in overengineering the whole thing, even if it was to save time for if and when Isabelle needed an arm or something replaced.

I realized that she’d said something. “Oh, um…” I stalled for time, trying to remember what she’d said. “When’s everything going to be over? When your sister is better? When your boss is in the ‘cage? I can’t tell you how peeved I am with the PRT right now, but I can’t help but feel like you’d be better off as a hero.”

“Yeah right. Best case they’d say something about conflict of interest and ship me to Anchorage or wherever.”

“Eh,” I said. “You’re hardly a villain as it is. At least compared to, you know, the fucking Ravens.” I took a deep breath, closing my eyes for a second to avoid going on that tangent. “I’d put in a good word for you, if it helps. Although my word’s probably not worth much. Maybe not putting in a word would be better for you.”

“Do you think you might have a chance to visit the hospital with me?” Isabelle asked after a pause.

“Yeah. I’d like to. I’d say let’s go tonight, but it’s my only day off this week and I… have plans.” I finished making my configuration changes, and sent the command to reboot. “Uh, you’re about to be paralyzed. I’d float if I were you.”

“I can teleport in place without floating, but sure.” She took a deep breath.

The status LED next to Isabelle’s diagnostic port flickered out, and I took my mask off, unplugging it from her. “Have you talked to her about it yet?”

“I haven’t seen her yet since…well, you know.”

“I see.” I screwed the access port shut. Part of me was a bit sad because I’d had a ‘screwing’ joke ready, but it wasn’t exactly the time to inject that into the conversation. “I’ll let you know next day I have free?”

“Okay. Thanks,” Isabelle said sadly.

“On the bright side…” I paused, and flicked her on the elbow.
“Ow.” She glared at me. “Was that really necessary?”

“Just making sure you can feel things. Try walking in a circle, or something? The input delay should be good to go, now that it’s adjusted for your weak flesh and blood body.”

“Sure thing, Doctor Frankenstein,” Isabelle quipped, slipping her shirt back on. She stretched and before settling into a short walk around the stall.

“Everything feel okay?” I asked, slipping my tools and stuff into my backpack.

“It feels great!” Isabelle hopped in place and gave me a smile.

“Sweet!” I unlocked the door, and stepped aside to let her through. “I can’t remember if I said this before, but if you start feeling like you have Parkinson’s, let me know. Otherwise, you should be good for a few weeks.”

“I’ll be sure to. I’d say an occasional check up is worth not having to shit in a pan.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “At least you’ve got your priorities straight, I guess. On the bright side, at least you didn’t have to learn how to do everything one-handed,” I said with a smile, making my way past the sinks and to the door.

“Right…”

I pulled open the door and stepped through, holding it open behind me as I walked through—

“What exactly are you two doing?” Naomi said, giving me a very stern look with her arms crossed.


“Um… how are you?”

“I came to check up on you since I haven’t seen you in… two weeks. Only for you to disappear in here for half of lunchtime. Did something happen between you and Jordan?” What does Jordan have to do with anything?

“This isn’t what it looks like!” Isabelle said loudly.

“What does it look like?” I asked, confused.

“What exactly are you two doing?” Naomi said, giving me a very stern look with her arms crossed.


“What! Naomi what the hell?” I asked, blushing. “Isabelle and I didn’t… no!”

“What! Naomi what the hell?” I asked, blushing. “Isabelle and I didn’t… no!”

“I mean, what else was I supposed to think? You’ve been avoiding everyone! And I’ve been worried sick…” Naomi trailed off. “What were you doing?”

“We were—” Oh, you know. Just fixing the Tinkertech I installed in my supervillain friend’s back. Oh, Isabelle is Blink, bee tee dubs. “Um…”

“I just wanted to talk to her about something. In private,” Isabelle said nervously.

Naomi sighed. “Brenna, can you look me in the eye and promise you aren’t cheating on Jordan?”

“I’m not…” I paused. Naomi was already suspicious. If I said yes… she might keep digging, and if she happened to see us again… I couldn’t stop fixing Isabelle and leave her helpless, and the PRT was still forcing me to track all of my movements while in costume. I looked away. “I don’t know.”
“I can’t believe you two,” Naomi said, shaking her head. “Whatever. Have fun, I guess.” She started to stomp away before pausing and turning around. “Actually, no. Brenna, what the fuck? Of all your hairbrained stubborn bullshit, this is… this is. Just. How could you do this? And Isabelle! You know she’s with someone! Just. Why?”

I looked back at Isabelle. Part of me wished I had a way of communicating without talking. Like radio chips attached to the brain, or something. Actually, that wasn’t a bad— I was getting distracted. I glanced back at Naomi and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Naomi. Just… please don’t tell him. It’s the last thing he needs right now.”

“I’d tell you to go fuck yourself, but it’s not like you’ve ever listened to anything anyone’s told you,” Naomi said, her eyes tearing up.

“Naomi,” I said, my voice quiet. “Please.”

“Isabelle. I think Brenna and I need to have a conversation in private.”

“Uh, okay,” Isabelle said, slipping past me. She shot me a worried look as she ran down the hall.

Naomi shoved me right where I just got fucking shot into the bathroom and stepped inside, the door swinging shut behind her. I reeled back, clutching at where she’d pushed and trying not to tear up from the pain. There was a flash of concern, before anger filled her face again. “Every damn time, Brenna. There’s always something. You’re so damn self-destructive. Never listening to orders. Firing at the fucking Simurgh when I yelled at you to stay back. Getting Jade killed. And this? Hurting your own teammates like this?” she said, quietly enough that I could barely hear her.

“Naomi,” I coughed out. “Is that what this is about? Fighting during an Endbringer fight?” She had the balls to blame Jade’s death on me? Like I was the one who threw a fucking building at us. “And you want to call me self-destructive? Didn’t I almost get fucking killed because you got your ass kidnapped? Get the fuck off your high horse.”

“I…” Naomi looked away. “Whatever. It’s not like you’re going to start listening to anything I say now.”

I sighed. “Naomi, what the hell? Are you okay? I mean, I know this hasn’t been easy for us, but… I dunno, maybe we should take a step back before one of us crosses a line.”

Naomi’s expression fell. “I’m not... I’m not okay,” she whispered.

“Okay. Neither am I, to be honest. So can we talk about it, instead of letting it all bottle up?” I sighed. “I’ve barely seen you all since the fight. I… I miss you guys. And yeah, I know it’s my fault I’m stuck on wall duty, but it’s not like they kicked me off the team. So… what’s going on?”

Naomi gave me a brief panicking look before taking a deep breath and looking away. “It’s nothing. See you around, I guess,” Naomi said in a dead tone. She turned to leave.

I grabbed her hand. “Naomi, please stop. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but… please don’t fucking hate me like this.”

“I don’t hate you,” Naomi said, looking back at me with an expression I couldn’t place. “You’re my friend and teammate. I just wish…” Naomi shook her head and walked away.

I watched the door shut behind her. Outside, I could hear the bell ring, lunchtime over. I wiped the tears from my eyes, and looked down at my hands. More tears came, and I didn’t bother wiping them away this time.
The house I stepped up to seemed bigger than the other houses on the block, though it otherwise seemed normal. Two stories, tan colored, with an immaculate lawn and a nice looking blue car parked in the driveway. I felt a little nervous. There was a doorbell, but also one of those fancy metal door knocker things. I wasn’t sure which one I should use, so I settled for knocking on the door like a normal person.

After a couple minutes, I realized nobody was probably coming to open the door, so I hit the doorbell button. *Why are there so many damn ways to ask to be let into a house?*

I was about to hit it again when the door opened, revealing a sleepy-looking Jordan with the most plain-looking pajamas I’d ever seen. His eyes widened.

“Brenna!” he squeaked. “Hi!”

“Hey,” I said with a grin, stepping forward to give him a hug. “I didn’t see you at school the last couple days, so I figured I’d check in on you.”

“Oh, yeah, about that…” He looked away, a little downcast. “Uh, wanna come in?”

“Sure!” I said, stepping inside. “I downloaded the last couple Kaminari’s for us, since we haven’t really had a chance to watch, what with…” I trailed off with a shrug. “Anyway, hi!”

“That sounds great,” he said, smiling as he walked inside.

I wasn’t sure what to expect after what I’d seen of his parents. The house was… clean, for lack of a better word. Too clean, too neat. It looked more like a display at Home Depot than an actual home. There was even a bowl of fruit, which was clearly plastic when I picked one up.

“Oh shit, Brenna!” Jordan snatched the fake fruit from my hand and set it carefully back in the pile. “Uh, it’s best if you just don’t touch anything until we get to my room. Please.”

“Oooh, inviting me to your room already?” I said with a giggle, stepping back from his crazy-ass parents’ crazy-ass fruit bowl.

“Yeah?” Jordan said giving me a weird look. “It’s the only place we can go where I won’t get crucified for ruffling something somewhere.”

I followed him up the stairs, glancing around. *What an uncomfortable place to live.* It felt… sterile, both metaphorically and literally. I was reminded of a professional laboratory, just being here. Thankfully, I was free from the oppression once we entered his room, though I was somewhat disappointed at the bare walls. In one corner was a bed all neatly made, and in the other was a desk with a computer setup. The screensaver was Pac-man, of all things. The old arcade game, not the cape.

“I’ve missed you,” I said, plopping down on his bed. “Sorry I wasn’t able to come by earlier.”

“I’ve missed you too,” he said, sitting down next to me. He glanced at me nervously before shifting to plant a kiss on my cheek. “How have you been?”
I returned the kiss with one of my own on his lips, before wrapping an arm around his waist and resting my head on his shoulder. “Kinda shitty, to be honest. I don’t know how long I can keep doing this.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

I shrugged. “Kinda? But I don’t want to bug you with it. I mean, unless you want to be bugged, but… well, I know you’re dealing with your own shit.” I sighed. “Sorry if I’m a little… ranty today.”

“You can bug me anytime,” Jordan said with a small smile.

I paused, not sure what to say. Finally, I sighed. “I got shot, and, well, in the process I really fucked some people up, and I don’t really know how to feel about it.” I looked over at him, biting my lip.

“Again? I mean, shit, are you okay?”

“...No,” I replied quietly. “They attacked me, and I just… sorta went into autopilot, you know? Fuck, if they even lived, they’re never gonna live a normal life again, especially not inside the walls.”

“They shouldn’t have picked a fight in the first place.”

“No, but… fuck, I cooked one of them with my fucking exhaust. Like, yeah, he shouldn’t have attacked me, but…” I swallowed the knot in my throat. “At least Branwen fucking deserved it. These guys were just desperate to get out.”

Jordan tightened his hug around me. I collapsed against him and the floodworks began. My face must’ve looked like a mess, but he hugged me anyway, rubbing a hand along my back. Jordan leaned back and carefully brushed the tears from my face. Leaning forward, I met him with a kiss. And another. We found ourselves side by side on the bed, legs and arms intertwined, as we met each other’s lips again and again. I grinned as Jordan’s hand shifted slowly from my back, to just above my chest.

“What’s this?” Jordan said, feeling my necklace.

“Oh, this?” I asked, pulling it out. The feather I’d found in the quarantine zone, fastened by the ‘base’ to a length of necklace chain.

“It’s pretty. Where’s it from?”

“The Simurgh,” I said simply. “Probably fell off during the fighting.”

“Jeez, Brenna,” Jordan said, his eyes going wide. “That seems kinda… culty? Not saying you are! Just uh.”

I snorted. “I’m definitely not a weirdo, don’t worry. I just… I guess it kinda serves as a reminder? If I
can make it through an endbringer fight…” I trailed off.

Jordan sat up, looking downcast. He whispered something that I couldn’t hear.

“You okay?” I asked, pushing myself up to a seated position with my wings. “Jordan?”

“I ran,” he finally said, shifting his legs to hug his knees.

I paused for a moment, not sure what to say. “Okay? So you’re the smarter of us. I mean, we were running out of exposure time anyway, right?”

“You don’t understand. *I ran!* I just, it was too much. I couldn’t. Seeing her face burned like that, from that stupid accident was just too much. I just ran. From all of it. And they later confronted me and said I don’t have to go to the Wards for now. Just take a break, they said. Like they saw me for the coward I am.”

“You're not a coward, Jordan. You think I wasn't scared? I was fucking terrified.” I paused, taking a deep breath. “If… if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have made it out of that truck. So, at worst it's a wash, right?”

“I didn’t know what I was getting into when I teleported into that truck. I just… I heard something and when you appeared in my sense I got worried. But, jeez. Brenna, you flew up to an Endbringer and shot it in the face! I just ran.”

I leaned over and wrapped my arms around him. “I did. And because of that, Jade died, and then I almost joined her, and then I got an hour-long ass-chewing from the Director. You went when a lot of people wouldn't.”

“No one else ran,” Jordan said hesitantly.

I shrugged. “No one else went back, either.”

Jordan was silent for a while, staring at the wall. “I don’t know how Naomi does it. She volunteered for the list early on. Been to countless Endbringer fights. I see her come back, and then there’s just this dazed expression on her face like she isn’t even really here.”

“I don't know either. I think she just… shuts down and powers through it. To be honest, I kinda felt like I was doing the same, and that was my first Endbringer. Well, second technically, but…”

“Second?” Jordan said, glancing at me.

“Oslo,” I replied simply. “I can't remember much, just being cold and wet and scared.”

“Oslo…” Jordan said, pausing in contemplation. “Oh! I’m sorry.”

I laughed. “Don't be. After all, it's the reason we came to America, so… you woulda had to find some other Tinker to be your girlfriend.”

Jordan snorted. “She wouldn’t be you, though. Even if some other supposed Tinker girlfriend appeared.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned over to give him a kiss. “You're such a dork, you know?”

Jordan grinned and kissed me back. “Yeah, well, you too.”

“Hmm… well, how about we celebrate our dorkiness by making out and watching anime and
cuddling?"

Instead of responding, Jordan tackled me down. His lips met mine.

*Nice.*
Blink

Scanning the roads below, I flew above the city, searching for anything unusual from the afternoon sky. It’d been hours since I started my little patrol, and I still saw nothing. Only the occasional cop pulling a car over broke the monotony. A new cape was running around, causing trouble for everyone and managing to get away every time. Recollect described them as small and ragged, almost like a rabid animal.

One might’ve thought I’d have seen something by then, but all of this tedious patrolling gave me time to dwell on the past few days. One of my two friends treated me like a stranger. The girl I had danced with, whose sheer positivity and energy that night made me shiver even now.

“Hey, Naomi?” I said worryingly.

She didn’t meet my gaze. “Hi.”

“Are you okay?” I wanted to reach out so badly.

“I’m fine,” she lied. The hurt was too obvious. “I just have homework to do.”

Dammit, Brenna. Why did you have to be so impulsive and dumb again?

A weird sound came from behind me, like a spring compressing and releasing. I turned around to see an unknown cape in a sparkling blue costume that billowed about her legs jump from one floating platform to another, heading directly towards me.

“What a coincidence!” she shouted as she leaped above and past me, jumping between a close pair of force fields to settle in roughly the same spot nearby. “My first patrol in this town, and I already find a cape. Small world, huh?”

Her costume wasn’t a simple bodysuit; I could tell someone had put a lot of effort into it. Her short flowy skirt went from a sparkling blue at the end to a light purple at her arms. She wore legging in a matching color. Her mask covered most of her face, exposing her eyes, mouth, and chin, and her dark brown hair was tied up in a curly ponytail. Blueish greenish eyes gazed into my own, with a bright smile to match.

“Who are you?” I said, one hand shifting towards my belt.

“Uplift!” She yelled, raising her hands. “Just transferred to the Denver Protectorate to fill up the gaps.”

“Uh huh. Nice to meet you?” I said questionably. Coincidence my ass. She was probably patrolling for the same reason I was. An unknown cape running around would be even more interesting to the PRT and the Protectorate than to Imperium.

“You must be Blink, right? Your file is super interesting.”

“I’m not looking for a fight,” I said.
“Me neither. But excuse me if I became curious why one of Imperium’s own was flying around the last seen locations of our mystery girl.”

*Girl? She just gave me a little free info, unless she’s completely misleading me.*

“Maybe I was out for the villainous equivalent of an afternoon stroll,” I said dryly.

“Ah, neato. Well, I gotta get back to it. Try not to commit any crimes!” she said with a wave before springing away. “We will be watching!”

I floated in place for a moment, staring unbelievingly as the cape jumped and bounced away, skirt flapping and bobbing in the wind. *Did that really just happen?*

Shaking off that thought, I continued with my patrol, keeping a wary eye out for the hero. I floated higher up to hopefully be less visible, even if it hurt how much I could see on the ground. Then I realized I was being dumb and pulled out my binoculars.

There was a shout to my left, and I looked to see Uplift falling from the sky. Someone on the ground was running. Uplift tried to follow, bouncing back up again, still yelling at the top of her lungs. I flew towards them, dropping down to use the buildings as cover.

“Ple—” Uplift tried to say, only to get shoved back.

I caught a glimpse of the cape. A girl wearing torn clothing, probably no older than 13. The hero tried to say something else, only to be shoved back again. The girl had to be the cape Recollect told me about.

Teleporting inside the second story of a random office building, I glanced out the window to see the young cape turn a corner. The hero tried to follow, only to get smashed into the side of the building. I teleported to the roof of the building, watching the hero from above as she limped away, pressing a phone to her ear. People around were already taking pictures.

Ignoring the hero, I flew to follow the young cape as she continued running.

*If I said anything, she’d just blast me.*

I kept an eye out in case any other heroes showed up, staying just above her. She didn’t even have a mask. Her clothes were more torn up than I realized. Dirt caked her in various spots, and there were angry red scrapes on her arms. The girl had to have been through a lot.

*Recent trigger?* I thought with sadness.

As much as I hated just following the girl around while she clearly suffered, I kept my distance. Trying to approach would likely end with me getting blasted, and the girl running off in a different direction. The distinct sounds of PRT sirens started somewhere in the distance.

*Idiots. You’ll just scare her more.*

The girl finally tripped, collapsing to the ground. Someone off the street attempted to run over, only to get blasted off their feet. One after another, the onlookers fell, settling into a sitting position or crawling away. The girl tried to rise, only to fall back down.

I floated in front of her, offering a hand to the girl. The girl looked up at me fearfully, only to collapse again.
“I’m here to help,” I said, keeping my hand outstretched. The girl did not move. “Hey!”

The girl didn’t respond, only the slow rise and fall of her chest showing any life. She was alive, at least, but to pass out like that...

“Dammit, there’s nothing I can do here,” I whispered to myself. A couple people pointed and shouted, and the sirens only grew louder. I picked her up. The girl didn’t wake as I flew away from the scene.

---

I could only hope my decision didn’t bite me in the butt later. The girl snoozed away on the couch, clutching the blanket as if her life depended on it. The soup I was making tasted fine. Perhaps could’ve used something else, but I couldn’t exactly correct it now. All I had was a simple homemade chicken noodle soup, and a hope that the girl wasn’t a vegetarian or something. Or that she wouldn’t flat out attack me the moment she woke up.

A squeak from the living room behind me alerted me that the girl was awake. I turned to see fearful brown eyes gazing into my own. I waved, careful to not make a sound. The girl didn’t move or speak, stuck like a deer in headlights.

Taking my eyes off her for the moment, I attempted to open a cabinet only for it to slam shut the moment it creaked. Turning back to the girl, I found her attempting to bury herself deeper into the couch. It was better than running, at least. Another attempt to open the cabinet ended up with it slamming shut again. I floated over to a wall and slapped it, to find myself being shoved back.

“Ca—” the attempt to speak ended with a shove to my mouth. Sighing—and being shoved for it—I teleported upstairs to find a notebook and a pen to write with.

The girl hadn’t moved from her position on the couch, staring towards the kitchen with wide eyes. I wrote a quick message and showed it to her.

Hi. I’m trying to help you. I have soup, but your power isn’t letting me get a bowl to bring it to you.

The girl muttered something. I scrawled out a question mark and showed it to her.

You have a power. It’s hitting everything that makes a sound.

I clapped for emphasis and winced as I was shoved back.

Make it stop I don’t want to hurt people.

I can’t do that. I’m sorry. I showed her the note, and started writing again. Can you describe any strange new sensation that you have?

The girl paused, looking at the kitchen for a moment before writing again.
I don’t know how.

Try. Anything is better than nothing. Maybe we can figure it out together?

There are waves and I feel like I’m being grabbed all the time. I felt it when you opened the cupboard and when you pressed your hands together.

I paused for a moment. Did she not realize I clapped?

That was me clapping.

I can’t hear.

The puzzle slowly came together in my head.

I think the waves and the grabbing might be sound you’re feeling.

The girl’s eyes widened.

I’ve been pushing at it to make it go away.

Don’t push. Just let it happen.

The girl looked at me nervously.

I’ll try.

I set my feet down and walked over to the kitchen. Glancing over at the girl, I tapped the wall, only to be forced back as the girl winced. I tapped it again, and this time there was no push. Smiling, I opened the cupboard to grab a bowl. After pouring in some soup and grabbing a spoon, I walked over and set it carefully on the table. The girl devoured the bowl with depressing speed, scrawling out a note the moment she was done.

Thank you.

“No problem,” I said, picking the bowl up. She gave me a confused look.

I winced at my stupidity as I walked to the kitchen to pour another bowl. On the way back I found another note.

My name is Alice.

If there was any doubt that she was a new trigger, it went away. I hesitated for a moment with the notebook before taking off my mask.

Hi Alice. I’m Isabelle.

Rather than responding, Alice ate more of the soup. Slower, this time. I picked up the notebook to write again.

Is there someone I can contact?

The girl paused, staring at the notebook. She wrote something, then scribbled it out before writing something else. She looked on the verge of tears as she showed me.

No.
The words before that were completely illegible. Sighing, I stared at the notebook. There was no way I could take care of her myself. Even if she could be self sufficient... no, the last thing a girl who just triggered needed was to be left alone for hours on end.

Imperium would just use her. The Wards, then? They would be best fit to help her. Even if I didn’t trust most of the heroes, I could trust Icarus. She’d look out for her.

Alice wrote a new message for me by the time I finished my thought. Which hero are you? I didn’t recognize you.

I resisted the urge to let out a self deprecating laugh.

I’m not a hero.

Alice gave me a confused look. But you saved me. Isn’t that what heroes do?

How could a recent trigger be so naive?

Sometimes. But I’m a villain.

Her eyes widened. You don’t seem like a villain to me. Don’t villains hurt people?

Yeah.

Alice looked down. Sighing, I wrote another message. Do you want to go to the Wards?

She looked back up, surprised, and shook her head.

Why not?

I can’t.

Raising an eyebrow, I pointed to my previous message. She amended hers.

I just can’t.

Dammit. Arguments sprung to my mind. The Wards could help her. Provide her space. Work her through her traumas. Keep her busy, set her up for life. Let her do some good. They’d also turn her into a marketing tool, using her for PR and as a child soldier when convenient, but for a cape... there were worse fates.

Can I have a bath please?

Oh. I shoved potential arguments away. It wasn’t what she needed in the moment. Yeah, of course.

Standing up, I reached my hand over to Alice. She took it, and I lead her up the stairs to the bathroom.

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The girl slept fitfully in Jessica’s old bed, clutching a stuffed bear for dear life.

“What am I going to do with you?” I asked myself.
She rejected my offer to take her to the Wards. There was no way in hell that I was going to give her to Imperium, even if that was what he would want. She deserved better than that. There wasn’t exactly another…

I shook my head. Cupid was forming a group, that was true. But the thought of sending Alice to the woman who nearly got me killed reminded me of the ever so slight sensation crawling along my new spine. One I wasn’t sure I could ever describe.

There was no other choice. Even with my muddied feelings towards Cupid, she was a far better option than any I had. Taking a deep breath, I tapped in a number and called. It rang three times before being picked up.

“Yo,” Cupid said. Her voice sounded tired, even over the tinny phone speaker.

“Cupid, hi. It’s Blink.”

“Hi. What do you want?”

“I have a girl at my place currently. She… recently triggered,” I said quietly. “She doesn’t want to join the Wards and can’t go home. I… wasn’t sure who else to talk to.”

“Don’t you have an entire gang of, oh I don’t know, noble villains that could take her in?”

I ignored the subtle dig. “I think she needs people who would actually care about her. Be there for her.”

“Huh,” she said. There was a pointed pause. “I’ll do what I can for her. Is there a place we can meet?”

“Not sure. We could always meet somewhere secluded and I could fly her in.”

There was a pause. “Okaaaay, and what happens when the entire city sees that? Does she even have a costume, or some way of protecting her identity?”

“Dammit. She doesn’t. I could maybe get something, but—”

“Oh, how about you just meet me at Union Station in a couple hours? Out of costume, of course.”

“You’re asking me to out myself to you,” I said flatly.

“Dude. You and your boss invited yourselves to my home,” Cupid responded. She didn’t sound amused.

I sighed. “Wasn’t like it was my idea, but fine.” Something told me that if she wanted to, she could find out my identity anyway. “It’ll be closer to three hours, I think. She’s taking a nap right now.”

“Not like I had anything else planned, sure. I’ll see you there.”

The line disconnected.

*Great. Continuing my quest to show my face to as many heroes as possible.*
I sighed heavily as we stepped off the train. I was beyond thankful that Alice managed to keep herself from derailing it, or worse. Even if my hand felt like it would have permanent marks from how tightly she’d held it.

This late in the evening, the station was hardly packed, with only a couple people waiting at the underground train platforms. I looked around for any redheaded, bow-wielding parahumans. I didn’t see any, so instead I led Alice towards the escalators at the far end of the platform, taking us up into the main part of the station.

The inside of Union Station was as incongruous as ever, with fancy chandeliers and a horrifically expensive coffee shop that earned a quick sneer from me. I glanced around the main room, seeing only a few people sitting around. No Cupid. It wasn’t until Alice tugged at my sleeve and pointed at someone did I realize I’d completely missed her.

Just outside the doors, Cupid was leaning against a column, watching the buses outside as she smoked a cigarette. I pushed open the heavy doors, holding them open for Alice as the former Protectorate poster child stamped out her cigarette with her boot.

“Hey,” she said simply to me.

“Hey,” I said awkwardly. “So, this is Alice.”

“Hi Alice,” Cupid said, squatting down a little to see the young girl eye-to-eye. “I’m—oh for fuck’s sake, you don’t speak English?”

“I forgot to mention she’s deaf. Sorry.”

“Oh!” Cupid smiled, and started making arcane gestures with her hands. “...and she doesn’t speak sign language. And here I thought PR might not have been wasting my time when they made me learn it.”

“I don’t think anyone *speaks* sign language,” I snarked. Turning towards Alice, I pulled out a scratch pad and a pencil.

*This is Cupid. She’s gonna help you out like how we said.*

Cupid waved, a bit awkwardly.

*I know.* Alice wrote. She hesitated for a moment, looking down. *I wanna stay with you, Isabelle.*

I winced at the mention of my name, with Cupid leaning over my shoulder. Oh fucking humpty dumpty well.

*She’ll care for you better than I ever could.*

Cupid held out a hand for the sheet, and started jotting down on it for a minute or so before holding it out to Alice. *You’re scared. This is all new, and you have stuff going on that’s hard for anyone to understand. But eventually we all end up making a decision, whether to help people or hurt people. You can make that now or make it later, but it’s a choice you HAVE to make eventually.*

The word “have” was written in capital letters, with two lines under it. Alice looked between the two of us before taking the sheet. *I don’t want to hurt anyone.*
I sighed and held my hand out for the sheet. Then you’re better off with Cupid. You don’t want to be with the likes of Blink. I ignored the look from Cupid and passed the sheet over to Alice. The girl gave me a troubled glance before writing.

*Does she really hurt people?* Alice glanced at me, before handing the sheet to Cupid.

She’s a supervillain. She thinks she’s stuck where she is because she has no other choice. Tell that to the guy whose leg—

“That’s enough,” I said weakly. It would’ve been easy to snatch the paper away, but I couldn’t.

—she broke in front of his family. And that’s before I get into the drug trafficking, assault, and robbery.

I couldn’t bare to see Alice’s expression. She didn’t make any noise, but I could only imagine what must be on her face. Shock? Sadness? Betrayal? Disappointment? I wasn’t sure what would be worse. Easier not to know. Cupid passed the paper to me, her expression carefully blank. “Not pulling punches when it’s her life on the line. Sorry.”

*Villains hurt people.*

“Yeah, I get it,” I said quietly, before dropping the paper and walking away. I didn’t meet Alice’s eyes. Couldn’t meet her eyes. *I don’t know how much longer I can do this.*

---

Even here, two days later, I couldn’t help but picture what the girl’s expression must have been. Even when I told her I was a villain, she didn’t know what that *meant* until Cupid…

“Fack me sideways. *Of course* you’re ’ere,” a voice I didn’t care to hear said. I glanced up at Kaboom and gave him the most dismissive look I could. He returned the look with a sneer. “And whadya know, you just sat on the very same chair I just boobytrapped. One move, and boom!” he cackled, slapping his knee as I tried not to let my flash of internal panic show.

“You know I could just teleport away, right?” I said, eyebrow raised. *That’s right, remain calm, don’t let the psycho know you’re nervous*…

Imperium ignored us, choosing to continue reading whatever book he had now.

“Jeez louise. Real stick in the mud, you are,” he said grumpily, arms crossed. “Dya have any idea how *bored* I was all cooped up?”

“Maybe as bored as I am talking to you,” I said flatly. *Oh great job, Isabelle. Please, do antagonize the psycho further.*

Kaboom snorted, giving a sideways glance to Encore and Recollect as they walked into the meeting room. “That’s a little better. Dry wit. I can respect that. Ya still coulda laughed when I joked about the bomb.”

Apparently threatening someone with a fake bomb under the seat qualified as a joke.

Kaboom continued, “Nah. If I really wanted to blow you away, I’d do… this!”
Before I could react, Kaboom tossed what appeared to be sand at me. They popped, leaving dust and a slight tickle in their wake before I could teleport up. Laughter echoed through the meeting room, turning into a gurgle. As the dust cleared, I could see Kaboom forced down onto the ground by a pair of Imperium’s robots. A third gripped his throat, not budging even as Kaboom squirmed. Imperium snapped his book shut.

“Did that really just happen?” I groaned, glaring at Kaboom.

Imperium spoke, as if he was talking about the weather. “I sincerely recommend not repeating your course of action. You may find yourself misplacing your head.”

The robots released Kaboom and stepped away, marching out of the room in unison. He shakily stood up, rubbing at his throat, his expression a mixture of bewildered and nervousness.

“I do believe everyone is here. Let us begin,” Imperium said.

“Seems a little small since, you know, two of us got offed,” Encore commented loudly, almost dismissively.

“A great loss, to be sure. Potion was a valuable part of our organisation. Woodwind, though she was not with us long, should be commended in passing as well. However, we must move forward. To that end, do welcome the newest addition to our Empire.”

Imperium motioned with one hand as a new cape walked into the room. Short, no taller than five feet. They wore a simple suit, the coat slung over their shoulder and their sleeves rolled up. Pale blue eyes scanned the room through their mask, framed by long, coarse black hair. In short, they looked like a smaller, more androgynous Recollect.

“Hello,” they said with a small wave. Even their voice was androgynous. “Please to meet you all. You may call me Ambiguity.”

“Who are you supposed to be?” Encore called as the new cape took a seat by Imperium’s side.

“Ambiguity,” the cape repeated with a smile. Kaboom chuckled.

“Ambiguity has earned their place at my side. A touch of politeness would be well appreciated,” Imperium said.

“Haha. Welcome to the team, kid. Call me Kaboom if ya don’t already know me.”

“Hi, Ambiguity. I’m Blink,” I said, strained.

“I’d be a poor excuse for a cape if you didn’t know about me,” Encore said, with a tiny tilt of their head.

“Ah. I am sorry for your current state, then, cape I do not know,” Ambiguity said. Kaboom cackled.

Encore sputtered, and stood up only for Imperium to gesture at him. He sat back down, grumbling to himself.

“With introductions aside, it is time we turned to the crux of the matter. The Ravens. There is little reason to mince words. The Ravens are a disgusting blight on the city, spreading like vermin, tainting everything they touch.” The vitriol in Imperium’s voice through me for a loop. Judging by the expressions Encore and Kaboom held, they were just as surprised.
“Preparations near their conclusions. Just as we threw out Las Muñecas, the Ravens too will have to find somewhere else. That is, if they aren’t sentenced to the Birdcage first. With Basilisk gone, it is only a matter of time.”

Recollect added, “Acquisitions of key properties within Arsenal and other parts of their territory are underway. Our contacts within certain companies will ensure they are remodeled and refitted accordingly.”

“In addition,” Imperium continued. “Epione is currently an ally, and not to be touched or even approached in any way.”

“The heck? When we were just harassing her?” Encore said.

“She is a key element of this operation. That is all you need to know. In addition, we will be slowing down on territory skirmishes. In particular, cape clashes should not occur unless your life is directly threatened. The Ravens will relax, even as seeds for their downfall are planted. They may inch closer to our territory, even as the metaphorical axe hangs above their heads.”

“Just like that?” I found myself speaking up.

“It won’t be long before every villain in this city answers to me.”

My whole body shivered. Imperium terrified me at that moment. Memories of myself dismissing him came to mind. Yet, at the same time I wanted him to win. If only because Imperium was better than the Ravens. I could think of one big problem. What did Imperium want after?

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We pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. I glanced over at Brenna, who was sitting in the passenger seat of my car, looking nervously at me.

“Let’s go, I guess,” I said, not knowing what else to say. Brenna simply nodded, reaching back to grab her backpack from the backseat before we stepped out of the car. The hospital loomed ahead.

No matter how many times I’d stepped inside, it never felt familiar. Cold, sterile. A place where someone might go, desperately hoping they get to leave alive, but only find death. I took a deep, halting breath, and walked inside. I knew the hallways too well by now.

Stopping in front of the door to my sister’s room, I glanced at Brenna. She shot me a smile, and I glanced back to the door. Finally, I pushed it open. Jessica laid in bed, blinking lazily at the TV. Some old black and white show was on, several men yelling angrily around a table. My sister was even more pale and weaker than the last time I saw her. She turned towards me, eyes widening.

“Isabelle!”

“Hey sis,” I said, giving her a small smile. “How’s it going?”

“Nice to see you weren’t killed by the Endbringer that attacked recently.” Jessica said. She stopped, pausing to cough. “Seriously, though. Would’ve been nice to have gotten at least a call.”
I winced. “I’m sorry.”

Jessica sighed. “Me too. But for real, sis. I’d like to see you more than once a month. How have you been?”

_Took part in an Endbringer fight. Got my spine snapped. Got a new spine. I helped a girl, and all I got was a friendly reminder how much of a shitty person I am._

“I’ve been busy, but okay, I guess.”

“You work too hard. I hope your girlfriend over there helps you relax _sometime_ , though?” Jessica asked, grinning, her eyes darting towards Brenna.

“She’s not… oh for fucks sake.”

“I’m not! Why does everyone think…”

Jessica snorted.

“My _friend’s_ name is Brenna.” I turned towards her. “Brenna, this is Jessica, my sister.”

Brenna stepped forward and waved. “Hi.”

Jessica stared at Brenna’s hand for a moment. “What an odd glove.”

“Oh, Jess… okay, sorry Brenna, but I’m gonna be blunt. My friend also happens to be Icarus.”

“Oh no,” Brenna said in monotone, clasping her hands to her face. “My secret identity is out. What a nightmare.”

“Huh,” Jessica said. “You’re dating a superhero! Nice.”

I slapped a hand to my face.

“I have a boyfriend,” Brenna said with a blush, crossing her arms.

“Sorry, sorry. I’m sorta low-key high,” Jessica said with a slight giggle. “Doesn’t quite make up for all this crap hooked up to me, but oh boy does it try. Hey, can you believe I’ve watched this movie five times now?”

“Wow, they’ve got you on the good shit, don’t they?” Brenna said with a twinge of worry.

“I guess. Hey, what were we talking about again? Sorry. I might be a little out of it.”

God. She wasn’t this bad the last time I saw her. Jessica… “Hey, Brenna?” I said quietly. “Is this… can you help her?”

“Isabelle, do you think you could step out for a moment?” Brenna said, giving me a serious gaze.

“Why?” I should be here for her.

“It’s for her ears only. Just trust me.”

“I…” I paused, looking back into Brenna’s sober eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

I stepped out, closing the door behind me. The temptation to press my ear against the door was strong, but instead I walked to a nearby chair. With nothing else to do, I pulled out my phone and
logged into PHO. The thread discussing my public kidnapping of Alice was locked, interestingly enough. I glanced through the other threads for Denver, looking to see if she popped up anywhere else. Looking past the threads discussing Uplift, the numerous noise complaints, and other small going-ons, I found a thread about Cupid’s new team.

*Finally officially started it, huh? I hope Alice is doing okay.*

Her team hadn’t come up with an identity yet. Still building. Cupid formed it with Synesthesia and… oh fucking hell. Astroglide of all capes was in her group. Last I checked, he was still a joke villain who never actually did anything. I only personally saw him once, kissing a guy as he fled from the police, skating across the concrete like it was ice.

In the thread was a recent photo of the three. Cupid looked the same as always, giving the camera a PR-friendly smile. Behind her stood Astroglide with a wide grin, pointing finger guns at the camera. A girl stood next to Astroglide, wearing a wavy golden costume with a cute little skirt and soft red leggings. She wore a simple golden mask, looking rather uncomfortable as she stared at the camera. That had to be Synesthesia. I couldn’t help but smile. She was looking quite the hero. Though the costume was a bit… gaudy, almost. Perhaps a touch stereotypical. There were far too many girl heroes with skirts.

The door opened, and I quickly shot to my feet to look towards Brenna as she stepped out. Just from her face, I already knew the answer. I felt ready to puke.

“*No,*” I whispered. “*Brenna. Please.*”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“*Why?*” I said, walking up to her.

“She said no.”

Shoving Brenna to the side, I rushed into the room and up to Jessica’s side. She looked up at me, smiling softly. Her eyes were more focused now than they were a few minutes ago.

“*Hey again,*” she said.

“*Why did you say no?*” I demanded.

Jessica’s smile faltered. “*I couldn’t.*”

“*Couldn’t what?*” My voice was rising. I didn’t bother to lower it.

“*Go through with it. Your friend told me everything she’d have to do and… I’m sorry, but I couldn’t. It wouldn’t be a life worth living.*”

“*But you’d be alive! You wouldn’t be lying in bed, waiting to die!*” I tried to blink away the stupid tears that threatened to form.

“*Isabelle…*”

“*You could be at home, with me! It could be like old times. Just doing whatever, talking about stupid stuff. I just. I can’t.*” Dammit. All the times I tried to hold back talking to her… “*I… I can’t take it anymore,*” I said quietly.

Jessica shakily lifted a hand to wipe at my tears. Or attempted to. I winced as her knuckle pushed
slightly into my eye.

“I’m glad you’ve found new friends. I know you’ll take good care of them.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Not after all this time. Not after everything I’ve done. I can’t lose you.” I couldn’t keep my voice for turning shrill.

Jessica gave me a worried glance. “What do you mean, everything you’ve done?”

Oh god. Don’t, Jessica. Please don’t.

“Why would you just give up like this?” I said, ignoring her question.

“I’m dying, Isabelle,” Jessica said, tiredly. “I’ve been dying for a while. But don’t think for a second that I can’t figure out what you’re trying to do. Talk to me, Isabelle. Please. I love you so, so much. There’s something bothering you. I think I’ve seen it for a while now. Can you let me be a big sister a little while longer?”

I dropped to my knees.

“I never wanted you to know.”

“You can tell me anything.”

“I still don’t want you to know. Please leave it alone, Jess.”

“I’m not going to do that. Talk to me. Better I find out now than later in heaven?” Jessica gave me a strained smile.

It felt as though I’d been punched in my gut.

“I’ve done bad things.” I could have left it at that and ran out into the hallway. Or jumped out the window.

“Okay.”

“Just okay?”

“It looked like you were gonna say more.”

“It’s hard to put into words. I still don’t want to—”

“Then don’t beat around the bush, sis.”

“I’m a supervillain.” I couldn’t meet Jessica’s eyes. She didn’t say anything for a few moments. “I —”

“Sorry, I’m struggling to figure out what to say,” Jessica said. “Of all the things my little sister could have came out to me about.”

“Seriously? Nothing like ‘how could you’ or ‘you can’t really be, Isabelle’?” I glanced back up at Jessica, dumbfounded.

“Well, excuse me. Though I feel like I should say breaking the law is not a very good thing to do.”

“Ah, yes. Don’t do drugs. Don’t break the law. Don’t jaywalk,” I said in monotone.
“There’s that snark. Tell me you aren’t pulling my leg on this one?”

Rather than answer with words, I teleported straight up and glanced at her as I floated.

“I’m Blink,” I said regretfully, looking away again. “I have been ever since…”

“I’m sorry.”

I glanced back at Jessica’s regretful eyes. “What could you possibly be sorry for?”

Jessica blinked slowly. “Sorry, still gathering thoughts. I… I just should’ve been there for you. Not stuck in here. Can you tell me why?”

I paused. “I wasn’t sure what else to do. I figured out my power, went out, and got an offer. And here I am,” I said quietly.

Jessica’s eyes widened. “There isn’t a mysterious donator, is there?”

“I think the word is ‘donor’, Jess.”

“Don’t dodge the question.”

“It’s…” I hesitated. “It’s just me.”

“What the hell, Isabelle?”

“I had to do something,” I said weakly.

Jessica was silent for a moment. “This is what’s been eating you up.”

“Yes.”

“I know you, Isabelle. Or at least I’d like to think I do. I couldn’t see you being a supervillain.”

“Well I am,” I said bitterly. “A pretty terrifying one, at that.”

“I can’t see you being terrifying,” Jessica said, one eyebrow raised.

“I’d never be to you.”

“I guess not.” She sighed. “Okay. I think I’ve wrapped my head around this. Tell me. Are you happy?”

The question was depressingly easy to answer. “No,” I said quickly.

“Would you be happier if you weren’t a supervillain?”

“I think so.”

“It’s a yes or no question, sis.”

“Yes, then!”

Jessica smiled. “Alright, so you are still the sister I know. Just as stupid as always.”

“Ouch?”
“Okay, that might have been a bit harsh.”

“I might have deserved it,” I admitted.

“Oh, yeah, you do. Come on, sis. A supervillain!”

“I didn’t know what else to do!”

“Umm. Not be a supervillain?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that,” I said flatly.

“Oh har har. The answer is still obvious. Stop being a supervillain.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“But what about—”

“No buts! No excuses! Don’t do this pretending to be helping me. No amount of money is going to fix…” Jessica trailed off.

I listened to the beeps and other sounds of the equipment around her. So much technology building up around her just to maintain a small shred of life.

“I’m lost without you. Without mom. Without papá,” I said quietly.

“I think you’re stronger than you think you are,” Jessica said, shifting her hand again to my face, smiling at me. “You’ve got a good friend out there. God only knows how a villain makes friends with a hero. Probably goes to show you aren’t really a villain. I don’t really know where I’m going with this. I think the drugs are kicking in again.”

“What do I do? Tell me what to do.”

“I think you know. I… I’m so sorry, sis. I’m tired. In more ways than one. Can you visit me two weeks from now?”

“I…” I paused. “I will. I promise.”

“Maybe you’ll have good news for me?” Jessica smiled and closed her eyes.

“Jessica?”

She didn’t say anything. At first I feared the worst, only to notice the rise and fall of the breathing. She’d just fallen asleep mid-conversation.

Overall the conversation went better than I ever dared imagine. Even if it was a giant clusterfuck. My thoughts started and stopped, never forming anything complete. Sitting on the ground, I dodged the conclusion I wanted to avoid. I took a deep breath and stood up, heading back to the hallway. Brenna was sitting in a chair, drawing something into a notebook. She glanced up at me and rushed over to hug me. I held her tightly for a moment before she stepped back.

“Hey, Brenna?” I hesitated. “I’m sorry again, but there’s one more thing I’d like help with. I don’t think I can do it by myself.”
“What is it?”

“I need you to help me turn myself in.”
Blink

“Hey, Isabelle! Slow down!” Brenna shouted as I rushed for the exit.

“You aren’t changing my mind,” I said, more to myself than to Brenna.

“Not gonna try to. Just. Hold on!”

Ignoring her, I made a beeline for my car. The moment I closed the door, I turned the key. The passenger door opened as Brenna folded her wings and sat down. “Hey, Isabelle? I’m glad you’re doing this, but you’re kinda worrying me right now.”

“I have to do this before I change my mind.” Shifting into drive, I headed for the road.

I’m going to regret this. I’m going to regret not doing this.

“Okay, so, what are you going to do? Walk into the PRT headquarters and shout that you’re Blink?”

“Maybe?” I said in a small voice. To be honest, I hadn’t put a single thought into this beyond turning myself in. That’s what I needed to do, right? To start setting things straight?

“Yeah, and good luck washing confoam out of your hair. Trust me, I’ve read the manual.”

“If you don’t have a better idea, I’m still heading over.” If I don’t head over there, I might lose myself.

“Hey, I got this. Go ahead and keep driving. I’ll give you directions.”

Taking deep breaths, I continued driving towards downtown. Brenna didn’t say anything else, tapping away at her phone. She glanced at me every so often, but didn’t say anything until we reached the skyscrapers, and even then it was only directions.

“Brenna, this is a sandwich shop,” I said, leaning down to look through the windshield.

“Well yeah, I was hungry,” Brenna said matter-of-factly. “And I’m sure Dad will want a sandwich too.”

“Your dad?” How was Brenna’s dad relevant? Come to think of it, she never said much about her family at all.

“Do you want anything?” Brenna opened the door and looked at me expectantly.

“Umm. A steak and cheese, I guess?” I didn’t have much of an appetite, but answering the question in a way Brenna expected was easier than trying to figure out what she was on about. All of my brainpower was going towards do this, do this and don’t look back.

The stillness, the lack of activity in waiting for Brenna ate at me, giving me the jumbled thoughts I didn’t want to have. You’re turning your back on your sister. Stay a villain. She needs the money. No, she doesn’t want it. Jess is gonna die anyway. How could I think that!? It’s true though. She’s
The door suddenly opened, and I jerked forward. Brenna gave me a worried glance. I could feel the mixture of surprise and embarrassment on my own face. She looked down to dig into the bag, pulling her sandwich out and immediately starting to mow it down.

“Where to now?” I asked, turning the ignition again.

“Aren’t you gonna eat?” Brenna said in between mouthfuls. I shook my head. “Okay. Well, you see that golden dome over there?”

“Yeah?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “The Capitol building is kinda hard to miss. What about it?”

“Just go there.”

“Really,” I said flatly.

“Yeah? My dad works there.”

Taking a deep breath, I drove out onto the road. “And then what?”

“One thing Dad always drilled into me, where the law is concerned, was to shut up and get a lawyer.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about outing myself to someone I don’t even know,” I said nervously. Brenna gave me a weird look. Technically, I would’ve been outing myself to someone I didn’t know by turning myself in.

“He’s pretty accepting. I think you’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’ll be fine,” she repeated. “Take a left.”

The drive to the Capitol still took a little time even with Brenna giving curt directions, still tapping away at her phone. Soon we found a parking lot, put the little ticket in the window, and were on our way. Even with everything else going on, part of me wondered how much the parking fee was going to be.

My heart rate increased with every step closer to the doors of the Capitol. My breathing shuddered. Brenna gripped my shoulder with a hand as she enveloped me in her wings. “Don’t worry, Isabelle,” Brenna said quietly.

“Brenna…” I wanted to stop in place. Turn around. “Am I being stupid?”

“This is the smartest thing I’ve seen your gay ass do in a while. Don’t worry about it.” There was a security checkpoint ahead, but Brenna waved some sort of ID card at the guard, and she let us pass through unhindered.

“What does your dad do?” I asked as we climbed up the stairs, if only to distract myself momentarily from the building nervousness.

“He’s a state senator. He’s been working to stop progress on the Springs wall and cancel the exclusion zone.”

My eyes widened. “Is that really a smart thing to do?”
Brenna shot me a questioning look. “It’s the right thing to do. There’s real people in there. Stripped of their lives, just because they weren’t fast enough. Left to die.”

“I hadn’t really thought of that.” Too swept up in my own problems. Real shitty person, I was.

“Not many people do,” Brenna said quietly, stepping through one of the doors. “Hey Linda, is Dad around?”

An older woman smiled at Brenna from behind a desk, giving me only a brief glance. She reminded me of a typical secretary, right down to her short cropped brown hair and thick glasses. “He just got out of a meeting, actually. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you.”

“Cool. Thanks!” Brenna stepped through the other door, waving a sandwich and dragging me in with her. “Hi Dad! I brought lunch.”

Brenna’s father stood beside a large bookcase, book in hand. He turned towards us, lighting up with a smile. It was my first good look with how, uh, distracted I was at the dance. His eyes reminded me of Brenna’s. “Brenna! You dropped by at a good time. Bastards haven’t been giving me an ounce of air to breathe lately, it feels like.”

“Honestly it’s a no brainer. Those people deserve to have their lives back.”

“If only they saw it that way,” Brenna’s dad said with a sigh. He gave me an inquisitive look. “I feel like we’ve met before.”

“Hi Mr. Grovsmed. I’m Isabelle.” I waved awkwardly.

“I remember now. You were at the dance. Naomi’s date, I believe?”

“Not exactly. Just there as friends,” I said, a bit of heat in my cheeks.

“It’s good to properly meet you. Any friend of my daughter’s is a friend of mine.”

I couldn’t take the small talk. Not right now. “Even if they were a supervillain?” I said. You could hear a pin drop for a moment.

“I might have a question or two if that were the case,” he replied.

The door was still open behind me. All I’d have to do was walk away. It wasn’t too late. I’d only pay the small price of hating myself forever. Of disappointing Jessica… and Brenna.

Taking a deep breath, I finally spoke. “Isabelle isn’t my only name.” I paused. “In costume, I’m known as Blink.”

“Okay, Isabelle, shush for a moment before Dad hits the silent alarm,” Brenna said, giving both me and her dad a glance. “So my friend here is really, and I mean really shitty at being a villain. And she’s finally wised up and wants to go to the good side.” Brenna gave me a second glance. I hadn’t thought about what I’d do after turning myself in. Hadn’t thought about any of this, really. No, I had thought about it once. Back when I started, a part of me always knew I was doing the wrong thing.

A pause. “Just give me a sec, and I’ll prove it to you.” Brenna took her mask out of her backpack and walking to the TV. She plugged it in, and after Icarus’s winged sword emblem briefly flashed across the screen, I appeared, lit in a weird greenish-blue light.

“You’re late,” I said in the recording
“Circled for a bit when I saw it was you, scoping it out. Still not convinced this isn’t a trap,” Icarus said.

Our first meeting, not counting the time I tried to taser her. A lifetime ago, after everything else that happened. I looked away; I couldn’t bear to be reminded of what happened next. Brenna let it play, only shutting it off after we had said our goodbyes. Brenna’s dad stared at the TV even after it went dark, a contemplative look on his face.

“I also want you to read this,” Brenna said, pulling out her phone and tapping at it. “Just, ugh. Just as soon as I can get it pulled up.”

There was an awkward minute of silence. “Brenna dear, do you need help?” Brenna’s dad said.

“I got this, Dad!” Brenna tapped away for another minute before jabbing a fist into the air triumphantly. She handed her phone over to her dad. “Here, read this. And uh, just so you know, this is classified information. And I might be doing something slightly illegal.”

He scrolled through her phone. “I see,” he finally said. He looked up towards me, his expression one I couldn’t quite make out. “Thank you, Isabelle. From the bottom of my heart. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t…” he trailed off.

It was pretty obvious what Brenna had shown him. “Brenna’s my friend.” Even if I was conflicted at the time. “I just did what anyone would’ve done.”

“‘Anyone’ wouldn’t have risked themselves and gotten arrested. You’re a hero, even if no one else sees you that way.”

“I’m not a hero,” I said, looking away. “It’s why I’m here.”

A wing settled on my back as Brenna spoke, “She wanted to turn herself in. I figured we’d go to you, try to do this the smart way.”

“First question,” Brenna’s dad said. “Do you plan on sticking around in Denver?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Denver’s my home.”

He sighed. “I’m afraid the Wards aren’t an option for you, not with your background.”

“I… wasn’t even thinking about that.”

“Okay. Just checking, did you have any plans?”

“Just turning myself in.” I was feeling more dumb by the minute.

Brenna’s dad rubbed his temples. “Take a deep breath. Think for a moment. What do you want?”

“I don’t want to be a villain.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“What do you want?” I found myself raising my voice.

“For you to take a deep breath and think.”

“I…” I paused. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I continued. “I’m scared. There’s no turning back if I do this.”
Brenna wrapped a wing around me. “Hey, you’ve got this. All you need to do is do what you think is right.”

“You’re so helpful,” I said dryly. Dammit, Isabelle, be nice. “It’s just… what if this isn’t the right thing to do? Imperium… he’s planning on taking down the Ravens. The fucking Ravens.”

“And you have to be a supervillain to fight them?”

Brenna might as well have thrown ice water into my face. I sputtered for a moment, my cheeks warming up. “No. I guess not.”

“Cool, I was worried I’d have to learn Latin.”

“I don’t know if he even speaks Latin. He’s certainly never brought it up.”

Audun spoke up. “I think we’re getting a little distracted.”

“Right.” I took another deep breath. “Wards are out. Being independent is out. I’m useless by myself.” But I had to do something, I thought to myself. I remembered when I stood up to bullies, once upon a time.

“Cupid? Between you and Astroglide, she can just name her group Villain Rehab.”

“Fuck that. Do you know what she did to me?” I said without even thinking.

“You mean trying to kill the thing that pulled her sister apart? Like, that’s awful, and I’d sure as heck be uncomfortable with it, but didn’t you get into this entire mess because of your sister?”

“Don’t bring her into this.” I shoved her away, even if I knew she was right. Even if I agreed with her.

“Isabelle,” Audun said. Sighing, I turned towards him. “If we could pick and choose all the people we have to work with, the world would be a splintered mess. Well, more than it already is. The bottom line is, I think you’d rather work with Cupid than with Imperium.”

“You’re right.” Dammit. “Doesn’t make it any better.”

“Compromise. It’s how society sticks together as well as it does.”

I could’ve argued. Picked at how it seems to not work at all, how it ends disastrously. How he’d counter and we’d all end up at the same conclusion anyway. I knew what I needed to do, and I just had to get over myself.

“I will just have to hope Cupid will accept me.”

Brenna’s dad smiled. “We’ll present such a good case, she’ll be begging for you to join.”

“What do I do now?”

Brenna’s dad picked up a phone. “I’ll call the PRT. Unless you need to take care of a thing or two?”

I gulped. The prospect felt more real every moment. A sickening feeling formed in the pit of my tummy.

“Hey, doesn’t she need a lawyer first?” Brenna said.
“She has one. I’ll represent her,” he said.

“Wait, Mr. Grovsmed, aren’t you a senator or… something?”

“Please, call me Audun. I was a lawyer before I was a senator,” he said, smiling. “A damn fine one. And there isn’t a single person in this state that knows cape law to the extent I do.”

“Won’t this hurt your career?” I said.

Audun shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. To be frank, you saved my daughter’s life. I’d give up a shot at the White House for her.”

“Okay,” I said after a pause. “There is one more thing. I have tinker-tech implanted in me from Brenna.”

Brenna’s dad looked at her. She stammered, “She was paralyzed in the fight. PRT was just going to write her off. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“That’s fine, so long as you weren’t arming her—”

“Really, Dad?” Brenna quipped.

Audun rolled his eyes. “They might not like it, but technically no laws were broken. You did fill out that paperwork for your medical license, right Brenna?”

“Hold on. Medical license?” I glanced at Brenna.

“Yeah!” she said with a smirk. “It turns out you need to be a doctor to do surgery and stuff, so technically I’m Doctor Grovsmed.”

“You have a medical license, dear, not a doctorate.”

“I’m also a private pilot and a law enforcement officer! Being a hero is weird. I had to get a concealed carry permit to use my arm, though. That was kinda extra-weird.”

“Anyway. Are you ready, Isabelle?”

“No,” I said quietly. “But yeah.”

Audun nodded and called someone. “Hello. This is Senator Grovsmed. I’m currently at the Capitol, room 346. I have a non-hostile villain here who would like to… yes, that’s correct, I said non-hostile. Uh huh. Yes. She is maskless, in civilian wear. Yes. She’ll stay put, that is correct.”

I tuned out the rest of the phone call, staring at the wall. Even as I felt Brenna press a wing to my back, as Audun walked out of the room to speak to his secretary. As an announcement went off throughout the building, and a pair of PRT officers piled into the room, pointing confoam launchers at me.

“Deja vu,” a man’s voice said. I finally looked away from the wall. Bunker stood by the door.

“Hello, Blink.”

“Down on the ground, hands behind your back. Don’t make any sudden movements,” a PRT officer said.

I, very slowly and carefully, complied. Holding my tongue from any stupid remarks, I listened as the officer read me my rights, and as another set a plain black mask on me to cover most of my face. I
was loaded into a truck, felt it shudder into motion. I was sure I walked into it with my own two feet, but it was too much of a blur to remember if I really had.

*Please be the right choice*, I repeated to myself. *Please be the right choice.*

---

*Here I am.*

The room reminded me of when Cupid interrogated me. Bare dark gray walls, bare gray floor. A shiny steel table dominating the room, with the occasional scruff from use and age. The biggest differences were the extra chairs and the lack of a mirror. The PRT guard yawned, but she kept her eyes on me. Despite the situation, despite the chest clenching anxiety that gripped me, I was bored. Any attempt to think of something else, any attempt to just be distracted for a brief moment, was stopped at every turn. All I could think about was what happened next. All I could hope right now, was that I could keep my promise with Jessica.

The door finally opened. Audun walked into the room, a determined look on his face as he set a binder and a box of donuts on the table.

“I will speak to my client alone,” Audun said, looking at the PRT officer. She walked out, shutting the door behind her, though I knew I was still being watched through camera. “How are you holding up?”

“Bored,” I said. And nervous. My heart thumped as the reality of the situation grew in my mind.

Audun nodded, setting a hand on my shoulder. “Sorry I took so long. Want a donut?”

I shook my head. They didn’t seem particularly appetizing.

“I have some good news. Cupid is already here and wants to speak to you. But first, we need to go through some things. I’ll list your charges. Don’t panic, okay? It sounds a lot worse than it really is, they always tack whatever they can on.”

Audun listed the charges. So textbook. As if I was listening about someone else’s crimes. Someone else’s life in the past six months. But it was me. It was all me. And they added and added. I couldn’t bare to listen to the specifics. Audun might have prodded me for clarification, and I might have answered, but my head was such a swirly mess and my tummy ached. I might have been hungry, or I might have been nauseous, and I had this tiny itch that I couldn’t reach because I was handcuffed to the table like the criminal I was.

“It’s a lot of charges,” I said dumbly, looking at the binder. Would I be stuck in jail forever?

“There’s some good news. Your status as a minor, for one. Your participation against an S-Class threat. Not to mention you saved my daughter and helped put one of Denver’s most elusive supervillains behind bars. And not all of the charges will stick.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. It still looked daunting.

“Given you turned yourself in with the intention to become a hero, you might not even face any jail time. Probation, certainly. You’ll be heavily restricted until you turn 18. It’s not a guarantee, but if
“You do spend some time locked up, it won’t be for very long.”

“Seriously? All that I’ve done, and I’m getting off with basically a slap on the wrist?”

“I’ve seen capes get away with worse. Far worse,” Audun said regretfully. “The law applies very differently when you have powers.”

I took a deep breath. “What’s next?”

“I’ll let Cupid know you’re ready. I’d prefer to sit with you on this one.”

“I think I’d like to talk to her alone.”

“Are you sure? It’s dangerous to talk without legal representation.”

I smiled. “She’s not the type to cut me up because I phrased things weirdly.”

“Alright. It won’t be much longer. Take care of yourself.”

Audun headed for the door, giving it a heavy knocking. He paused when the door opened.

“Hello, Director.”

A woman I could not see spoke. “Senator Grovsmed. Your presence is very interesting.”

“I’m here representing my client.”

“Yes, the villain. I’m going to speak to her now. Step aside.”

Audun stepped aside, and I finally got a good look at the woman. Her face was set in a serious glare. Her immaculate suit and tightly bound hair only added to the impression. The eyes were her most striking feature. Heterochromia, one blue and one green eye. I’d heard about Director Meyer. Enough to know that I really didn’t want to have a conversation with her.

Audun glared at the Director. “As her lawyer, I’m—”

“Yes, Senator. Don’t waste my time telling me what I already know. Sit down, then.”

Audun walked over to my side but remained standing, giving the Director an expecting look. She crossed her arms, staring at me. “Blink. I’ll skip the bullshit. Why are you surrendering?”

I started to open my mouth, only for Audun to shift his hand in front of me. He said, “My client is offering official surrender to the PRT for her crimes. She is prepared to accept whichever form of punishment is due, in return for having her status as a villain cleared.”

“Cleared,” the Director repeated, shooting me a glance.

“Her wishes to become a hero,” Audun clarified.

“She wants to join the Wards, then.”

Audun shook his head. “My client wishes to remain in Denver.” I would be relocated if I signed up for the Wards.

“This is going to be a very unproductive meeting then, if your client wants to be an independent hero.”
“Director Meyer,” Audun pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let’s skip the grandstanding, please? We’ll take a plea bargain, Blink joins Cupid’s group, under strict probation. If she so much as jaywalks, you can send her to the Florence containment facility if you so wish.”

“And why, Senator, wouldn’t I just do that anyway? Let her make license plates until she turns eighteen. I’ve got you by the balls here, sorry.”

“Director, please don’t feign ignorance. You know as well as we do that you benefit more from having her as a hero than locked away. With Cupid, she’s on your side. It’s a good PR move, as well.” Audun paused. “In addition, if you don’t play nice, you may suddenly find yourself prosecuted for ordering the operation that recklessly endangered and nearly killed my daughter. I would be surprised if your next assignment was a Deputy Director in fly-over country.”

Christ. This is why Brenna wanted me to lawyer up.

The Director bristled. “Are you suggesting you’re going to resort to blackmail?”

“I have full rights to represent my daughter in any Colorado court of law, Director, as well as sue for damages on her behalf. I merely wish to suggest that you should reconsider your stance towards my client, who is the sole reason the operation did not end in disaster.”

The Director stood up. “I’m going to have to discuss this with our legal department.” She stormed off, slamming the door behind her.

“Okay? What is her deal?” I said, dumbfounded.

Audun massaged his temples for a moment. “I don’t know. But we’re probably in the clear. I doubt they’ll reject this.”

“If you say so. You’re the expert,” I said uselessly.

“You’ll be fine.” Audun smiled. “Now, unless there’s another surprise, I’ll leave you to Cupid.”

I sat in silence for a while after he left. So silent, I could hear my breathing and the clink of the handcuffs as I shifted around. This entire process involved far too much waiting. Far too much time to dwell. Was this what my sister wanted? What I wanted? I never wanted to be a villain, so why was I still so full of dread?

The door finally opened and, taking a shaky breath, I looked up. Cupid looked concerned. “Hey, Blink. How are you doing?”

“You know how I’m doing,” I said, a little too forcefully.

“I’m trying to make conversation, you ass.” Cupid sat down across from me.

I sighed. “Sorry. I’m just… I don’t know.”

Cupid paused briefly. “So you’re joining my team, huh?”

“I don’t exactly have anywhere else to go.”

“Sure you do. You could be someplace other than Denver.”

I shook my head. “Even if I wanted to leave, I couldn’t.”

“Your sister.”
“She told me I was being stupid.” I sighed.

“I’m with her on that.”

“Do you even want me on your team?”

Cupid flinched. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be a bitch. I have a habit of probing for info. Yes, I want you on my team.”

I sighed in relief. Fucking thinkers. “You could just ask. Any questions?”

“Is Imperium going to be a problem with you leaving?”

“I haven’t thought about that,” I said quietly. “I had to do this before I could second-guess myself.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of time. I don’t think he will from what I’ve read on him, but if he comes after us in retaliation once this is announced… well we gotta know.”

“Imperium, for all his craziness, seems to operate under his own rules. And I was more of a mercenary than a part of his little gang. But… ugh, I’m not sure. Should I contact him?”

Cupid glanced around at our surroundings. “Maybe not now? Once a deal is finalized, sure.”

I took a deep breath, wishing my hands would stop shaking. When did they start shaking? “Okay.”

“Okay. So here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to spend some time in jail, until this all gets worked out. We’ve cleared Icarus to do maintenance as needed, under supervision of course. Assuming there’s no weaponry in… okay good, that would have made things complicated. Basically, you’re going to be spending a couple weeks getting to know prison food with a Tinkertech counter for your power, until this all clears.”

*I’m going to prison after all. No less than I deserved.*

“May I ask how you countered my power?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You know those stereotypical ball-and-chains prisoners have in old movies?”

“Uh huh?” I hadn’t actually expected her to give an answer. So I’d be lugging around a lump of metal weighing 400 pounds or something? How?

“Oh, a Tinker out in Wisconsin specializes in this stuff. It’ll be a big weight that lifts itself. Given you can only carry so much at once? Ah, yes.”

“Okay.” A part of me was relieved. I couldn’t run away from this.

Cupid smiled. “Cool. Well, we’ve got our work cut out for us, but welcome to the team.”

**Icarus**

Someone had apparently been sipping some Corporate Synergy Kool-Aid, that was the only possible explanation for this.

“Team-building!” she exclaimed, dragging us all into an unmarked SUV with no explanation.
Team-building was supposed to be just a codeword for “Let's have fun and get the PRT to pay for it.” This? This wasn’t fun. This was camping. I didn’t even know who this lady really was. The devil apparently called herself Ana when she wasn’t busy being Uplift.

“Brenna, stop moping!” the she-devil’s willing servant (Naomi) exclaimed, the light of the small campfire reflecting in her eyes as she took a sip from her water bottle. “Camping is fun! You can't spend all your spare time in a workshop.”

“Workshops don’t have mosquitoes,” I complained, slapping one of the bugs off my leg. Every non-metal bit of me was covered in bug bites; at this point I was half-convinced that some sort of sentient force was controlling them. I couldn’t help but giggle at the thought.

“What are you laughing at?” Lindsay said, looking bored. She wasn’t having any problem with mosquitoes, nope. Any that came near her turned into a flash of fire the second they touched her skin. Behind her, I could see Jordan and Thomas arguing over how to assemble their tent. A woman who earlier introduced herself as Lexi rolled her eyes at them, seemingly content to just watch their failing attempts at tent construction as she cuddled with the Devil. As far as I knew, she wasn’t a cape, but she worked with the PRT and knew the others’ identities anyway.

“Nothing, just laughing at the situation, I guess,” I replied awkwardly, shifting my position on the mossy log I was using as a seat.

Afternoon slowly became evening, and Ana finally broke out the one good part of living in the woods like goddamn animals.

“S’mores!” she exclaimed, throwing graham crackers and chocolate at myself, Naomi, and Lindsay. Naomi immediately skewered some marshmallows onto her fingers and plunged her hands into the fire.

“Okay, that's just showing off,” I complained. I turned to Lindsay, who was just as bad, holding a marshmallow in her fingertips and roasting it with surgical precision using her power.

She saw me looking and smirked. “Don’t you have metal arms, Brenna? Can't handle the heat?”

“You don’t have to clean soot out of your finger mechanisms,” I grumbled, standing and wandering into the woods to find a stick so that I could make s'mores like a human.

By the time I found enough sticks that would work and returned to the campsite, Thomas and Jordan had given up on their tent, apparently resigned to sleeping under the stars, and had returned to the fire. I handed my fellow not-fire-immune teammates—and the gays, who were currently holding hands and staring into each others’ eyes—sticks and sat next to Jordan, stabbing a marshmallow and sticking it over the flames.

Suddenly, I was struck with a brilliant idea. A way to make camping less awful. I leaned against Jordan as I looked into the fire, rubbing my arms. “Hey,” I said.

“Um, what's up?” he asked.

“Not much, it's just kinda cold,” I remarked, resting my head on his shoulder and pointedly ignoring the eye roll from Lindsay.

“Oh!” Jordan exclaimed, and suddenly he was gone. I nearly smacked my head on the log as I tried to recover from his sudden teleporting away.

A few seconds later he appeared back in the campsite with a whoosh, his arms full of wood. “I saw
a bunch of good firewood earlier,” he said proudly, throwing chunks of wood onto the fire.

“Oh, you’re... making the fire bigger,” I replied. Was I being too subtle? I glanced around the campsite. Lindsay had the look of someone trying too hard not to laugh, Thomas had his face buried in his hands, Naomi was obliviously sticking her fingers in her mouth to remove charred marshmallow. Ana and Lexi were in their own world. No, my boyfriend is just clueless, apparently.

Jordan was throwing sticks into the fire, muttering to himself about how being forced to be a boy scout finally paid off. I wasn’t so sure about that, though, as the fire got smaller and smaller, until it was half the size it had been before he started... helping.

Suddenly the fire erupted into a towering inferno. Jordan leaped back, startled, his eyes wide and eyelashes singed. “Huh,” Lindsay said, glancing at the fire and back at Jordan. “If fire scares you so easily, maybe you should just leave it to us.”

I sighed, and for the millionth time that night wondered why it had to be camping of all things.

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I pulled at the scratchy sweatshirt I’d brought to hide my arms and wings, as I bounced around in the passenger seat. Things had been fine at the campsite, but now… it was pretty obvious the chilly atmosphere wasn’t from the temperature.

“Of all the things to forget,” Naomi muttered under her breath.

“I mean, I can handle creek water for what it’s worth,” I said, trying to inject a little bit of humor into the… situation.

“Oh good. Way to think about yourself.”

“Hey, at least our team captain had her own water covered,” I replied dryly, gesturing towards the bottle in her cupholder. “If we want to go down that road.”

“I really don’t,” Naomi said quietly. “I don’t want to argue. Let’s just… get this done.”

“Okay.” I glanced out the window, looking at the pine trees flying by. With Blink having turned herself in a week ago… could I tell her the truth, finally?

“Hey, Brenna?” Naomi said after a pause, her breath shaky.

“Yeah?” I glanced over at her.

“I… we’re here,” she said, as we pulled into the parking lot of a gas station at the edge of some town. It felt like it just popped out of the woods.

“Naomi, hold on.” I reached out and grabbed her wrist. “What can I do? I miss my best friend. Seeing us like this… it fucking sucks.”

Naomi grabbed her water bottle and took a sip. “Gotta turn around and own up to your mistakes,” Naomi whispered, looking away

“There’s more going on than that. I can’t… I just can’t. And that’s the last thing he needs right now.”
God, I hated doubling down on this lie, but it meant Isabelle’s identity was safe.

“Then I guess that’s that,” she said bitterly and tossed the keys at me. “There’s a gas card in the glovebox, fill it up while I buy some water from inside.”

“Um, I don’t really kn—” I cut myself off as she shut her door.

I took a deep breath. This was awkward. I probably could have just stopped her and said “Don’t worry, Naomi, I’ll get the water if you want to deal with filling it up.” But I could just hear her now, *Oh, you’re too busy being a cheating harlot lesbian to know how to fill up gas.*

I mean, it *was* stupid, but it had always been something Mom and Dad took care of. Was that weird? Maybe. It just had always sounded so *boring.*

No matter. I was a Tinker, a superhuman inventor and engineer. I’d made aerodynamics my bitch and fought against the Simurgh. I’d be able to figure out how to pump gas. First things first. Glovebox. I knew what that was! I found the card buried in some paperwork and hopped out, walking over to the pumps.

Figuring out the credit card reader was easy enough, and when it asked what kind of gas I just picked the one with the biggest numbers—after all, gas was gas right? There was a hose, with a nozzle on the end, but I couldn’t figure out how to open the little door the covered the gas...port? hole? socket? The thing I had to put the nozzle in. There wasn’t a lock to put a key in, or any sort of handle...I sighed and pulled out my cell phone, hoping I could find a Youtube video or something—

“Brenna!” someone screamed. No, that was Naomi’s voice.

I dropped the nozzle and poked my head around the back of the SUV. She was standing at the doors of the gas station, her face as white as a sheet with a horrified look spreading across it.

I rushed over. “What’s wrong?” I asked. She didn't answer, just pulled me into the store.

The smell hit me first. It was like Colorado Springs, but... worse. The iron stench of blood only barely masking the other scents of death. Inside, It was a massacre. Random bodies everywhere throughout the store, every surface I could see was covered in splatters of blood. Some of the bodies were missing limbs and others could hardly be called bodies at all.

It was all too much, and I found myself bent over, heaving the contents of my stomach onto the floor.

“Icarus,” Naomi said. I looked over at her. She sounded completely in control of the situation now, even without her armor there was no doubt she was Tank Buster now.

“Yeah,” I replied, wiping my mouth on my sleeve.

“Look for survivors. I’m going to call the others and get help.”

I didn't say anything, just nodded and stepped into the mess.

Half of the bodies I didn't bother with, they were so torn apart that even if they clung to life, they wouldn't make it anywhere. The rest were already dead, no pulse and nothing I could do.

When I made it to the back of the store, I found a man, barely older than me, propped against a beer cooler, breathing shallowly. His hands were at his stomach, and I could see his guts between his fingers.
He looked up at me, eyes glazed with pain. I knelt next to him. “Hey, I'm going to take a look.”

He was a lost cause. Maybe if I'd had my costume with the blood transfusion tubing, I could have given him enough of my regeneration enzymes, but even then I doubted it would've been enough.

“Help is on the way, okay?” I said, pulling off my sweatshirt and pressing it over his stomach hopelessly. “Can you tell me your name?”

The man closed his eyes for a long moment, before whispering, barely audible, “Brian.”

“Okay, Brian, you're going to be fine,” I lied. “Can you tell me what happened?”

He whispered, too quietly for me to hear. I leaned closer, and he repeated himself. But I still couldn't understand.

There was nothing I could do. I opened my arm and pulled out a tranquilizer dart, jabbing it into his neck. He was out almost immediately. I couldn't save him, but at least he could die unconscious, rather than in agony.

I stood and turned away, blinking away tears. Naomi was there, looking at me, breathing heavily like she'd just ran a mile. I pushed past her and outside, sitting on the curb and trying to regain my composure. After two years of training and preparing, there was nothing I could have done to help here.

“Brenna,” Naomi said, “Emergency services are on the way, but the others don't have cell service.”

“We have to get them, I can fly—”

“No, we need to stay put until help arrives.”

“Naomi, what if... whoever did this is out there? Fuck, this is like some fucked-up horror movie.”

“The entire town is the same,” Naomi said, her voice shaking a little. “They could still be here. If we split up, we open ourselves to getting picked off.”

_Oh God._ “Is it... fuck, it's not the Nine, is it? Who else could do this?” All the more reason to warn the rest of the team, then.

“I don't know,” she responded. “But we have jobs to do.”

“How can you just respond like that?” I retorted, my voice shaking with a fear I didn't even realize had wrapped its fingers around my heart. “If it's the entire town—fuck, what can we even do?”

Naomi grabbed me by the shoulders. “Look at me, Brenna.” I looked up at her. She was staring at me, her blue eyes hardened with determination. “I'm scared too. I'm terrified. But we need to keep it together right now, okay?”

I stood and stepped away, taking a deep breath. This situation was _fucked_. But she was right. I didn't have the liberty to lose it right now. Maybe one day I'd be as in-control as Naomi was, but until then I'd have to pretend.

“Okay. What's the plan?” I asked, looking towards the rest of the small town.

Naomi didn't answer. I glanced over at her. She was looking at me, looking much less determined than she had been a second ago.
“Naomi?”

“Don’t make any sudden moves and listen carefully.” She wasn’t looking at me, I realized. She was looking behind me.

“... what is it?” I asked quietly, resisting the urge to turn around.

“Brenna, kick your jets to maximum and fly out of here. Get to the others and get them out.”

“What is it?” I repeated, louder, as my jets started to turn over.

“Treant. I don’t know why it’s… just… Brenna, you have to get out of here before it decides to attack.”

“Fuck that,” I said to myself, turning around. “I’m not leaving you here by your—oh jesus christ.”

Not even two feet away stood what I could only describe as a mess of vines and leaves in a vague humanoid shape, the skull that made up its mask—or head—tilted to the side. Thorns poked out between the leaves, and with horror I realised I could see pieces of metal sticking out alongside them, along with blood dripping all along its body onto the pavement. I froze, even as my whole body tensed, ready to move. How the fuck did a giant fucking tree sneak up on me?

There was nothing else for it. I raised my left arm at Treant, and the panels folded back. I slowly backed away, spreading my wings to shield Naomi from the tree monster. Without my mask, I only had a feeling, but I knew my arm was roughly half charged. Not enough. “I’m a bit flattered at the Icarus cosplay, pine tree, but I pull it off better.”

“What the fuck?” Naomi said under her breath from behind me.

“I couldn’t think of a better one-liner,” I whispered to her, feeling more power trickle into my arm’s capacitors. *Gotta buy more time…*

“I hope you have a plan,” Naomi whispered. “Unless you’re just trying to go down with snark.”

Vines burst out from the ground beside us, heading straight for Naomi. Instinctively, I extended my wing more to block the vine, only to have it wrap around and *tug*. Without thinking, I yanked my wing back, but it didn’t give. Instead, there was a *screech* of metal and my wing erupted in pain, pulling me off my feet.

There was another screech further away. I shifted my head to see the car slam into Treant. The tree monster jerked, and the vine around my wing constricted. I fell back, no longer being pulled on, but there was a numbness where the vine had been. I glanced over, and…

It had sheared through my wing.

“Naomi! Fucking *run!*” I screamed, pulsing my jets to leap away before spinning around to see an enraged Treant tearing into the front of the SUV. Naomi had jumped out, and was backing away. *Fuck fuck fucking shit.* I… I wasn’t going to get another chance, I realized, so I leveled my arm and fired the lightning cannon.

Everything went white, and the clap of thunder shook my bones. Even only half-charged, it felt just as powerful as it had been against the Simurgh. I blinked, trying to clear my vision, and slowly—too slowly—it came mostly back, leaving a jagged afterimage of whiteness. I could barely see Treant, but what I saw was reassuring. He was clutching at where his arm had been blown off along with a good portion of his shoulder.
Huh. I aim like Basilisk.

I was lying on my ass, I realized, from the recoil. I heard something like someone shouting my name. Naomi. She was here, instead of running, pulling me up.

“We have to get out of here while he’s reeling. Come on, Brenna!” With her help I got up to my feet, stumbling away. There was a sharp pain in my shoulder, and a pulsing burn in my sheared-off wing, every footstep causing a painful jolt.

“Naomi… fuck, the others, we need to—”

“They can handle themselves. They should’ve already been warned. We have to figure out how we’re not going to die in the next twenty seconds. Wait… yes! Sirens! We just gotta hold out a little longer. You’re not dying here.”

I glanced behind me. Treant had gotten up, and our car was on its roof fifty feet away from him. I could see a tangle of vines and twigs pushing out of the missing chunk of his flesh… was it a he, even? I couldn’t exactly tell and it wasn’t like you could just ask.

A pair of vines grabbed onto a dumpster, and flung it towards us. Without thinking, I shoved Naomi to the side, diving after her and landing atop her with a thud. The dumpster smashed through where we’d been, gravel and trash exploding everywhere.

I pulled myself up with my good wing, grabbing Naomi and pulling her with me. I could hear sirens now, and stumbled toward them, using pulses of the jets to make every step count just a little more. I could see the flashing, and hear thundering footsteps behind us. I lowered my right arm, spraying down a line of containment foam as we ran, hoping it’d buy just a second of time.

At the end of the street, a police car screeched to a stop, a man getting out of the driver’s seat with a pistol, like that would do any fucking good. “No!” I shouted. “We need to get the fuck out of here!”

“Sir, your pistol is nothing but a noise cannon. My friend is right. We need to move!” Naomi shouted.

He nodded, and got back into the driver’s seat. I ran forward with Naomi, tearing open the back door and leaping in, pulling her after me. “FUCKING GO!”

The car jerked forward, turning around and zooming away. I glanced behind us to see Treant standing there, his overgrown face somehow radiating pure rage. The car turned a corner, and then he was gone.
Icarus

The car screeched to a halt, amid a swarm of flashing lights filling a parking lot on the west side of town. Naomi hopped out and I followed, holding my ruined wing in my hands. Bunker was standing outside, along with what remained of the Protectorate sans Uplift, leaving just him, Chozo, and Umbra. And us two.

“What the hell happened?” Bunker shouted at Naomi, even as he handed her a mask.

“Treant,” I said quietly. “Attacked the town. Looks like the fucking Slaughterhouse Nine passed through.”

“What about everyone else? Did the rest of my team make it out?” Tank Buster said.

“They’re on their way, we sent a chopper out to pick them up,” Chozo interjected. “The PRT is on their way with your mech, Tank Buster.”

“The Tank Buster or the Torunn? Treant fought against the damn Simurgh, and now they’re killing people. We need to end this fast!” Tank Buster shouted.

“I agree,” Bunker said. “Director Meyer is in contact with the Chief Director in Washington. Last I heard they were giving Treant an A-class rating.”

“A-class?” I butted in. “So the big guns are headed our way?”

“Anyone who volunteers, and hopefully at least one of the Triumvirate.” Bunker paused. “Are the two of you up for this? Injuries?”

I held up what remained of my wing. “Socket’s a bit fucked, and my vision’s a little weird. I won’t be able to fly but my arms are fine. Can someone get me my mask and costume?”

“Already on its way, along with everyone’s costumes and equipment.”

An officer ran up to us, pointing at a nearby PRT truck which was just pulling into the lot with Naomi’s mech attached to the hitch. Tank Buster made a beeline for it and I followed.

“I wish they brought the Torunn,” Naomi muttered just loudly enough for me to hear. She took a drink from her water bottle. I couldn’t help but wonder if she’d always been this passive-aggressive, or if I’d only started noticing it recently.

“I’m just hoping they brought my other wings,” I replied as I pulled open the back compartment of the truck. “Nope.” There was, however, Naomi’s power armor, and all of the Wards costumes, along with Uplift’s. I crawled out of my civilian clothes and into my costume, finally clicking my mask on with a sigh of relief.

“Ready?” Naomi asked in Tank Buster’s modified voice, now fully-encased with a hand on the back door.

“Yeah,” I replied, half-distracted by the bukkake of error messages littering my mask’s HUD. I guess
having a wing nearly torn out of you and then shredded kinda caused some issues. I mentally dismissed it all and followed TB out into the field, feeling a bit seasick and unbalanced.

There was a helicopter landing in an open area, the rest of the Wards jumping out before it'd even fully landed. A rock landed beside me, and suddenly I found myself wrapped in a hug. Flashstep stepped back, giving me a worried look.

“Are you okay?”

I unclipped my mask and squeezed him tightly. “Maybe. Glad you guys are alright. He didn’t attack you too, did he?”

“No. We just heard about… fuck. The whole town?”

*Jeez, I don’t even remember him cussing when there was a fucking Endbringer.*

“Yeah,” I replied. “It… it wasn’t good. Fuck. I was scared. Am scared. I don’t know. Fuck, he had like metal and shit hanging out of him. I can’t get that thought out of my head. Like…” I trailed off.

It was hard to describe. For some reason, in my memory, it stuck out.

Flashstep stood on the tips of his toes to plant a kiss on my lips. “We’ll get through this.” I could feel his hand shake as he grasped my own.

I nodded, giving him a kiss in return. “Yeah. We got this. Just keep a tag on me in case you get in trouble, okay?”

“I got one when I kissed you,” he said, looking into my eyes. I couldn’t help but lean in for a second kiss.

“I hope that fucking tree just kills me so I don’t have to deal with this shit,” Eimyrja grumbled sarcastically as she walked past us.

Flashstep rolled his eyes. “I have to go get dressed.”

“Go. I’ll still be here.”

“You two are so sweet I feel like I’m gonna get diabetes,” Red Light quipped as he walked by, dragging Flashstep with him.

While I waited, I scanned the area. As if Treant would show up in the middle of Lakewood, but I couldn’t do nothing. It wasn’t long before I felt a hand on my back, my boyfriend once again by my side. Heavy footsteps sounded behind me as Tank Buster took her mech for a walk.

“Icarus, was it? You’re missing a wing,” someone said behind me.

“Yeah asshole,” I muttered before turning around to find myself face to face with *Legend*. “Oh. Hi. I, uh, had a run in with Treant?” How did he know my cape name? A few other capes stood behind him, glancing around.

“If you have any information on Treant, let us know. We might have seen him fight during the Simurgh battle, but if you have something new…”

“Right.” I paused, thinking back to the fight. Honestly, my memories revolved more around screaming and trying not to die, but… “I shot off one of his arms and watched vines sprout out of his stump to reform. And there was something off about the metal bits in him. And he’s angry, I think?”
How does one talk to Legend? He clasped a hand on my shoulder and shot me a comforting smile.
“Tell me about the metal.”

“It… almost felt… familiar?” I paused. “Like… well, like my implants, but not.”

I nearly flinched as Legend’s gaze intensified. “You believe Treant has been Tinker-modified?”

“I don’t know how but… yeah, it looked like implants. Felt like something I’d make, if I didn’t give a shit about looking semi-human.” Way to sound like a mini Bonesaw there, Brenna.

“Do you know what it’s doing to him?”

I shook my head. “If I had more time to study them, I could say. I don’t want to guess and be wrong.”

“That’s alright. Thank you.” Legend turned and walked a couple steps before pausing. “Please don’t be reckless this time around. Learn from your fight with the Simurgh. I’d hate to see one of our Wards die tonight.”

Fuuuuuck. “Yeah, uh, sounds good. Me too, I mean. Like, nobody dying is the goal. Except Treant.” I laughed nervously.

I spotted Bunker walking briskly over to us… well, to Legend. “Treant has been sighted in a mall northeast of here.”

“Shit! You mean he’s at Colorado Mills?” I exclaimed.

Bunker nodded grimly and turned towards Legend. “We knew Treant was some kind of mover… but we never expected this.”

“Everyone, listen up!” Legend shouted. “Treant has been sighted. We’re setting out immediately. We’ll go over everything we know about it on the way.”

I itched to get into the sky and fly off. People were dying right now, and we were here. A hand clasped around my wrist, and I turned to see Red Light shaking his head at me. I awkwardly realized I’d stepped away from everyone, and my single jet was spooling up. Old habits died hard, I’d instinctively started to fly off. “Sorry,” I said with a blush, clipping my mask back on to hide my embarrassment and following him into the PRT truck that’d had our costumes. The truck pulled away. Out the tiny rear window I could see Tank Buster finish shifting into a mobile state, treads slamming into the ground. She quickly caught up, driving side-by-side with our transport.

“Icarus,” Tank Buster’s voice buzzed on the radio. “Can you still fly?”

I shook my head, then realized how stupid that was. “No,” I said sheepishly. “I can kinda hop with one jet?”

“Then focus on getting civilians out. You can’t go up against Treant again like that. They want us on support, anyway.”

“Sounds good,” I replied quietly, leaning my head back to rest on the wall of the cab. It was a weird feeling. I wanted to jump in, fight, but that wasn’t a battle I’d win.

“Just… be careful, okay? I know you like to do reckless things, but…” She trailed off. But you’ll get your ass kicked, Brenna.
“You too. Be careful, I mean. Not that you like being reckless.”

Tank Buster responded with a short, quiet giggle. “Flashstep, Red Light. You know what to do. Eimyrja? Stay with them. It’s tempting to try fire against tree monster, but I don’t want you close enough to test.”

“What if I just, like, grab the tree thing and stand still?” Red Light said.

“No.”

“But—”

“No.”

“Damn.”

“Anyway, I’ll be covering you guys. Remember, we’ll be on the outskirts, getting any civilians out who haven’t already escaped. Leave the fight to the big guns,” Tank Buster continued.

Aren’t you a big gun? I didn’t speak my thoughts.

Even given the familiar streets, I almost didn’t recognize the place. Vines, flowers, and other bits of nature had sprouted everywhere, covering the entire mall. Wrapped around pillars, spreading cracks in walls as they grew into them. A few bushes were scattered around, as if a groundskeeper was trying to make a hedge and failed completely. I barely recognized the place I spent countless hours in, before… everything. The truck stopped, and I jumped out the back, looking around.

It was… quiet, in a way. I could hear distant shouting, and the sirens of approaching emergency vehicles, but it wasn’t the din of sirens and screams that had been the Simurgh. I didn’t wait for the others, running towards the sliding glass doors jammed open with vines. Inside… I could hear more screaming now, and there were trails of blood on the tile floor where people had been dragged. A pop song was playing on the tinny mall speakers. If it weren’t for the music and fresh blood, it could almost be mistaken for a building that’d just been abandoned for centuries.

My radio crackled, and the semi-familiar voice of Dragon spoke in my ears over the open channel, “The mall’s security cameras are on a closed loop, so we don’t have any eyes on Treant right now. Be careful.”

“Understood,” Tank Buster replied, and as a group we made our way into the mall. Even after the hour or so it had been since the gas station, I still felt… off-balance, with one wing missing. The phantom pain didn’t help either. I shook my head to distract myself from thinking about that and making it worse. It didn’t work.


“Icarus. Can you spot anyone on thermal?” Tank Buster asked.

I mentally switched my mask’s sight mode. The brightly-lit mall was suddenly overlaid with reds and blues. “Um… a lot of warmth, but not moving… yeah they’re dead.” Was it weird, that I didn’t really feel anything saying that? That so many were dead, and I was saying it just like a fact. It didn’t feel right.

The building shuddered as a crash, or maybe it was an explosion, went off somewhere up ahead.

“Treant has been spotted. Northeast section,” Legend said over the comms.
“Is that how he says hi to everybody?” Eimyrja snarked. Not over the radio, thank God.

“Contact lost,” Legend said again. “He disappeared. Keep an eye out.”

“How do you lose a giant tree?” Red Light muttered.

“We think Treant has some kind of Mover ability,” Tank Buster said. “Keep your guard up.”

We’d made it to the food court at this point. Tables were flipped over, shredded bodies and torn up body parts littering the area. Our feet made nauseatingly splashy sounds as we stepped through what could only be blood. Collectively, we spread out, looking for survivors. With a pulse of my remaining jet I hopped over the counter of a pizza place, poking my head into the back.

There was a scream, and a pan hit me in the face.

“What the fuck?” I shouted, shielding my mask. “Stop!”

“Oh shit sorry! I thought you were…”

I lowered my arms. There was a blonde-haired girl, my age, familiar-seeming green eyes glaring at me… wait…

It was her. Amy, My childhood best friend, up until I… the day I was kidnapped, here in front of me. Best friends since kindergarten, and the last time I’d seen her was in the hospital when I’d lost my arm. And suddenly she was here, in the middle of this fucking mess. What the fuck?

“Amy? What the hell? Do I look like Treant?”

“Brenna? What the flippin shit? I mean, I heard you were a… I mean…” she shook her head. “Fuck. Everything’s gone to shit. I just wanted pizza.”

“Yeah, well, I just wanted cuddles in the woods and yet here we are.” I scratched the back of my neck awkwardly. “Are you, uh, alone?”

The building shook again, an explosion. Far and yet too close.

“Hannah was with me. I lost her in… the fuckening shit. Vines… vines everywhere…”

“We’ve got another sighting on Treant! Northeast part of… dammit, we lost him again.”

“Enough chatter,” Tank Buster snapped. “We need to get the civilian out of here.”

“Fuck, right, yeah,” I replied on the radio. “Amy, we’re gonna get you out of here, okay? Eimyrja’ll set that tree fucker on fire if he fucks with us y’know?”

“What about Hannah?”

“We’ll find her, don’t worry,” Flashstep said beside me. Amy jerked back. “Sorry.”

“Shit—” There was an ear-splitting noise like nails on a chalkboard, and I turned just in time to see Tank Buster being flung towards the opposite end of the food court.

“Treant spotted,” Eimyrja’s voice drawled over the radio, oddly calm. “Food court.”

“Amy! Behind me!” I shouted, deploying my arms’ weapons and shielding her with my wing. Treant advanced, vines latching onto TB’s mech and jerking it upright. There was a sour sound as
the vines smoldered on the red-hot mech…

And then they were on fire, spreading up to cover Treant. Eimyrja laughed, her arms covered in her own fire as Treant immolated.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Amy snarked, and I gave her a brief glance. When I looked back, Treant was gone, the only sign of his existence a handful of burning vines stretched on the ground.

“Dammit, what are you all doing? Get out of here!” Tank Buster shouted, her mech slowly picking itself up. “We’ve lost sight of Treant,” she said over the radio.

“Yeah, gotcha,” I replied. “Amy, come on, we’ll drop you off safe and sound outside, and try and find Hannah.”

“Safe,” Amy laughed, a little too loudly. “Yeah. Hah. I’d like that.”

Was she this… weird when we were friends? Or maybe it was because of the mass murder around us. Whatever, it didn’t matter right now.

“Well, cool I guess, because that’s what you’re getting,” Eimyrja said, strutting over to us. “Icarus, this your girlfriend or some shit?”

“No!” Amy and I shouted at the same time. Eimyrja glanced at me. I could feel the smirk behind her mask. “Right,” I stammered. “Yeah, let’s go.” Is this really the right time, Lindsay…

We grouped up, and starting heading back to where we started. Somehow, stalking along in a burning steel mech, I could tell Naomi was exasperated. A handful of heroes ran past us towards where we’d come from, giving TB a nod as they went.

My mask’s HUD lit up, a new target appearing behind us. “Treant!” I shouted, grabbing Amy and shoving her into a clothing store as I spun around.

Treant was far less singed than I expected after the flames that Eimyrja gave him. Fresh-looking green buds sprouted from him. I smelled a hint of cut grass.

“Fuck off,” I muttered, firing my lightning cannon at him. Everything, as was traditional, erupted into blinding whiteness and the ringing of what was probably tinnitus. My vision cleared, and there was a smoldering crater in Treant’s chest, and vines lashing out towards me. Fuck! I dove into the store after Amy, as Tank Buster dove towards the big tree fucker.

I felt something pull at my right arm, and hit the floor with a grunt, the wind knocked out of me. Amy grabbed at me, pulling me up.

“Shit! Brenna, are you okay?” I looked down. My arm was missing below the elbow, fluids leaking and circuitry sparking. I let the remaining portion detach and fall off, leaving just the mounting point on my stump.

This mother fucker.

“Amy, come on,” I grabbed her hand, and dragged her to the back of the store, looking for a door or something. Thankfully, it seemed the edgy teenager store had a back door, which apparently lead into a stockroom.

“Great, now I can see if they have shoes in my size,” Amy shouted at the lack of any other exit from the room.
“Not helping,” I quipped, knocking on the wall. Hollow.

“What?”

“NOT HELPING!” I shouted back at her, giving her a look as I punched through the wall.

Amy just watched, wide-eyed, as I punched through a couple more times until there was enough hole in the drywall to climb through. “How are you guys doing out there?” I asked over the radio as I crawled through. There wasn’t a response. Oh, right. My comms system had been kept in my arm, since the antenna wouldn’t fit in my mask. Fan-fucking-tastic.

I reached over to pull Amy through the hole after me. We were in a back hall of some sort. I picked a direction at random and headed that way, Amy in tow. We didn’t say much, running through the hallway. Occasionally the building shuddered, dust pinged off my mask and digging into my hair. It would’ve been really nice to know what was going on.

“You okay?” Amy asked out of the blue.

“I’m lost as shit,” I admitted. “It’s a fucking maze back here. Seriously, like if there was a fire or something, this place is a death trap.”

“Maybe this door right here?” Amy stood by a door, shrugging.

“Sure,” I replied, trying the handle. It was locked. I pulled anyway, and with a screech of metal it opened. It was a movie theater, or the lobby of one at least. Popcorn was everywhere, marinating in thick pools of blood. Treant had already been here. The entrance was caved in, blocks of concrete blocking us from getting back into the mall proper.

“Well this is no better,” Amy muttered.

“Come on. There’ll be emergency exits in the theaters, right?” I led the way, an uncomfortable amount of splashing around our feet as we ran past the little stand-thing where a bored teenager would’ve been ripping ticket stubs in half.

I ducked into the first theater I saw, where Alexandria: The Musical had apparently been having a screening. It was still playing, but thankfully someone had had the sense to mute the sound system. Amy and I ran down the aisle towards the happily-lit green exit sign below the screen.

There was another shudder. Treant stepped into the theater from the exit.

“Oh what the fucking shit!” I snarled, blocking Amy with a wing as I backed away from him. My remaining arm was leveled at the monster, but with barely any charge… I wasn’t confident it’d do much.

“Amy, go to another theater and get out. Now,” I said quietly.

“Brenna—”

“Fucking go, before he fucking attacks!”

Treant tilted his head to the side as Amy spoke, her voice desperate. “It’s blocked.”

I glanced behind us. Vines, covering the way out. They hadn’t been there a second ago.

Glueing my eyes back on Treant, I punched at the wall. There was a loud ring, and I couldn’t help but wince. Concrete, not drywall.
Treant shook silently. I got the impression he was laughing.

“Fuck off, asshole!” I shouted, pulling Amy into one of the rows, keeping myself between him and me. Trying to put the seating in the way. I didn’t think it’d make a difference.

“Brenna…” Amy said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“We’re gonna die, aren’t we?”

I paused. Maybe I should’ve been more panicked, but I felt… almost calm. “Yeah, maybe.”

“I’m sorry I never tried to call you.”

“Yeah… me too,” I said quietly. I felt her hand grabbing mine, and I squeezed it reassuringly.

Treant stepped forward. With a click, I let my mask fall to the ground. If I was gonna die, I’d might as well die as a human, not some mask.

Vines snarled out, grabbing me and yanking me towards Treant. I didn’t struggle. What was I gonna do, punch him? Actually, even if it didn’t make a difference, yeah. Punch this mother fucker in the face, put a crack in his stupid skull.

The vines tightened, slicing into me… and then stopped. And then let go, and I heard crackling. Behind me, there was heat, and I backpedaled away from Treant as…

Eimyrja.

“Shoot him!” she shouted, and I obliged, raising my arm. It was a pitiful shot with this little charge, but… I knew what she was planning. It was barely enough to make his leaves smolder… but it was enough. Suddenly he was on fire, a towering inferno silently screaming in rage.

“Run, you retards!” Eimyrja shouted. Amy ran behind her, myself following.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I shouted. “I thought…”

“He disappeared, and we went after you,” she replied, her arms lighting up with fire. She touched the wall of the theater, and fire darted across it, towards Treant to surround him. “That’ll keep him distracted, let’s go!”

I nodded, running out of the theater after Amy, Eimyrja just behind me, and behind her the sound of a rapidly-spreading fire.

There was a faint sound from behind me, then a thump. I glanced over my shoulder—

Trillions of lights all around. Glittering gemstones surrounded by glowing energy. Familiar, somehow. I didn’t exist, but I could observe. Around me, inside me, everywhere and nowhere, I saw two beings dancing, with skin of a thousand dimensions warped across space and time. They were almost close enough to touch, and then distant. And then shattering, each spin of their cores throwing a trillion shards of themselves out across the vast emptiness. It was a serene terror, watching the shards plummet across and through the ground. Too many to follow. I could feel myself getting sick at the—

There was screaming. I was on the ground, my face wet with hot blood. Something had… Lindsay.
She was dead. Everything was a blur.

There was a loud blast, and a rush of air. I was the one screaming, I realized.

Amy ran past me, leaping towards the still-immolated Treant. No! Flaming vines grabbed her, tearing her to pieces, like a cloth. No blood.

Someone pulled at me. It was Red Light. He dragged me up to my feet. We were in the darkened hallway outside the theaters. Amy was leaning against a wall, throwing up onto the ground. Tank and Flashstep were nowhere to be seen.

A shudder, and the sound of flames died away. Treant was gone.

The debris at the entrance to the theater flew away as Tank Buster slammed into it with casual ease.

“Icarus!” she shouted. “I— when we lost comms I thought…” she trailed off.

“Radio was in my arm,” I said mutely. There… fuck, I felt dead inside. Numb.

“We need to get out of here. He could come back again. Where’s Eimyrja?”

“She…” I couldn’t say it.

“She’s dead,” Red Light said quietly. He was looking away from us at the wall.

Tank Buster was still, silent. She might as well have been frozen in time, if it weren’t for the heat waves above her.

“Tank Buster?” I said.

She didn’t respond.

“Hey—”

Her mech’s arm jerked to the side, pointing at one of the vines. With a crack, the vine was coated in shrapnel. Another crack as she shot a different vine.

“Hey, stop,” Red Light said softly, walking up. “We need to—” Another sharp crack cut off his words. “We—” Crack. “Dammit, TB!”

Red Light jumped up to the gun and latched on.

“Dammit, Red Light, are you trying to get shot?” Tank Buster said.

“Why not? Always fun to have stuff bounce off me.”

“Be serious!”

“Dammit, TB! What will shooting the vines accomplish, huh? You’re not going to kill Treant that way. Just… don’t forget your friends are here. We’re hurting too.”

“Friends minus one,” Tank Buster murmured. “All because of me. I couldn’t keep us together.”

I should have said something, but I couldn’t find the words. All I could do was look away, trying not to cry. She’d been chasing after me, and now… I closed my eyes. This all felt uncomfortably familiar, in a hard-to-describe way. Something pulling at the back of my head, away from reality and
into years-old memories.

For once, I was glad for the distraction.

Works inspired by this one: Homecoming by keira_irl

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