How I Met Your Monster

by Ghoul_King

Summary

A side-story or flipside to Monster, covering things from Cherie's perspective.

It's recommended you read through Monster before reading How I Met Your Monster, specifically starting by finishing the second Arc.
This overlaps with Monster 2.3 and 2.4. It's recommended you read those chapters of Monster first.

I'm with Daddy, hunting down his next girl, when life changes.

This approach isn't normal for us. Or wasn't normal? Daddy usually handles finding new girls himself in his own impulsive way, but ever since he found out how big my range is, he's been pushing me, making me test it. I nod and smile and go along, because any other path is suffering. I take some solace in the fact that he doesn't have my ability to read people. Or maybe he knows and just doesn't care. It would be typical of him.


There's been a cape in Toronto for the last week. Gotta be a cape with how they're... I'm guessing roof-hopping, though it could be flight. Weird, flat emotions most of the time, too. Been in the back of my mind for a bit now, only really found them interesting at all because they're clearly not living in the area. No idea where they are living, really. But mostly I've been ignoring them, 'cause, hey. Capes come and go all the time, ya know? Almost never relevant to us.

This one's been looking for something, though, and getting increasingly frustrated. Piqued my curiosity, 'cause that's a bit odd. So tonight, since we're out around the same time they're giving the city a lookie-loo again anyway, I decided to pick out a girl who should put us on the path to intercept the cape. If nothing else being able to connect their feelings to something visible will make it easier to make sense of them. Heck, I might be able to get a toy out of this if I'm careful. Assuming Daddy doesn't steal them anyway, but what Daddy doesn't know about Daddy can't steal.

But then we cross paths and the cape reacts. There's a surge of interest/focus initially, which melts
into cold, murderous intent after only a few seconds. My conversational patter hitches for a moment, but Daddy doesn't seem to notice my reaction. I try to look, out of the corner of my eye, to where I know the cape is currently standing atop a roof, but I can't see anyone. I glimpse a bit of motion, and I can feel the cape moving back from the roof's edge. They jump to another one, I think. Still haven't seen them.

Nervous, now. They're clearly stalking us, it takes less than a minute of walking afterward for that to become obvious. It never crossed my mind they might be looking for us. They seem... surprised? Not sure by what, though they're getting over it. There's some jealousy? Low-grade physical revulsion. Hmmm. Reacting to Daddy's face, probably. Probably a heterosexual man-cape, with the jealousy and all. Oh, the frustration is going up again. Huh. The murderous intent hasn't gone away yet, but he's not willing to jump us right now. Too public? Probably too public. Interesting. Given he's not local, I'm pretty sure he's not a Protectorate cape. I think those people are on too tight a leash. I'd think he'd go for a public kill if he wants Daddy dead, though. Free publicity and all. Hm. Maybe it's something about his power? Or maybe he's just paranoid -yes he is definitely paranoid. So maybe he wants to be sure he gets the kill.

Wish I could see him, trying to do an analysis semi-blind like this fucking sucks. I shift the patter of my dialogue a bit. No reaction. I'm thinking he can't hear us from up there. Clearly not any kind of tracker. God, that impulse for violence is so visceral. They don't just want Daddy (and possibly me! Don't assume!) dead, they need to be in his face, choking him with their bare hands. Imma call this cape Killer until I have a better name. Explains the frustration, I think. Going for the choke would be suicide, and while I don't think Daddy's abilities are that well understood by outsiders, he's plenty well-known, so they probably know it.

After two blocks of following us Killer's anxiety spikes. Hm. We're heading downtown... he's roof-hopping. Yeah, I can see how that might be a problem. Hm. Well, we can escape easily enough then. Just keep going into the high-rises.

... but do I wanna? I'm curious now. Real curious. Not exactly in a hurry to die, but I'm thinking I can take him if he does go for me. Suicidal depression isn't particularly hard to induce.

Let's see how this plays out.

Cue up supplicant teenage girl routine. "Oh, oh, Daddy, situation's changed." We pull to a stop. Aunt Cordelia heaves a dramatic sigh and tries to meet Daddy's eyes. She's basically not begging him for sex because we're in public. Correction: because he hit her with terror the last time she did it in public. She still loves him, of course, and would sooner die than fail him.

Daddy grunts. You learn to read his grunts. This one is, "Go on."
"Turns out Betty-" Probably not actually her name, but we're in public so I need a name for the façade. "-doesn't have time for us tonight. Surprise visit by family, too busy for us." Lies, all lies. 'Betty' is currently drinking herself into a stupor and would probably be glad to have a strange man burst into her home and offer to have sex with her, even without Daddy's power getting involved. Not that he'd be offering so much as demanding, but 'Betty' probably wouldn't care. Self-esteem issues like crazy. But I gotta sell the illusion. So with a grin I wave my cell phone -not that I use it that much- and say, "But Louise -she's the one who lives more at the edge of town- is throwing a little party and is happy to have us over."

Message to Daddy: "The girl I scoped is too problematic to approach right now, and will be until morning. I have a back-up target, though."

Real motive: let's see if Killer perks up.

Daddy grunts again. This one is, "Sure, why not." So I return to the patter of teenage girl monologue interspersed with character analysis of 'Louise', and we turn right. This'll take us to a less urban part of the city.

Killer has a spike of relief. Levels off fairly fast. As we walk Killer keeps following us. Having a hard time catching sight of him, though. I think I might've caught sight of him mid-jump at one point? Just a dark, indistinct shape sailing through the air, though.

Whoa. Killer's upset. Not rage-y upset, more horrified-upset. Interesti-

Jesus!

It takes me a moment to remember what ninny blathering I was in the middle of. Fortunately, Daddy isn't really paying attention, and I manage to get my rhythm going before he does notice the gap. Cordelia doesn't care, of course. Never does. Still, that was murderous, and it came on fast. Little more disturbed. Should I move to safety? On the other hand, Killer's still just... stalking us from rooftop. I don't think I need to fear him simply dropping down and killing us all before I have a chance to reason with and/or blast him with emotions.

Hmmm. I... think I can work with this.

So I go back to talking about 'Louise'. Let's sell Daddy on her. I'm thinking... Killer's waiting
for opportunity. Privacy, maybe? Some people think of murder as an intimate act...

Oh! Oh! Killer's reacting. I think he hears me talking?

"... two, maybe three relationships close enough that they might miss her, and they read long-distance to me, probably parents she talks with on the phone or maybe by email or Skype, I can't find reciprocal people in the city. I don't think she's close enough to any of them that they'll find a sudden change alarming if they even notice it at all, though there was the incident with the stalker a couple years back so you shouldn't assume anything, and her coworkers find her a combination of boring and creepy. She's got self-esteem issues like crazy, convinced she's not that attractive, but guys and some girls disagree fairly frequently, she probably dresses ugly and hasn't even noticed it, she doesn't feel to me like she's in poor health, anyway. She's not a spender, too conservative, probably has some money saved up from her job even though her job doesn't pay well."

Killer's confused. Not sure exactly what he's thinking, but confusion makes sense. Hmm. Let's test something.

"So Daddy, she joining the 'harem' or not?" I do actual air-quotes. Might be hamming it up a bit too much, there's hardly anyone out this late in this area anyway, but hey, why not? Interestingly, Killer feels some relief. And anticipation? Excitement?... little bit of joy, too. Not sure what the relief is about, but the rest of it... I'm thinking Killer was looking for Daddy, and is thinking he's found Daddy. Iiiinteresting.

"Goddammit Cher." Daddy's annoyed, but not that annoyed. He probably won't punish me at home. Probably. "I've told you before, don't talk about it like that outside." Yes, I know, I know. Trying to get you killed dear old dad.

So glad he can't read feelings. Or thoughts.

... also, is Killer gay? Maybe just bi. 'cause wow Killer is reacting salaciously to Daddy's voice. Bit unexpected. Or... maybe Killer is hunting Daddy down to bone him? Ugh. Better not be a fanboy. Eewwww.

I make an effort to look contrite. Not much of one, it's not like he's actually looking my way. "Sorry Daddy, I forget sometimes it's supposed to be a secret, the way we live." Pffahhahaha. Lies, all lies. But he buys it when Pauline says it, and he doesn't pay much attention to us as individuals, so sure why not.
Daddy grunts. "Don't do it again." Uh-huh. Yup. Got it. I make a vague noise of affirmation. He's not really listening to me anyway. I think Cordelia is trying to get frisky with him. Ugh.

Killer keeps following us. Closer now, less effort to stay out of sight, I think? Getting stalker vibes now, but the anger's still there, it's just more of an undercurrent rather than the primary stream. So... have hatesex with Daddy before killing him? While killing him? I mean, ewww, but whatever floats your boat, bro. I just want him dead.

Killer either can't hear me or isn't paying attention to me anymore. Disappointing. I'm tempted to do something to try to provoke him, but... no. I don't want Daddy noticing anything. Especially if Killer isn't actually going to kill him. Which would suck, but it's possible. Or Daddy might whammy Killer. He's not fond of doing that to men, but he's willing to, and I doubt he'd be all that slow to turn to it if his life was on the line. Sooo... can't count on his death.

sigh

I pass the time with chatter. Once I've basically run out of things to say about 'Louise' I focus more on teen-girl gossip stuff. Mostly about the fam, though I mix in some of the stuff from when I've hooked up with a guy. Or girl. Or multiple. But with the bits that might out us if overheard glossed over, of course.

Finally, finally, finally we get to 'Louise' and I wave off Cordelia and Daddy. He grunts in acknowledgment. That's his, "Good job," grunt. Personally, I think the woman is a bit bland, but whatever. Daddy is boring. I already knew this.

Then I hurry home while trying to look like I'm not, keeping my attention on Killer. And trying to not 'listen' overly closely to Daddy and company. Got lots of practice at that. Way the heck too much practice. Basically an automatic at this point.

Killer's moodstream is difficult to follow. Mostly, it's pretty low-key, aside from the occasional burst of anger or even more occasional joy, and I'm feeling like it's... heavily internalized, maybe? There's a moment of self-satisfaction where he deliberately cuts himself off from indulging in it and then settles back into an analytical mode. Makes me think he... was happy with something he thought and then forced himself to focus on the mission? Hard to say.

Then he moves, and I have a stab of panic when it looks like he's coming for me-
-but no. He's going for Daddy.

Relief.

So now I just need to work on my escape. And hope Killer lives up to his name. And hope that nothing goes wrong with the escape itself.

It's fine, it's all fine. Everything's cool.

Let's just keep walking and 'listening in'...

Killer's... interesting. He's scuttling around the building once I'm a fair distance away, and his attitude isn't what I was expecting, given how things were going down earlier. He makes me think of one of the brats handed a Rubik's Cube. The ones who wouldn't throw it away as dumb, anyway. Poking at the situation like it's an interesting puzzle to solve. I shiver a little, and it's not just due to the physical cold.

I'm pretty sure I know the exact moment Killer finds Daddy and the girls... busy. There's a fair amount of revulsion, irritation, anger. No jealousy though, which seems odd. No lust, either. None at all. Usually people experience at least a little, even if they won't act on it or admit it, when they see or hear sex in action. Odd. The level of discomfort I'm getting... I don't think Killer is, like, jaded to it, or whatever. I don't understand what I'm getting from him. Might be a power thing? Something to keep in mind.

Eventually Killer... settles in, patient. Awww, fuck. That's lame.

Something like twenty minutes later I stop paying close attention to Killer. He's getting frustrated, slowly, and bored, slightly less slowly, but he doesn't seem to be having his attention wander in a way that would give me an opportunity to have fun trying to guess at what he's thinking. He's just being boring.

I end up focusing on the 'background noise' of the city instead for the remainder of the walk home, bored out of my skull.
Sasha's house is our current bolthole, and it's a decent little mid-sized house in the suburbs. It's not really designed for this many people to live in it, but it's manageable as a temporary solution. By far its most beneficial quality is that the neighbors aren't very nosy. I'm not entirely sure why, that's normally something I see in cruddy neighborhoods where curiosity gets the cat shot, where this area is comfortably middle-class, but whatever the case we haven't had to do too much shenanigans to avoid drawing problematic attention. It helps that Sasha always drove an SUV anyway and always bought groceries in large batches. People will eventually notice that she's making shopping trips once or twice a week rather than once a month, every month, but in the short term it's working, and that's all that really matters.

For my purposes, it's kind of convenient, because while the neighbors aren't nosy enough to be poking into the house and seeing things we don't want them to see, neither are they so un-nosy that they'll ignore a public confrontation. If I can get my stuff and get out of the house, the fam will have to wait until I'm further away to confront me. Ideally, they won't realize anything unusual is happening, but if they do... backup plans are good.

Just in front of the door, I take a deep breath, steady myself. Then I get the house key out of my purse, in it goes, turn the lock, and open the door quietly. Not slowly, because if anyone is watching I don't want them to think I'm trying to be sneaky, but I particularly make an effort to not bang the door against the wall. Step on through, close the door, careful to not make too much noise. On the plus side, it's the middle of the night, so most of the fam is asleep, and anyone watching might think I'm being considerate of that. (Okay, any of the fam who don't really know me that well might, but my aunts -and Mom- don't tend to pay close attention to us kids and the kids are basically a bunch of little cliques, so that's actually more than half the fam)

I don't see anyone with a view on the door, not when I turn to look and put the key back in my purse, but I'm not assuming I succeeded.

Then I go to get my stuff.

My stuff is on the second floor, not the first, in a room that was a guest room before Daddy entered Sasha's life. This is unfortunate, because the goddamn stairs tend to creak and the room I sleep in is the furthest one from the top of the stairs too. Worse, the stairs are, themselves, on the opposite side of the house from the front door. So basically I have to walk pretty much as much of the house as is possible to force, just to retrieve some essentials. Fucking wonderful. It doesn't help any that I'm wearing heels because Daddy is less awful when I wear heels, and if I change before I leave then trying to pretend I'm going out to a club or something will fall flat.
I walk through a doorframe and *oof*

"Hey Cher'." It's Pauline, oldest kid in the fam, false cheer filling her voice. Syrupy-sweet, awful to listen to. Though given she just punched me in the gut, maybe it's not so false after all.

I spend a minute gasping for air, hunched over with my arms clutched against my gut, before I manage to rasp out, "Hey Pauline."

What I'd like to do is tell Pauline to go fuck herself, but that's a bad plan. I can't read her at all for some reason, not even to know where she is -I assume it's her power, but she triggered when I was still learning to walk so for all I know she just never had real emotions- and she prefers literally beat the defiance out of you if you show any. I've never figured out the details of her power and I'm scared to ask, but I do know she uses violence to change your feelings in a tangible way. I don't think she has any kind of actual emotion-sense, because she doesn't hit me every time I have a hostile thought -if she did, I'd be a walking bruise or dead- but she usually will recognize even subtle defiance and move to remove it with her fists. Sometimes she kicks, usually if you fall down.

I'd also love to try clawing her eyes out, but even aside from the irony of her name -'Pauline' means something like small, and she's the tallest member of the fam nowadays, with like half an inch on Daddy- I'm almost certain her power has a physical component. Super-strength and super-toughness, or something like that. My best guess is that it's controlled by how much you fear her - she's real big on having everyone but Daddy afraid of her- where, like, a punch hurts more if you're more scared, and your own punches are weak and ineffectual if you're scared of her.

And I am plenty scared of her, however much I try to not let it show.

I maintain eye contact. She also tends to hit if you break eye contact. I read once staring contests are a dominance thing, the person who averts their gaze first being the weaker party, something like that, so I'd really expect her to hit for maintaining eye contact, but it's how she is. Whatever. Makes no sense to me, but whatever.

*Something* about me pisses her off though, because she slaps me in the face, this weird up-swing motion aimed at my nose instead of a cheek. I jerk upright, more or less, clutching at my nose instead of my gut, and try not to react. She also hits if you make high-pitched noises. High-pitched noises really irritate her (I don't know why she hasn't killed a baby, given that) and most anything that irritates her gets violence. I want to make a high-pitched noise right now, a shriek or keening wail, but somehow I manage to force myself to just moan in pain. After a second I pull my hands away -fuck. Blood. My nose isn't broken, but I've got a nosebleed. *Fuck*. That's going to be a problem.
Then I give a shaky, brittle smile aimed at Pauline. Given brittle is my default when I smile at her, I'm not worried about that. I'm worried by how she's staring at the inside of her left hand, eyeing the blood that got on it. She also is a bit of a neat-freak, which most of the time is actually a small blessing because she spends literally an hour every day hogging a bathroom, getting her makeup and hair and so on perfect, so that's an hour -sometimes two!- that you're safe from her, she won't even come out and punish people over noise, but then there's moments like this where the act of beating on you can lead to her deciding she needs to beat on you some more because she got herself dirty in the process and that's somehow your fault.

I think she might be autistic, honestly. More accurately, I fervently believe it. There's some actual evidence, but mostly I want to believe because it makes it easier to cope with her. She hurts you because hurting you gets what she wants -be it quiet, or power, or getting you out of the bathroom when she wants to preen- not because she's a sadist who delights in your misery and so will seek to increase it for its own sake. If I believe that, I can keep calm.

Mostly.

Right now I'm holding my breath, waiting to see how she reacts.

Finally, she drops the hand to her side and gives me a smile. It's the smile of someone who doesn't realize smiles are for happy people, instead blindly imitating the things other people do because there must surely be some kind of reason behind it. (This is another thing that supports my desperate belief) She's not smiling because she's happy, she's smiling because she's about to end this interaction. (I don't know why she does that, but she does. She only smiles when doing that or when picking up boys -always boys, never girls. I'm not sure why. I'm certainly not going to ask why)

I breathe a slow, low sigh of relief at the realization, and then slump and wince, finally able to relax, when she artfully whirls around (Skirt flaring up in a way that would make other people drool, revealing thigh without quite displaying underwear, tantalizing anyone who might be interested in her) and starts clicking away in her high heels. She's probably going to go start her daily ritual. I'm safe for an hour. Safe.

Ow. Ow. Shit, my nose is still dripping blood.

Shakily, I click my own way to a tissue box, pull several tissues out, and clutch a pair to my nose. I change my mind about the heels -off they go, clutched in the other hand with the extra tissues, and I walk slowly through the kitchen and around to the stairway. I have to step over a pair of aunts sleeping on a rug, curled up against each other -the proper lesbian couple, signature-wise, though
it's so dark I wouldn't know if it weren't for my power- and then it's a slow, agonized climb up the stairs. Walk past the room the three older boys are set up in, where Guillaume and Nicholas are playing some fucking murder simulator game. Guillaume calls out, "Hey Cher'-bear," because he's an asshole, but he stays focused on the game. I've seen this particular one enough to know he's playing against Nicholas, not with Nicholas. If my brief glimpse is accurate, Nicholas is currently winning. Probably why Guillaume isn't inclined to harass me more than the bare minimum. Winning is too important to him.

Past the master bedroom, which is currently overstuffed with sleeping women. Not sure why the door is half-open. I'd probably ask, normally, but right now I just want to lie down. Then I'm in the room I share with the three youngest girls, because for once I managed to talk Daddy into not doing the age-based approach, which has been a tremendous relief because not sharing a room with Pauline is amazing compared to sharing a room with her. I mean, the brats are irritating in their own way, but for the most part they aren't violent. For that matter, they're midgets, so they can't do a lot to hurt me anyway. Hadn't thought about that before, but it's true.

Two of the brats are asleep. The last one is reading a book via nightlight; she gives me a cursory glance, and then goes back to reading... whatever the fuck this brat reads. (They are not old enough for me to care about names, certainly not if they don't have powers. Which they don't) I lay down on the floor (I share a bed with one of the sleeping brats, and I'm not waking her, I don't need more trouble), on my back, head tilted back so the blood won't flow out of my nose.

Then I close my eyes and just... focus on the feelings of the city. Take a moment to double-check Killer, but while it's vaguely amusing how aggravated he is at this point, he's not actually changed. Mayor's still asleep, I think. So's his mistress. What I think is Tube Lord (I've never actually confirmed it's Tube Lord and not just some hobo) is in some kind of frenzy, I'm thinking he's gotten inspiration for tinkering. Some kind of confrontation, Radiance and Flaktrap taking on... either a cape I don't know -new trigger, maybe- or a regular burglar. Hmm. Thinking it's a regular burglar. Flacktrap is bored to tears, so... not a new trigger. Might be a loser I've just never bothered to pay attention to, though. Or an out-of-towner like Killer, but not worth paying attention to.

And on and on I distract myself. Trying to not fall asleep, which... I'm not sure how successful I am, but I snap to full alertness when Cordelia has an utter freak out and-

Daddy is gone.

I jerk up, startling book-brat, but she relaxes and goes back to her book when I go to check the nose bleed with an unused, clean tissue, acting as if nothing is going on. Yep, bleeding's done. Excellent. Then, projecting calm (Figuratively, not literally), I grab up some of my snack stash, my duffel bag -normally only broken out for a move- and pretty much anything else I think I might need for a trip.
Not my laptop. (I used to share it with Pauline, but a year ago I managed to talk Daddy into getting a new one for her, so now it's just mine. Not having her demand the laptop from me=not getting beaten by her when I'm too slow to comply!) I want to take it, I really really want to, but bringing it would be a giant neon sign making it obvious I'm planning something more than clubbing or the like.

I also grab a pair of recently-purchased (Well, convincing a clerk to give me them for a dollar and the suggestion I'll go on a date with her even though they're fifty bucks, more than actually purchased) shoes I hadn't gotten around to trying. They're still in their box, but I correct that. Purple, glossy, nice-looking flowers set toward the back of the center. I quite like them, honestly, but more importantly than that they're a plausible excuse for me to go out not in heels. The fam thinks of me as easily distracted by shiny new things and... they're not wrong, but the main thing is that they'll believe it and high heels are not ideal for fleeing.

I pack clothes into the duffel bag and that's when nerd-girl finally decides I'm being weird and asks me what I'm doing.

I smile brightly at her and say, "It's a surprise."

She's not stupid, but we do enough dumb shit like birthday parties often enough she's not quite willing to call bullshit on me. Also, I'm smothering her curiosity. Should've done that earlier, really. Fuck, I better not have a concussion. I don't have a broken nose, so I shouldn't have a concussion from Pauline's loving handling, but fuck, powers mean anything is possible. Whatever, not a big deal that I didn't think of it sooner.

She goes back to ignoring me once I've wrangled her curiosity from 'burning' to 'eh, it'd be nice to know' and I start walking. Guillaume is... not present in his room. Nicholas is playing some kind of puzzle game now, I think. A quick check of Guillaume's emotions shows he's outside, playing with whatever friends he has that are stupid enough to wake up before dawn. I'm thinking they're graffiti-ing some place. It's a power thing, put their mark on the world, but a dumb kind of power thing because they're scared of getting caught and are doing it (Whatever it actually is) precisely because it's a way of exerting power without retaliation from people with real power.

I don't know why Guillaume runs with these idiots. I really don't know why Daddy hasn't reined it in, either, 'cause at this rate the cops are gonna catch him or something. Dumbass doesn't even have powers yet.

But whatever, it's convenient for me!
I make my way downstairs. The two aunts who were curled up earlier are starting breakfast, still in their sleepwear. Going by the simmering lust, I think they're expecting Daddy to come back and be pleased to see them this way. (Never understood the appeal of that whole thing, personally, but never mind, stop getting distracted Cherie) Or... oh right, lesbians. Miiiiight be for each other.

Ugh, I never know with those two.

No wait never mind they're doing that soulfully-staring-into-each-other's-eyes thing over a goddamn mixing bowl. Definitely for each other. More importantly, they're ignor-

"Not staying for breakfast?"

-ing me... fuck, what's Pauline doing here, staring at me with her dead, soulless eyes, face blank like a doll? I... fuck, I must've fallen asleep earlier.

Fuck.

I turn to face her, casual as can be, and stick one foot out, gesturing at the shoe. "I wanna break in these babies. I'll eat out."

"Father is not home yet. You should stay." She speaks like she's reading a script. That would be because she is reading from a script. She hates it when you deviate from routine, and one of those routines is that anyone who goes out with Daddy stays if they come home before him, waiting until he's home before they're free to leave without her harassing them. Every. Single. Goddamn. Time. She says the same thing. Even the inflection is identical.

I smile brightly -fuck, too brightly too brightly- wrangle it into a more appropriately brittle one. I'm so close to being gone I can taste it, and here's Pauline, in my way. Always in my way. I need to handle this... peacefully. Can't have a confrontation.

Fuck, I think I'm going to need to invite her along.

"I was going to meet with a-" quickquickquick oh right the shoe girl "-girl for a date. We could go together, I'm sure she won't mind." Because I'll make her want it. "If you want?" I'm not even sure Pauline can tell when there's the lilt of a question, but I do it anyway. Habit, maybe.
Hell, I even did imply I’d pick up the girl this morning. Won't need to do too much emotion massaging to make it-

"Girl?"

-fuuuuuck forgot she only goes for boys.

"That would be acceptable." Pauline nods, looking vaguely thoughtful. She pushes a lock of hair back behind one ear in a motion that I know makes the boys hot for her. (I don't know why, it doesn't work when I do it. Not fair)

...

Did she just not realize other girls were an option?!?

Oh god I think she didn't. Oh god, this would be glorious to witness if I wasn't trying to get out of here.

Instead of letting any of this show on my face or leak into my voice, I just grin and say, "Great! You ready then?"

In the background the aunts have decided that they are macking on each other rather than baking pancakes. I twitch a little, because the noise is distracting and Pauline is staring at me silently and I do not need these two things happening at the same time. I do not need to associate kissy-face noises with Pauline's fisheyed stare of horribleness.

Fuck, I'm going to flash to her face the next time I'm kissing someone, aren't I?

Then Pauline smiles -the one she normally only uses for boys, not the stiff one she uses when ending a conversation- and warmth enters her voice. "I think I am, yes."

God, I'm going to have nightmares about this.
I walk us to the girl's house or possibly apartment. (Gonna need to massage her feelings so she ignores that she never told me where she lives, ugh) Killer fled the city, fled my range. I'm a little frustrated, because there's no chance of me keeping up now, not with being forced to do this detour, but it was the same general direction he always goes and arrives from: south-east. I've got a starting point if I want to follow him, which I kind of do because hell yes Daddy's dead. I'd really like to get a better idea who made that possible.

Pauline at no point offers to carry my stuff. I dunno if she just normally uses her feminine wiles to get everyone else to carry her stuff and hasn't even thought of the possibility of offering or if she's clueless in general or what, but while there's a part of me irritated by this there's a much larger part that is so relieved that I can keep all my stuff on hand. If I can get separated from her? I'm all good.

Unfortunately, she insists on walking about half a foot behind me to my left, staring at the back of my skull. I'm going to have to lose her at the girl's home, I think. Yaaaay. Or, worse, on the date. Assuming we go out somewhere, which... is not actually my normal modus operandi, but I don't think Pauline knows that so I don't think I need to worry overly much about her catching onto me being weird.

I can tell aunt Cordelia is wandering around, and it's... very weird. Not sure what's going on there. Did Killer get her coated in blood and guts from Daddy or something? Because everywhere she goes people are upset. More fear than anything else though. Nobody seems in a hurry to get her to a hospital, though. I'm missing something, I think.

Whatever.

Pauline and I get to the girl's house. I ring the doorbell, but she's still asleep. That's fine. I hit her with excitement, and after ramping it up for about thirty seconds she jerks awake. Then I ring the doorbell again, and she calls out something and scrabbles to get to the door. I tweak her feelings so there's more anticipation, going for making her hope it's me so she won't question my presence, reduces the massaging I need to do. She ends up jerking the door open, and yes I've still got it she lights up when she recognizes me.

... for some reason she's still wearing her work outfit, nametag and all. Odd. She didn't seem unusually exhausted last night? Is this laziness?...
Oh, whatever. Time for smiles and smoothtalking.

"So heya girl I'm here to deliver on the-"

*jesus christ I forgot about Pauline* she steps up from behind me, scaring the *bejeezus* out of me and inserts herself into the barely-started conversation. "I would like to sleep with you."

Goddammit Pauline, that's not how-  

...

...

Oh come *on.*

The girl -who I am dubbing Shylia, and I don't give a damn what her nametag says- is doing that *thing* of wanting to accept what she's being offered but not wanting to *admit* to wanting to accept it, and she's blushing and ducking her eyes and wringing her hands and I suspect I'd think she was upset if I couldn't read her emotions but as-is I *know* she wants Pauline, wants her *way* more than she wants me.

I vibrate in place for a second, smile brittle, probably more of a rictus than anything else. *Goddamn* Pauline always *fucking* taking my *fucking* toys and- and- aaaa.

... and then I remember I'm actually trying to escape, not score.

Smiling fiercely, I push Pauline at Shylia -and yes Pauline is cooperating instead of hitting me for daring to touch her so she must *really* like Shylia- and declare, "You know what? Never you mind me, you two lovebirds were clearly *made* for each other and fuckit-"

"That was the intention, yes," is Pauline's flat, slightly confused-sounding rejoinder. Shylia ducks her head and blushing but Pauline's weirdness apparently does it for her for some reason. *Fuckit I don't care anymore!*
"-I'll just be... elsewhere. Doing other things and/or people." Shylia doesn't blush or particularly react. Oh come on, not fair at all. Pauline does it, it's cool, I do it, it's not? Whyyyy. Why do you do this to me world, I'm funny and clever and all-around awesome. Why is there never anyone around who appreciates me properly? All the world's a stage somethingsomething and I've got no goddamn audience. Not one with actual taste.

Fine. Fine.

I cheerily declare, "Have fun with that!" and slam the door in their mutual faces. Or it would be their faces if they weren't looking at each other more than me. Pauline doesn't react, Shylia is distracted for just a second aaaaand yeah let's just pretend I can't read their feelings.

Good news: Pauline isn't going to be following me. She'll be busy with her new toy.

I turn and walk away, heading in a vaguely southeasterly direction.

Free. I'm free.

Freeeeeee.
What Is This I Don't Even

Chapter Summary

This actually doesn't overlap with any part of Monster's chapters.

What is this I don't even

First order of business: get the fuck out of town.

Since my purse has a decent chunk of cash for the moment, thanks to Daddy's laziness, I decide to take a cab out to the edge of town. I *could* just manipulate my way into a random car, but that's just reckless. A nicely-dressed girl hiring a cab isn't going to grab anyone's attention. (Okay, if I'm as pretty as I like to think of myself being, it absolutely *will*, but of a whole other kind) Just flagging down a random car is more likely to get people thinking I'm a streetwalker or otherwise worth remembering. I don't need to be taking risks *now*, certainly not of the kind that might help the fam track me. Not that hard to get more money, *really*.

That step goes smoothly. I *almost* let the cabby see how much money I've got by accident, but remember at the last second that I need to be careful with that. I could dull his curiosity or the like, but that wouldn't cause him to forget entirely, and now I don't have Daddy to cover for my mistakes, so it's important I not *make* these kinds of mistakes.

Once I've waved him off, I walk on past the edge of town, ignoring the chill. I'll be fine.

Once I'm... probably twenty minutes out, I start 'fishing' for someone to hitch a ride with. For the moment, I just want a ride to a hotel out of town. It takes... four tries before manipulating an oncoming driver to feel sympathetic results in an actual ride. It ends up being a little old biddy, who proceeds to regale me with a combination of talking about the son she's visiting and stories of her daring-do in her youth. I basically let her ramble, only tweaking her emotions enough to keep her from being particularly pushy about 'my story'.

The first hotel we encounter (In some no-name town), I get her to drop me off at. Turns out I'm too early/late for check-in, but some massaging of emotions later I've talked the desk jockey into, "making an exception, just this once." I deliberately overpay -their boss will be more likely to let it pass and forget about it if irregularities are to their benefit, and I'm trying to be forgettable right now.
Then I basically pass out for twelve hours.

----------------------------------

When I wake up, the first thing I do is check if there's any signatures I recognize in my range. The answer is: yes, towards the edge of my range. Just Tube Lord again, though, still basically where he was last time I focused on him. Not that I'd know if Pauline had somehow found me... but not worth focusing on that.

Then I retrieve some snacks from my duffel bag and make myself eat. I'm honestly not that hungry, but I haven't eaten in... way too long. A day? More? Stomach may not be demanding anything, but I've still got to eat. I realize I don't have anything to drink, have some tap water. Stupid mistake to forget fluids, but not a big deal.

I hesitate, and then turn on the television. Local news, see if there's anything about Daddy, or anyone else in the fam. It's important enough to justify twenty, thirty minutes of nausea.

The answer? Maybe. Flaktrap gives a little speech about an 'unknown' parahuman who possibly brutally murdered a man in his apartment, but details are pretty light. It's basically a call for people to phone in anything unusual. Makes me glad I've been careful; my power is invisible in action, but I have had people recognize, after the fact, that they were being weird around me. Exactly the sort of thing that might get people phoning the PRT in this situation.

Then things segue into an interview with one of the heroes who fought at Ellisburg - I startle for a moment until I remember that Nix is the Vegas cape, not the Nine member- jabbering about how they lost some asshole named Satyrical blah blah blah, and I shut off the TV. Wish I had my laptop, it would make this easier.

No, don't think that way. Fucking Pauline might not have gone along with the 'double date' if I'd grabbed it. Too risky, and with Daddy dead... I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen with the fam, but it's probably going to messily self-destruct. Daddy was awful, but he did keep things... limited. I'm not so sure Pauline wouldn't, say, start killing us without his oversight stopping her.

Frustratingly, I realize I'm too tired to go anywhere. I'm barely able to make myself shower and change clothes before I collapse into bed again. I reassure myself that I did specify two nights in the first place.
Aunt Cordelia is back in my range when I wake up (Out of a nightmare, of course), along with three siblings. Two of them are nothings, but the third... adrenaline spiked, I barely even bother to eat before heading out and flagging down a new ride. It only takes me two tries this time, and it's actually a pleasant surprise to succeed in getting a man who is high and clumsily trying to seduce me. Not sure why he thinks he has a chance with me, but it means that talking him into letting me borrow his smartphone is trivial; I can brute-force the manipulation and let him blame everything, later, on the fact that he's high.

The internet is a little more informative, but not by much. All I really gather is that it's not crossed anyone's mind that Daddy might be dead. If they've found his body, they haven't recognized it. Or haven't announced it, but I can't imagine why they wouldn't if they thought he was dead. He's sometimes spoken of in the same breath as shit like Nilbog or the Three Blasphemies. If I were the Protectorate, I'd be crowing so loud they could hear me in Korea.

I get bored, hit up dope-man for conversation. He's got a cousin in the PRT somewhere southeast, and is heading out to fish and have beer with the guy. It quickly becomes obvious that dope-man is boring and depressing, and I lose interest in him entirely, maintaining just enough focus to keep him from wrecking us or bothering me. Instead, I fiddle with the phone.

Dude doesn't even have any (good) games on his phone. Contacts list is... short. Not sure why I looked, really. Boredom, I guess.

I go back to the internet and, on impulse, go rooting around about Ellisburg. Yadda yadda, Panacea is awesome, let's mourn our heroic dead, Dragon killed someo- wait, she did? I thought she was some kind of pacifist wimp. Hello? Creator of the Birdcage? I poke at that some more.

Yadda yadda, middle of the night, infighting occurred among the goblins... interesting... situation grew chaotic and Dragon executed a standing Kill Order. I guess she's fine with authorized murder? Actually, why hadn't they killed Nilbog sooner? A quick search determines... that I'm like the millionth person to wonder that since he died. The Protectorate's official stance is, "It was a delicate situation," no elaboration.

Weird. Dragon isn't even a proper member, isn't she? Is her pulling the trigger kosher?

I sit back and stare at the screen for a minute, feeling like... I'm missing something.
Finally, I shake myself, double-check my radius -back to just Tube Lord, and not for long at this rate- and shrug it off.

Not relevant to me.

Last time I ran away, the border crossing tripped me up. I buttered up the guy, spun a story about running away from an abusive household to meet up with a relative in the US, and... whoops, he didn't let me pass without making sure everything was in order. Nicholas and Guillaume caught up before I could salvage that mess.

Embarrassing.

I've learned and practiced since: be boring. Don't be sympathetic, don't be memorable, don't engage. Be the most dull, uninteresting person ever. If you're Boring Everyday Normal, then you can get away with flashing an 'ID' that's blatantly fake.

This time? I get through the border checkpoint easily enough.

... though it turns out the driver is a moron who kept his shit in the trunk. And the fact that he reeks of weed would've set off a dog if I wasn't clamping down on its emotions so that it feels utterly fucking bored. I actually have to back off when it starts to lay down, catching its handler's attention, and strike a balance of keeping it bored enough to not react but not so bored that it decides it wants a nap, all while sunnily smiling at the guards like I'm some dumb tourist who has no idea this could possibly go awry.

I legit thought for a bit there that the dumbass had forgotten his papers, actually, but no, he just... had them in the trunk. Because why fucking not, right? Probably took a hit and then started packing to go, fucking moron. Pack, then drug. Not drug, then pack. You-on-drugs is a fucking moron who can't be trusted to tie their own goddamn shoes, and you should treat them appropriately. Though I guess this guy is so stupid the difference is probably nil.

I make even less effort to pretend to interact with him after we're past the border crossing, because goddamn.
Some hours later, I make Whatever-The-Fuckface's Name Is drop me off at another, fancier hotel. I let him keep his phone, ultimately, because while I'm not thinking of a problem that might result if I keep it I'm also not seeing a real benefit. It takes a bit of finagling to get the loser to actually abandon me -he's got some thin sense of obligation or honor that won't let him without nudging from me- but ultimately I hit him with mounting disgust and horror as I talk about my period and how I am 'so glad' to 'have his support in my hour of need'.

He can't be rid of me fast enough after that.

That handled I walk into the hotel lobby and- wait, is that a computer for my use? Huh. Yeah, it is. I didn't know hotels did that. Convenient.

Checking in is simple. I spend more of Daddy's money, because I can see the cameras, and then I... well, originally I planned to drop my stuff in my room and use the computer, but I sit down in a chair in my room for 'just a minute' and its dark when I open my eyes. And I'm hungry. That's easily solved, though: order a pizza with bread sticks and a couple of soda bottles, wait for the luckless lad or lass to show up, dazzle them with my charm, good looks, and a chaste peck on the cheek while leaving them feeling like a superstar and/or god has deigned to give them attention, and close the door in their face while they wander off.

... okay, it turns out this particular pizza delivery boy is slightly more persistent than that, sitting in his car for a few minutes before he quite clearly has a wait a second moment and comes back to demand pay, but hitting him with mounting dread as he closes with my door and rewarding him with relief and some joy as he moves away works. Pavlovian Conditioning, are there no problems you can't solve? It doesn't even interrupt my meal. I can do this kind of thing in my sleep. I mean, not literally... not yet.

He has a nervous breakdown and probably cries like the bitch he is for a few minutes before driving off once he gets to the car, but whatever. By then I'm paying more attention to the city. There's an obvious cape flying around, being smug... a couple of signatures that are so messed-up I think they basically have to be capes, like with powers that mess with their heads... hm. I had this idea that Killer might be trackable somehow, but I'm not sure what I was thinking. Ugh, this is going to be, what? A grid search?

Hell, some capes can survive in the woods. Some choose to! Lunatics, all of them. So I can't even focus on cities and towns.
Ugh, I don't care that much. If I meet him, I meet him.

I finish eating and very deliberately belch. No one around to object! Fuck all of you, I'm free! So nice. Then I take my keycard and check out the computer. As it happens, there's someone already on it, but a minute of standing outside, tapping one foot impatiently, is plenty to send them running.

Oh, and ramping up their fear and dashing it with more basic anxiety. That too. How silly of me to overlook that!

With a proper computer, looking things up is a lot easier. I briefly look into new capes in the US - pretty sure Killer isn't Canadian, given his path and my failure to find him before the border- but nothing really leaps out at me as plausible Killer material. Focusing on capes in the north-east US is... well, there's possibilities-

Hell-o there.

Jean-Paul. I'd know your stupid haircut anywhere. Wow, I thought you'd done something smart that Daddy couldn't find you, but Daddy is just the most useless, fucking LAZY-

Ahem.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Calm.

I close the browser, delete the browsing history just in case, and head back to my room with a cheery wave to the sap at the desk. Their own cheer is faked. I fix that. I hate it when staff are being friendly and obviously imagining strangling me with my own intestines. I'm not stupid, come on. It's so easy, too, and it's always funny seeing them either decide I must be nice or something or have an identity crisis because apparently 'hating the customers' is a vital part of their self-image.

Once in my room, I lean back into my chair and finally allow myself to cackle like a maniac.

Leave me behind in your escape, will you, Little Jean? Thought you could just abandon your favorite sibling like trash, thought I wouldn't know you care so and yet still treated me this way? You thought wrong, bro. You thought so wrong.
The pain train is coming to Brockton Bay.

------------------------------------------

I end up stopping at another hotel before I get to Brockton Bay. I'm just so tired, and I don't understand why. I take advantage of the opportunity to read up on Jean-Paul's teammates. While I was hitching my latest ride -a chatty woman who lost my interest in about five minutes- it occurred to me that it would be profoundly stupid of me to assume he didn't deliberately pick allies suited to defeating me, Daddy, or any of the other powered people in the fam, and this hotel also has a computer for patrons. Why not, right?

'Hellhound' is easy to get info on. She's a bitch, Bitch is what she calls herself. Power makes monster dogs, probably out of regular dogs. I'm not real concerned about her. Unless her monster dogs are protected from me, she's nothing special. Jean-Paul can't control dogs, either, so he can't bypass my power with them.

You Are Eaten By A Grue worries me more. His apparent power is meh, but that name... I find myself thinking it has to be he's trying to be 'clever' and allude to another aspect of his power 'subtly'. The team ("The Undersiders," whatever that's supposed to mean) has consistently avoided fights, if the PHO wiki is to be believed, so it would be easy to be keeping an ace in the hole for a rainy day. I'd rather not learn he has a more murderous aspect to his power by being eaten alive. Should take him out of the fight promptly, definitely.

Last, Tattletale. Wiki's got nothing. Just a name, her affiliation, her gender, and, "This page is a stub. Be a hero blah blah blah." A wild card. Probably something subtle, too, given nobody knows jack about her. Name suggests ferreting out secrets or something, but if she's kept her power secret this long she might be the sort to pick a misleading name rather than an iconic one. If anyone will foil my power, it'll be her.

Little Jean is an idiot, incidentally. 'Regent' screams people control, and he's apparently pretending his power is just the involuntary twitches that happen as he feels out your nervous system. Are people really stupid enough to fall for this? He doesn't even hide his hair! Or dye it! I have no idea why the Protectorate hasn't come down on him like a building. Don't their offices talk to each other?

I try to think of something else to look up, blank, and then realize it might make sense to get the lay of the land. Maybe play a rival group into trying to kill Jean-Paul and his underwear pals? Need to know who they are to plot that, after all.
I'm surprised, very surprised, to learn that Lung is heading a gang in Brockton Bay. Last I heard the man was somewhere in California. Not overly concerned about it, as he's more about the cape scene than he is about hunting down and killing non-capes. His sidekick sounds a lot more worrying. A teleporter who's a repeated-suicide-bomber? Uuuugh. I hate teleporters. If I'm lucky, his range will be short, and I won't have to worry about him catching me off guard. Or he might have some sense of 'honor' like his boss, but I'm doubtful. Honorable people like to have more cutthroat minions so they can keep their hands clean while still getting shit done, so I'm kind of expecting Oni Lee to be Lung's personal, honorless attack dog. Something to worry about.

Biggest gang in the city is... called Empire Eighty-Eight. Means nothing to me. Wiki calls them Nazis, so I guess they're unusually awful by gang standards. I pop into somebody called Purity's entry, she's basically Legend-lite, but glowier. Eh. There's a ball of blades called Hookwolf... wouldn't want to fight him, but I'm not worried about him being in the city. Same for... Rune? Why is she called Rune? Her power is telekinesis. What do magical letters or whatever have to do with manipulating cars and shit? Honestly, getting a bit-

... 

... 

Wait. 

Wait a goddamn second. 

They're actual fucking Nazis. What? I- how have I not heard of this before? There's actual fucking Nazis within spitting distance of where I li- used to live??

Shocked, I go poking around online to see if there's some massive groundwell of Nazi support in the US I somehow never heard about before, but no. Empire Eighty Eight is reputed to have 'connections' to some German Nazi organization (Which seems slightly more logical, but still weirds me out) but that's about it. Just... two Nazi organizations bro-ing it up across the ocean, both in countries that overall agree that Nazis rate slightly above zombies as 'pour gasoline over them, strike a match, have a barbecue, and don't worry about whether you're still moral or not'.

Isn't Captain America still being written punching out Nazi zombies and shit? Are comics people just stone-cold badasses who give no fucks about reprisal?...
You know what? Never mind. I don't think I really care. I'm done with this shit, off the computer I go- I'm hungry. When's the last time I ate?... oh. That last hotel, I ordered pizza... yeah, I think that was the last time. Fuck. Sleeping a lot, can't keep track of my meals... what's wrong with me? Ugh. I end up getting pizza the same way as last time, after I've logged out and headed up to my room. The delivery girl doesn't come back to try to demand the money she's owed, instead having weird conflicted feelings and introspective-ness and yadda. Best guess? She's decided that being hot for me must have some deeper meaning, but I don't give a fuck. Have fun with your stupid crisis, girl. I'm not even going to be here tomorrow!

I manage to watch some TV (A nature program covering sharks. I don't think I can feel sharks. There's no nausea, anyway, so long as there's no fucking divers get off my screen you assholes) over breadsticks, soda, and two big pizzas. Takes me more than an hour to get through everything, but I never hit the point of feeling full. I just slow down after the first pizza, that's all. I've never eaten like this. Am I just reveling in freedom from Daddy? He didn't control my diet or anything, so that... doesn't seem like it makes sense? I guess it's possible, but I dunno. Something's going on, anyway, and I don't understand it.

Hm. Maybe I'm sick?

No, wait, I don't feel sick. I don't feel nauseous except when fucking Cousteau is on my screen, I'm not struggling to eat or anything. That... doesn't seem to add up.

Ugh, I don't know. This is going to drive me up the wall forever.

After I've eaten, I turn off the television, deal with everything that needs to be dealt with afterward, and lay down, "Actual fucking Nazis," circling around in my head.

Eventually I drift off anyway.

-----------------------------------------------------

In the morning, I make damn sure to force myself to go to the hotel's free breakfast.

I mean, to be fair, I didn't even know free breakfasts were a thing when I went to the first hotel. Never stayed in a hotel before then, right? Just hijacked various people's houses/apartments/etc.
But I should've noticed and taken advantage by the second hotel. Not here and now.

On the other hand, my appetite is all kinds of weird, has been since I got Daddy killed. (Unlikely possibility: I'm mourning him. Doubt it, but can't ignore it entirely) Maybe I wouldn't have been able to eat a proper breakfast even if I had known it was there to take advantage of. Also, this particular hotel's free breakfast is... eh. I can't compare it to other hotels, of course, but a muffin and some orange juice is pretty lame, really. I was expecting actual hot food. Steak, ideally, but even just some form of cooked egg would have been nice.

In fact, I'm sufficiently disappointed by the fare that I hit up a McDonalds afterward for fries and a burger. I actually pay for this one; they have cameras, I can spare the funding readily, and I'm tired enough I don't really want to muster the effort to do more than make the person giving me food actually goddamn smile with real happiness. I need to conserve my A game for when I hit Brockton Bay. I should be in range in an hour, three tops, and I'm going to need to keep out of Jean-Paul's reach very carefully, so carefully he doesn't even know I'm around, while I maneuver to punish him. I'm tempted to insert myself into Lung's silly gang, honestly -with a good enough costume, nobody has to know I don't fit the requirements for entry and anyway I've got my power and more importantly the idea of setting Lung on Jean-Paul is a delight I'm willing to suffer a bit to make happen.

From the McDonalds I manage to hitchhike again, catching a ride with a family that apparently lives in Brockton Bay and was coming back anyway from visiting relatives. I didn't even have to manipulate them much. Well, not to get aboard. The youngest girl I twist into disinterest in me when she won't back the hell off after I've made it clear she's irritating me, but they let me in basically out of the goodness of their hearts.

No, really. I can't detect any guilt they're trying to atone for or any lust from the parents or much of anything except some sympathy for me.

Weird.

They're all a bunch of lunatics.

They speak with pride -and it is real pride, my power tells all- about Brockton Bay's cape population. The parents routinely make bets about which cape would win in a fight, actual bets with real stakes. The father is good-naturedly arguing with his oldest son about Oni Lee vs Aegis (Whoever that is), with the mother periodically inserting herself into the conversation to point out
things like: the Wards always patrol in pairs, at least, and so it's 'not realistic' to assume Aegis is alone in the fight, while Oni Lee usually does operate solo. She apparently has a long-standing bet that Armsmaster would beat Kaiser in a fair fight -something about plastics- and has bet something pretty significant on it. I'm not sure what the family bets. It doesn't sound like it's money.

The youngest girl is adamant that 'Vista' could take on all comers, after I've squeezed out her interest in me. I manage to infer, staring disinterestedly out the SUV's window, that Vista is the youngest of the Wards, and initially assume the girl is simply overly identifying with the Ward's youngest girl because she's her family's youngest girl. This assumption is busted when she rattles off long lists of facts -Vista's longest observed range, fastest observed alterations, 'most extreme' observed alterations, what matchups she's previously won, the list is unending- to back up her conviction. The family isn't merely humoring her, either, and takes most of her claims very seriously. Lung vs Vista is the only one where they are faking for her benefit.

Worse, I eventually gather that the family has friends they make similar bets with. The lunacy is contagious.

I rouse myself from my attempt to keep their attention away from me long enough to ask why they live in the Bay. The mother's answer is somehow unsurprising, yet still lunacy.

"Well, we both grew up in the Bay, of course, and I don't rightly know why our parents stuck around, but we love the cape scene and couldn't abandon it, and Brockton Bay is one of the cape capitols of America." She pauses, and I sense some dissatisfaction in her. "Of course, America isn't really the cape capitol of the world. If I could've picked where I was born, I'd take some place else in an instant. China, probably, or maybe a European country. I've always liked what I hear of the French cape scene..."

The father takes up after she trails off. "Sorry to say that the C.U.I. rejected our application to immigrate. We actually did, once, look into the African scene, and while we could probably live there, if only by failing to show up for the return ticket and then trying to live off the land, we'd be way out of touch with the cape scene living like that." He frowns slightly, as if forgetting something, and he nods and smiles as much as he can without taking his eyes off the road. "Oh, and of course we'd all be in dreadful danger in Africa. They don't have Heroes, did you know that? Warlords is what they have, and servant warriors. None of this Heroes vs Villains stuff. No parahumans to protect us from parahumans? Man alive, we'd probably die the instant one looked funny at us."

I try to conceal my smirk. Like you're that safe here.

Then I realize there was absolutely no fear while he was talking. The possibility of death was a side note, something he'd forgotten entirely. My smirk falls away in favor of stone-facedly staring
out the window. If I didn't have my powers, this would be terrifying. As-is, it's still creepy that the family values... what, *spectator sports*? So much that dying while trying to follow it doesn't bother them. And it *is* the family, not just the father. I'm not even sure he's the nuttiest nutjob of the bunch.

I worry, for a moment, that Brockton Bay will be filled with crazy people like this. Then I dismiss that thought. *Don't be ridiculous. You can't have an entire town of crazy people: it wouldn't function. Certainly not well enough for this family to be as comfortable as they are.*

Incidentally, Brockton Bay is entering my range. No Jean-Paul yet, and no *obvious* capes... not yet. The city's early mood is... grimly determined. Might just be this edge of the town, though, a slummy part of town. It relieves me a little regardless, because no, the city isn't *made* of lunatics like the ones I'm riding with. It just contains a few. A minority, easily ignored. I'd hate to imagine that Jean-Paul had thrown his lot into a madhouse. It might suggest a familial tendency, a similarity.

Not a lot I can do to fix myself if I'm crazy.

"*Fatherfucker!*"

The entire family jerks to look at me, even the father, but then I twist all of them until they just don't care. And then tweak the father so he's actually paying attention to the road again, a frisson of fear to focus him.

Of all the pure, stupid, blind luck... Killer is here. In Brockton Bay! I honestly thought I was going to lose interest in trying to find him before I actually found him. I know my own attention span, my own patience. They are not fantastic, and I had almost nothing to go off of. I'm not a real tracker, not really, not in power set, not in skillset, and Killer is pretty damn fast when he wants to be. Since I didn't find him in the first few hours of fleeing... I thought that was it.

This changes things. I mean, Jean-Paul is still getting his just desserts, but he can keep. I still need to get more information about Killer, so I can find him again if he moves. Besides, maybe Killer will be my hammer of justice. He dealt with Daddy, after all. Jean-Paul might punch his buttons. I might even be able to *talk* Killer into doing it without any manipulation at all! If he could kill Daddy successfully, I doubt Jean-Paul has any protection from him. Gonna have to wait and see how Killer's personality shakes out, though. Might be difficult to talk him into properly punishing Jean-Paul, might be difficult to wrangle him into seeing things my way.
I settle back to ignoring the family, more closely monitoring what I'm hearing from the city.

------------------------------------------------------------------

Turns out the family lives in some suburbs, and while the mother indicates she'd be willing to drop me off somewhere after they've gotten into their house, I don't want to stick around.

The city's mood?

Yeah, grimly determined.

Oh, there's parts of the city that are... less unhappy, let's go with. There's even people who are basically happy, though I'm pretty sure they're violence-seekers and other sorts of adrenaline junkies, at least most of them. But overall, people in this city clearly think they live in a kind of Hell on Earth that they just need to survive long enough and eventually it will get better. Or maybe they just think nowhere else is any better, either-or. I'd question why there aren't people desperate to escape the sinking ship, but that's a stupid question: they already escaped.

Duh.

Jean-Paul was easily identified, of course. I think he's playing video games right now, going by how his mood is shifting. He's not moving, himself, and no one else is nearby (Unless, say, the Tattletale girl is immune to my power) so I'm pretty sure I'm right. Mostly sure.

I've also, almost certainly, pinned down Oni Lee. His signature duplicates, and then vanishes until there's just one. It's surprising how unsettling it is, though not nearly so unsettling as realizing his mood is flat for unnatural reasons. See, he's calm. Really calm. Some people are like that, so I didn't question it at first. Then he got into a fight, terrorized someone, killed them. His emotions were the same throughout: a kind of almost-bored disinterest in the proceedings. No fear, no satisfaction in victory, no looking forward to any kind of reward or anything. Just... boredom. Even when his opponent -victim? - was terrified and, I'm thinking, begging for mercy, Oni Lee felt... bored. I'm not sure if some people are just like that, and I didn't notice because nobody in my range historically who was like that got into an obvious fight, or if Oni Lee's power did something to his head. Hopefully he's still susceptible to my manipulations, because if he's not... I don't have a good answer to him. Plan: Get Beside Lung is looking a lot less appealing now. Lotta risk, little reward.
I'm not sure what's going on with Killer. My first thought was that he was an office drone, because he's fairly static... but then he moves periodically. Regularly. I don't know shit about actual jobs, but I can't make sense of the pattern, 'cause it's not just him. He's clustered with people, and most all of them pick up stakes at the same time as him, but they don't move as a group. There's an entire building, from what I can tell, almost all of them doing this weirdness.

The pattern nags at me as familiar, but I can't call it to mind. I make a resolution to arrange to see Killer 'coincidentally', ferret out what's going on. Especially since Killer is, bizarrely, much more tense than when he was stalking Daddy. Lotta anger... but also some fear? There wasn't fear back home. Anger? Yeah, scarily so, more than here. But no fear, not until...

I frown. Wow, I was so busy hurrying to leave the fam, I didn't even notice how Killer was scared after he killed Daddy. Weird. Why was he afraid after he killed Daddy? Was he worried he'd be caught by the authorities? Hm. Maybe he didn't realize it was Daddy until after he killed him, and then panicked once he recognized him, worried the fam would retaliate. (I snort at the thought. Pauline's loyal enough, I think, but I doubt she's motivated enough. Pretty sure everybody else would be too busy watching their own back to go looking for trouble) Definitely missing something important there.

Anyway, Killer, tenseness, mostly anger, some fear. Worried he's going to get fired from his job? Hates his boss?... no, that doesn't fit. Group dynamics indicate he's going from one boss to another, if I'm following this at all correctly. Everybody's reacting primarily to one individual in their little cluster, and Killer's mood is pretty constant throughout. He doesn't hate any of these bosses much more than any other, if he hates them specifically. Might be that he hates his job, but is still worried about getting fired from it.

Then during one of the bizarre, chaotic transfers that keeps happening, Killer gets cornered by a cluster of people. Killer wants these people dead. The group is... feeling vaguely superior. Prideful. Haughty. Little bit of actual anger. Hm. Maybe Killer is a talented new hire, and the other employees resent him making them look bad? Oh, there's a spike of anger from Killer. Something happened, not sure what. Not sure why Killer hasn't just broken through the group, it's only four people. He's restraining himself from just gutting them all, though. He thinks he could take them. Hm. Contempt, in fact. If I'm reading this right... he's assuming he can take them. Not 'I can take them', but 'they live only because I allow it'.

Parahuman vs normies, probably, so yeah that's pretty understandable, but it's still useful to know, and also makes it a little strange that he's putting up with this bullshit. Just rend them, end them, move along. Why play at being normal?

I check into a hotel -actually check in with actual money again, not sure how long I'll be here and this one clearly has enough money I wouldn't be surprised if they're prepared for capes- and keep 'listening in' over the course of the day, just laying in bed. (I'm still tired, but not enough to sleep,
and now I'm not even hungry!) Eventually Killer goes to what I assume is his home. He spends some time doing... something. Not sure what. It involves holding still and concentrating. It's only during this period that I notice that Killer's weird, flat mood is... not a consistent thing. It wasn't happening at all at the office or whatever, but it kicked in full force while he was alone until shortly before he sat down and started concentrating. Really wanting to know what's going on there.

I pay attention to other stuff -like where the idiots provoking Killer go and how they feel and stuff like that- but eventually I

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

drift... off.

I'm awake. It takes far, far too long for me to notice that it's night, as my attention first goes to Killer. He's up and about, and he seems unbothered. I can't read tiredness directly, but people's profiles shift in a fairly consistent, distinctive way as they get exhausted, even quite early in the process. Killer doesn't read to me like he's tired at all. He did earlier, at the office, eventually, but now he's alert, wide awake. Does he... need less sleep than normal? Hm. He was, what, popping across the border every night? So I guess he'd kind of have to be able to do without sleep or sleep less, really. Ugh, stupid Cherie, duh.

... still. He was getting tired at the office, but not now that he's skulking around the city? I guess maybe his power somehow makes itself visible when he's preventing himself from becoming tired? Not a glow. I would've noticed it back ex-home when I caught glimpses of him. A sound, maybe? Or maybe some deformity. Skin of glass or something silly like that. Some reason why he doesn't want to show it off during work.

Then I'm distracted from my thoughts by the reason why I woke in the first place: bathroom, now!

...

After that's dealt with... well, I'm tired. And Killer is being boring. He's looking for something, getting frustrated, kind of like when he was looking for Daddy, like in the early stages of looking for Daddy. Probably someone, really.

... wow. Aren't serial killers normally, like, pacing their kills by years, or at least months?
Certainly, a few weeks between, at minimum. Killer's really living up to his nickname if he's so eager for a target already. I should try to see if there's been any brutal bloodbaths in Brockton Bay news recently, it's hard to imagine he's not killed a bunch of people out of sheer frustration or something.

... maybe in the morning.

-----------------------------------------------------

Breakfast, done. Listening in to Killer? Yeah, he's at his home again. There's someone else there, which I didn't notice last time because, well, my power doesn't exactly give me landmarks. It didn't occur to me that this other dude was in basically the same area as Killer until they were actually interacting. Not sure what's going on there. My first thought is that Killer's got a 'special someone', but that doesn't seem right. The two have some love for each other, but no lust, and it's buried under all kinds of strain. I'm having trouble imagining a couple sticking together like this, and bits and pieces of other things don't feel like a couple to me.

But they don't act like roommates, either. Puzzling.

Whatever the case, the two of them separate before I finish my (free) breakfast. Shit. I bolt down the rest of my meal and hurry to catch a bus -they're pretty distinctive to my sense, a pile of people moving at high speed- because I'm trying to get a good look at Killer.

At this point I'm dead curious about what kind of person he is.

-----------------------------------------------------

I end up having to get off the bus early to avoid entering Jean-Paul's reach, skirting around his radius on foot. I could simply hitch a ride with someone, but I don't think it's necessary. Killer is taking a bus crowded with other people, and its route is pretty roundabout for Killer's destination. Curiously, nobody is getting off, only on. Some kind of company bus? I think that's a thing. Point being? I have a decent amount of time to make the rest of the walk.

Then I get in sight of the building.

"No. Way."
I breathe the words out.

It's a school! A high school, admittedly, but still a damn *school*. Killer isn't on a *company* bus, and if he's on a bus he's not a *teacher*. He's a *student*.

I close my eyes and breathe for a couple minutes, trying to ignore the feel of the entire city. Wait, I think I just identified Lung, Oni Lee is interacting with someone who... is moody and takes Oni Lee's loyalty as a given, I'm thinking. I guess it could be a civilian boss- no, he just duplicated. Could be one of Lung's lieutenants, I guess. I think some gangs don't put all the capes at the top? Silly, I know, but it's what I've heard, and what I've sensed back ex-home fits with it.

*Aarrgh,* focus.

Killer is... a high school student. That's... hm. Well, it means he's, ah, *moldable*. Not already set in his ways, maybe even looking to shake up the establish-

**Nilbog.**

Killer did it!

... okay, it's all circumstantial, weak evidence, but it *makes so much sense*.

... assuming Killer's self-confidence isn't delusional, anyway.

...

Well, okay, it's *really* weak, but I like the idea of it and if I claim I 'figured it out' it'll put him off-balance, puff up his ego, make it *easier* to mold him without him having the chance to notice. And if I'm wrong? Eh, oh well. No big deal. Not like his opinions matter in the long-term anyway.

Oh shit, Killer's bus is almost here.
I hustle while trying to look like I'm not hustling, try to anticipate where the bus is going to offload and set up where I'll be behind Killer so he can't see me seeing him, get it a bit off, and there we go.

...

...

...

It's not until someone 'accidentally' (Sure hun, I can tell you were gleefully anticipating it) trips Killer that I'm sure I'm not misunderstanding what I'm seeing.

Killer's a girl.

... okay, pretty confused now. I mean, okay, possibly wanting to bang Daddy is, uh, way creepier and way less surprising (One of my aunts did seek out Daddy, after all), but jealousy? I'm pretty sure wanting your own harem isn't very normal if you're female and not one of Daddy's spawn. Maybe pop culture has misled me horribly? Or... I guess Killer could just be a freak, with pop culture having told me the complete and unabridged truth about your typical female. Hmm. I think I'll assume the latter for the moment and keep an eye out for more evidence of the former.

Huh. Now I'm really curious what Killer's power is. Must not be good at getting a harem if he - no, she- doesn't already have one. Fits with my thinking that the no-sleep aspect of her power has an obvious and repulsive aspect to it, too. Actually, there's a thought: did Killer think she could steal Daddy's harem by killing him?

...

No, wait, she ran away right after killing him. Or... wait, Aunt Cordelia freaked out. So maybe she killed Daddy, went, "Behold love slaves! It is I, your new lord and mistress, Killer! Worship me!" and it didn't work the way she thought it would, and she ran. Though. I'd have expected her to kill them if they dissatisfied her so? I mean, Aunt Cordelia was definitely alive long after Killer left, and... I'm pretty sure the other girl hadn't been killed? I might've overlooked her death, admittedly. Or maybe I'm just overestimating Killer's bloodthirstiness. She hasn't killed any of...
... it's been about ten minutes and there's been as many 100% deliberate 'accidents' as there's been minutes. From about seven people so far. So that's seven people Killer restrained herself from killing, who she very much wants dead. So okay, I'm being silly. She probably just got disappointed and left. (Or maybe it worked, and she was afraid because the truth of that kind of blind devotion didn't fit with her fantasies?) Hm. Maybe she was looking for Jean-Paul in hopes that he has a harem she can steal? Last night? Wait, wait, no. 'Regent' was listed as being able to make people flinch, trip, lose their balance, etc. Just because Jean-Paul's 'disguise' is about as thin as the emperor's new clothes to me doesn't mean everyone else knows who he is on sight. Ugh, stop being stupid Cherie.

I weave my way to a nice little restaurant to 'listen in' on Killer's day, now with the benefit of knowing she's a student at a school, and when I'm done with eating make my way to the hotel, still 'listening in' and thinking about the direction I'm going to take this now.

--------------------------------------------

Okay, so.

A school she hates, filled with people who are all shitty to her or at least willing to look the other way when other people are shitty to her. There's some people who are genuinely oblivious, but only one of them seems to earnestly want to be friendly to her (By which I mean lust after her) and it's pretty obvious the kid is unwanted. The teachers... it's difficult to pin down who they're reacting to without being present, and I don't want Killer recognizing me before I've got a plan on how to handle her, but I think a couple are genuinely sympathetic to her. Doesn't seem to help particularly, though. My read on the situation is that it basically means Killer's harassers just distribute the obnoxiousness differently.

I frankly have no idea how she hasn't killed all of them in their sleep by now.

I've tentatively decided the person she's living with is her father. Might be her mother, and I'm not willing to trust my judgment with Killer's family when it comes to gender now, but overall the signature makes me think 'male'. I might check in on the dude at some point more directly, but I'm not overly concerned because he doesn't seem to be a parahuman at all. I force myself to stay awake with coffee until past ten at night -I was ready to fall asleep at five in the afternoon, goddammit- and Killer quite clearly waits for the man to fall asleep and then sneaks out of the house to do her thing, so I'm pretty sure he doesn't know Killer's got powers, either.

Even with the coffee, I drift off at... probably 10:20? That's the last thing I remember the clock saying, anyway. When I wake up, it's to room service harassing me at eleven.
Why am I sleeping so goddamn much?

Ugh, this is maddening.

I pass this morning with food and 'listening in' to Killer's father, returning to my room once room service is done with it and continuing to 'listen in'. Killer's father is a depressive sort, and I'm not sure if it's just because of Fucking Brockton Bay or if it's more personal than that - divorced recently? Dead spouse? I haven't detected a third member of the house yet- or what, but he seems to be powering through more on momentum than a real zest for life or a conviction things will get better. He also doesn't seem to be real involved in his kid's life: I'm pretty sure both yesterday and today the two didn't call each other via cell phone, and they don't seem to spend time around each other physically, particularly. A brief interaction over probably-breakfast, and when they are both actually home at the same time in the afternoon they spend time together for maybe an hour but I think it's just dinner.

... that's it for both days.

In the afternoon, something strange catches my attention: one of Killer's harassers is roof-hopping!

Hmmm.

Iiiiiinteresting.
To truly know someone, you should study their enemies.

That's a saying, right? I'm pretty sure that's a saying. Whatever, it is now.

So one of Killer's enemies at school is, it turns out, also a cape. Makes me wonder if they're bitter rivals in capehood or what. I wasn't paying overly close attention to Killer's botherers as individuals, but this clearly merits closer study.

Amusingly, this person is actually fairly similar to Killer. A tight ball of restrained anger, waiting to lash out. Less restrained than Killer, though. Anger is older, harder, too. Hm. What to call this one? I think I'll go with Fury. Oh, and it's so amusing how Fury and Killer both roof-hop. The details are different - Fury is slower, but doesn't hesitate or second-guess him or herself when making these jumps- but it's a similar sort of pattern. Fury is looking for something too.

Ah, but Fury finds something fairly quickly.

Hm. Doesn't jump on it right away, though. Seems to be... checking out the area? Concerned about something, flinty anger behind the concern. I think Fury is mad that they have to take whatever precaution they're taking. Hm. Wonder what that means? Oh, there we go, Fury has jumped someone, excuse me, multiple someones. A fistfight, seems like. It doesn't take me long to connect Fury's moments of satisfaction to their targets' suffering - Fury is enjoying hurting these people. Seems to be a bit of catharsis to it, but not just catharsis. And... Fury's signature overlaps with the other combatants, sometimes? That's a little creep-

Oh hey, what're you up to, Jean-Paul? Is he meeting with his underpals, the Undersiders? That's three people... so if they are, Tattletale isn't invisible to me. Hm. Wish I could properly confirm this without entering Jean-Paul's reach. Well, the three people are:
Scared And Resentful. Hm. Is that Bitch? She's supposed to be a runaway. Maybe she's only in the group because she needs their protection? Wait, that doesn't fit. She's the one with the muscle, not them. Unless maybe Jean-Paul is controlling her?... I'll need to see if she stays in his radius after they break up. Scared And Resentful is putting up a pretty good façade of calm confidence, though, enough for the sympathetic real reaction to be less weak than usual. Fake It 'Til You Make It? Or just a good actor?

Crouching Confidence Hidden Anger. Hmm. I don't know enough about Grue and Tattletale to guess properly. Whoever they are, I'm not sure they realize how angry they are, that's how hidden the anger is. They seem to have successfully Faked It 'Til They Maked It on the confidence. Or maybe it's real confidence, and the only fakery is hiding the anger? That'd make more sense if they don't realize how repressed they are. The group seems to defer to CCHA, sort of. Jean-Paul is doing his usual pretension of apatheticness, and Scared And Resentful seems to be playing along more than actually submitting, but CCHA seems to be making the decisions in practice, as only-

-Angry And Suspicious And Lonely And Angry seems to be chomping at the bit for leadership. Hm. Maybe Tattletale is team leader, and Grue wants to be team leader? Thinker leadership and all, elitism, blah blah. Not sure. Anyway, they've got anger problems. Thinking trust problems, too, but trust isn't something I can read directly. Honestly, feels like they're ready to break from the group on a moment's notice, but are too lonely to just do it without a specific cause. There's a history there, and more importantly I might be able to peel away maybe-Grue by providing that excuse, minimal interference and no chance of Jean-Paul realizing it's me. One less protector for the boy.

Jean-Paul is, of course, Jean-Paul. He's got his feelings buried deep, barely knows they're there. Same ol' same ol'. He seems fond enough of his teammates. Fonder than he was of the fam.

_Fonder than he is of me._

Whoa Cherie, deep breaths. Calm. Out with the anger, in with the thinking.

Aaaanyway. Right. There's definitely a hierarchy there. Maybe-Grue he can take or leave, overall, but finds amusing to watch. Also scared of them, but not enough for him to notice he's scared of them, not nearly as strong as the amusement. Maybe-Tattletale he views with a kind of weary fondness. Doesn't like doing things their way, but can't argue with it? Something like that, I think. Maybe-Bitch is amusing to him. And annoying. But mostly amusing. Hm. If that is Bitch, he's not worried she's going to kill him. Did he befriend the girl? Or it could be support for the 'controlling her against her will' theory.
Back to Fury.

Fury's finished up, exulting in victory. Took a couple of hits, but isn't worried about them. Then... catches himself, flees the scene. Doesn't want to be caught by someone? The PRT? Anyway, Fury's more relaxed now. The violence helped him calm down. Possible insight into why he or she torments Killer? (Fuckit, referring to Fury as 'he'. Simpler) Can't relax without a fight? Capes are weird, that's plausible. Point of contrast with Killer, probably. Okay, maybe. Killer's hit on Daddy was... I'm still not sure what happened there. Can't actually assume her failure to exult in victory was representative, and I wasn't awake for the actual hit so I don't know how she felt during it.

I think Fury is heading home now? Kind of casual -hold up. He's syncing up, emotional shifting-wise, with one of Killer's other tormentors. Cell phone call, probably. Aaaand... Fury's phone buddy has a kind of tense anticipation while Fury is feeling some pride and a more cheerful sort of anticipation. Hm. I initially thought Fury was just going back to pretending to be normal, but now I'm thinking his phone buddy knows Fury is a cape, Fury is reveling in retelling his battle just now, something like that. Phone buddy is trying to act calm, probably succeeding okay-ish -either that or Fury knows and doesn't care that it's fake- but feels sick to their gut.

Hm. My impulse is to think phone buddy is a non-cape, or maybe a really shitty cape? Like, they have a power but it's nearly worthless in practice and so they don't want to really hit the cape scene. Hell, with Lung as part of the landscape even a pretty kickass power would be risky to lean on. Not sure which: better pay attention to phone buddy and see if they do anything obviously cape-y.

Fury is... stopping off somewhere. Just had a casual interaction with someone, either a relative or a friend, because they've clearly done much the same many times before. Or I guess it could be a neighbor they pass by routinely, but there's enough mutual fondness that I doubt it's that superficial.

Aaaand Fury is in and out in less than five minutes, moving with purpose. There's resentment building, it's affecting the cell phone conversation but doesn't seem to be rooted in it -ah, I think they just cut the call. Fury is being moody, I'm guessing he's contemplating his near future and doesn't like it. Phone buddy is relieved to be done and... I'm thinking recriminating theirself over said relief?

Ah, meanwhile Jean-Paul and pals are done with their little powwow and going their separate ways. Jean-Paul is... probably settling into more video games. Maybe-Bitch is having an anxiety spike-

...?
Why is Maybe-Bitch talking to someone via cell phone who is... is that an underground building? I was sort of ignoring it before, but there's a cluster of people noticeably lower than anybody else in the surrounding area. Huh. Should check that out at some point.

More importantly, this means either my guess is wrong or I've been misled as to the kind of person Bitch is. The dynamic is... Probably-Not-Bitch is nervous, playing at playfulness, while the underground dude is calm and... is he being deliberately threatening over a cell phone? Am I reading that right? That doesn't seem terribly plausible, but I don't think I'm misunderstanding what I'm reading. Blackmail? Cave-dude has to have some kind of hold over them, realistically, but I'm not sure what kind of hold it might be.

Hm. Food for thought for later.

The spiky angry one... oh, I'm dumb. It's Bitch, with three dogs with her. Duh. Okay, Nervous Nelly thus has to be either Grue or Tattletale, then. Not sure which is more plausible, too little information. Huh. Wouldn't have pegged Bitch as a lonely person. She's got her dogs, after all... and paying closer attention, she's got a good relationship with all three, lots of respect and so on all around. But she's still lonely?

... weird.

Lastly, ConfidenceMcAngry. They're... exercising? Very focused on it, whatever it is, and it's something they have long practice in, something they're comfortable with and soothed by... but also has some kind of unpleasant association. Hm. That could be practically anything. Hell, they could be looking at porn. Not getting much out of them.

Ah, and now Fury is entering a building, I think. Not the school. Hm. People recognize him, deliberately control their reactions. Wonder why. Wonder what he's doing there.

... I want to get up and look at this building but I also want to keep luxuriating in this soft bed.

Compromise: can I see it from my window and make sense of it?

Answer: sooorrrt of? I'm pretty sure I can see the building, but nothing about it leaps out at me.

I flop back into the bed, disappointed.
Okay, Fury is... not sure what. Focused on something that doesn't make him angry, holds him in one place. Seriously wish I could figure out what I'm 'seeing'. Okay, he's moving again?... 

... ah, Nervous Nelly is done talking to Cavedude. Cavedude is... now going out for a walk... and... being pretty strongly reacted to by everyone else in his cave?... respect, some fear, some awe. The fuck is up with Cavedude? Anyway, Nervous Nelly isn't experiencing any relief. I'm reminded, actually, of people who have proceeded to bury themselves in booze to dull the pain. Nervous Nelly... sits down and starts doing something to unwind. Pattern doesn't fit reading a book or watching television. Could be on the phone with someone out of town, or playing video games. Probably other possibilities I'm overlooking.

Ah! Fury is... going upstairs with one person. Fury has contempt for this person. The person dislikes Fury, but isn't terribly invested in the dislike. Ah? Fury just roof-hopped! And- 

... 

... the fuck was that? Fury's companion did something, and it's giving me a headache trying to parse what my power is telling me and- agh! They did it again! They... teleported?... no. Duplicated? Stretched? Uuuugh this feels wrong what the fuck are they doing.

No, stop getting distracted. Fury is openly caping, in front of someone else who is a cape. They both came from the same building, too, and didn't seem to be trying to hide as they went out. So either Fury is a gang member and the gang is pretty goddamn powerful or he's a Ward. Call it fifty-fifty whether he's Empire Eighty-Eight or a Ward. Pretty sure he's not one of Lung's, and the other gangs are small potatoes.

If he's a Ward, that was Protectorate HQ. I can confirm that... ugh, whenever I feel up to leaving my room. Probably tomorrow, really. (Wait, no, Protectorate HQ is that dumb oil rig. I'm missing something)

I catch myself nodding off. Still wonky. Also need to make sure I pay for another... let's pay for three more nights. In the morning.

---------------------------------------------------

I actually wake up at like 3 in the morning. Killer is still stalking arou- no, Killer just jumped
someone! Said someone... hit the ground, in pain, not yet panicking. More angry than scared. Ah, but then they get to their feet, and then they get scared. Layering bravado over it, but they're not scared. Hm. I think they... just swung a baseball bat or a crowbar or something of the sort at Killer. Didn't connect, though. Killer got behind them and hit them again. Scared is pushing out anger. Killer is more annoyed than anything else. A little hopeful for some reason.

This basic pattern plays out for call it two more minutes before Killer loses her patience, does something to scare the bejeezus out of her foe, and violence ensues. She doesn't kill him, though. Just knocks him down again, gets angry. Low-grade anger, not any of the murder-rage I've come to associate with her signature. Ah, the fella is resigned now, giving in. Metaphorically showing their belly or baring their throat. Whatever it is, it satisfies Killer but leaves her disappointed. Hm. Got what she wanted, but it wasn't what she expected? Not sure.

Lesse... Fury is asleep, over where I thought their home was, so that was probably accurate. Seems to be living with three other people, but given Fury is a schoolmate of Killer's that's not surprising. Bitch is asleep too, and she's surrounded by dogs. They stay in a boundary, though, the ones that are awake and bouncing about. Some kind of building? Fencing? It would have to somehow be subtle for her to not have been run down. She doesn't even have a secret identity. Hm. Food for thought, maybe a place to check out later. Jean-Paul is asleep. Nervous Nelly is not asleep, but is sitting in one place. Too active to just be watching TV, I'm pretty sure. On a computer? Hm. Nervous Nelly is tired, anyway. And alone, I'm pretty sure. What's with the Jean-Pals? Are they all teens living alone? Whatever. ConfidenceMcAngry is asleep, probably, and I'm guessing having a nightmare. Killer's probably-a-parent is asleep. Fury's phone pal is crying in their sleep, at a guess. Oni Lee is awake, unmoving. I... really hope he actually needs sleep. He's creepy enough as-is, he doesn't need to be creepier. Probably-Lung is skulking around somewhere -and it is skulking if his feelings are anything to go by, some wounded pride in there too, makes me think I've got it right- along with a few nervous-but-bored-but-ready-for-a-fight people who I'm guessing are Lung minions.

Fury's roof-pal is asleep. Pretty sure they're sharing a home with some people.

I rub at my face, still feeling tired, but not able to sleep. Should I go out, find something to do? Maybe find someone to do, relax a little. Ah, but that's riskier now, and I don't need to play for Daddy.

... how do I relax, if not that?

I chew on my lip and lean back against the headboard, thinking. I almost completely stopped watching television after I triggered. Electronic games were better, so long as I was careful to vet for overly human-focused games, but I never got into them the way some of the fam did. (Say, Jean-Paul) Board games were right out, bar the occasional visit with someone who wasn't fam and who offered, for whatever reason, and they never grabbed me. I read a lot of books -an
ironic amount of psychology and sociology, thanks Aunt Pam- but really it was comics that I actually liked. I could look at fake people and not feel sick, but I don't think it was just that. And I could just pick them up and read them when I had a few moments peace, not like a 'real' book, where I had to commit a lot of time I didn't have much of and be willing to stop in the middle and sometimes (Oftentimes) accept that I was going to end up reading Book 4, then Book 1, then Book 7, and never have anything but the faintest idea what happened in between.

... put like that, it might have been mostly circumstantial.

Damn. Drat and damn and drat again.

I never really cared to talk with people. Even before I triggered conversation was a means to an end, not... not social grooming. After I triggered? Not much point. If I want to convince someone of something, I can. I don't need to know what I'm talking about or speak in a persuasive way or anything, I can just claim it and shove around their feelings until they think they decided they agree with what I said for their own reasons, so it's not like debate has any appeal. Not much point in convincing people to believe specific things, either. I don't need to tell Johnny things that help him think blondes with a red stripe in their hair are especially hot so he'll make out with me. I can just hit him with lust until he can't think of anything else. Have to do it carefully if I want to have plausible deniability, yeah, but I don't need conversational skills. Not much point to honing them.

I certainly don't see any point in talking out feelings. Running through my own head, yeah, definitely, can't just point my power at myself and see the strings pulling on my mind, but I don't need catharsis and I don't need to listen to other people. A sounding board isn't much use.

Maybe I should exercise? It makes you feel good all by itself, it doesn't involve other people... not exactly stimulating, not of my mind, but there's an appeal there. I've never really exercised before, not unless you count some of the mad panicked runs after Pauline killed a burglar or whatever. It's not got any connotations of my old life, not really, and I don't need any tools or people. It might help me actually sleep, too.

Pushups aren't hard, right?

--------------------------------------------------

Pushups are hard.
Chin-ups -when I think to use the bar meant for clothes for such- are even harder, but pushups are harder than I'd have expected. Gives me something to do while I 'listen in' to the city, though. I note with some amusement when the Brocktonite Loons wake up, and quite obviously get into a lively multi-directional conversation between the five of them. I also note when Killer comes back from stalking rooftops. I think she's pretending to be asleep for the probably-parent, lying still. More evidence the other person doesn't know about Killer's nightlife.

Uuuuugh exercising is hard. Didn't I hear something about there being a correct way of doing pushups? I should make sure to look that up, later.

Fury wakes up, still tired. Sleep doesn't seem to have given them any relief of any kind, really. I've never gotten good at reading sleeping people -I never saw much point, especially since I'd need to get people to tell me their dreams to have any chance of refining the skill to real accuracy- so I'm not sure if it's some consequence of their power or if they just had bad dreams or if they're behind on sleep or what. Jean-Paul is still asleep, but his teammates are up and about. Bitch is interacting with the ridiculous number of dogs she's got clustered around her, probably getting them fed or something. The other two Jean-pals are going through what's probably their morning routine - something they enjoy but find routine, anyway- but there's little of interest there.

Lung seems to have gone to sleep. I'm sort of surprised he needs sleep, really. The goobers he was interacting with have scattered pretty widely. Hm. Maybe they were his lieutenants, and now they're enacting his will? I'd sort of assumed they were planning on doing something right then and there, but clearly not. Lieutenants makes more sense.

I collapse, panting after a disappointingly small number of pushups. I'm a big enough girl to admit that the sound I produce in response to this is a whine, though I'll never admit it to anyone else. Ever.

Okay, fine. I give myself a few minutes to cool off, and then I get myself some computer time to look into the mysterious art of the exercise.

Yes, there is a 'proper' way to do pushups. It supposedly is actually easier on the body and develops muscle tone faster. I dunno if I care that much about the latter, but the former is reason enough to try. Also, apparently I should've continued with light exercise once I'd pushed myself too far, rather than simply stopping. I don't really follow the explanation, but basically there's bodily toxins or something and winding-down exercise helps move it. Or something. Whatever. I'll give it a shot.

I note with a tinge of amusement that 'results' shouldn't really be expected for months. It's a damn good thing I'm just trying to find a way to pass downtime, then. Results are a bonus, not the goal. I'm remembering, from Before, how losing weight and so on was all over the commercials etc etc,
so there's some schadenfreude there just imagining how many people must find that to be a crushing disappointment to learn.

*Heh.*

Then I lose interest and cede the computer to someone who's been waiting for like two minutes and is already glaring at his watch. Dude pretty obviously thinks I'm giving in to his peer pressure, self-satisfied as fuck, so I very deliberately make eye contact, raise an eyebrow, and hit him with a stab of fear on my way out.

I fight down the temptation to stick around and watch him as he tries to figure out why a slip of a girl could scare him so on eye contact alone. It'd be funny to watch the expressions he makes, but if I really care I can just try to parse his feelings in the background while I'm focused on other stuff. And really, I don't care. It's the principle of the thing. *I'm* the big dog. *You* are some pansy unpowered person. *Fear me.*

It's like respect, but easy.

The smell of food reminds me that *oh yeah, hotel breakfasts* and I go to do that. Wasn't sure what to do next anyway, that works.

Over the course of breakfast, Killer is visited by their live-in person and there's some complicated dance of guilt, shame, and fear that goes on in Killer's housemate. Killer is frustrated, bored, and deliberately fighting down anger when it bubbles up. Hm. Now I wish I'd paid closer attention to their earlier interactions. The heck kind of relationship is that? It's like watching one of the fam screwing up the courage to talk to Pauline, but that's ridiculous. If Killer is hiding her powers and nightlife from the dude, then it makes no sense for the dude to be scared of her.

Hm. Maybe he's not scared of *her.* There's been boys and girls who were scared to talk to me not because they were scared of *me* -more fool them, heh- but because they were scared of being rejected by me, or mocked by me, or in some of the girls' cases outed by me -hehehehe- or whatever. So maybe Killer's housedude is afraid of... I dunno, screwing up in talking with her? Not sure. Gotta be missing something. Need to see them in action, in person, hear the words and watch the body language. Hm. Does Killer have friends? The school is damn hostile, but maybe she has a friend outside of school. That hasn't visited her in the entire time I've been here. Or called her by cell phone the entire ti- no actually it *is* possible she has a phone-friend who's outside the city. I wouldn't necessarily have noticed the difference between, say, reading an engaging book and talking with someone in France.
Still. I'm skeptical she's got friends, and anyway I can't try to get one of her friends wrapped around my finger as an in for visiting them in person regardless of whether it's because she has none or because they live in Antarctica.

Damn. There goes that option.

Okay, back to Fury. Having breakfast with their family, I'm thinking. Best guess. It's not a great family, if I'm honest. Not a chance in hell of competing with my family for awfulness, of course, but it's pretty clear there's a lot of resentment all-around. (Huh. Looks like the companionable interaction last night was a neighbor or something) There's like one pair of people who seem to get along basically okay, if I'm reading this interaction right, and the pair doesn't include Fury his or herself. If I had to come up with a theory on the spot or be shot in the head, I'd guess the parents weren't ready to have kids and resent the kids and the kids resent them back for being shit parents. 'course, there's plenty of other possibilities, but they remind me of the cases I know were exactly that. Not terribly important overall, because I'm not interested in Fury except inasmuch as they connect to Killer and possibly are a Ward, so I'm fine with not working out a solid theory. I can just poke them with it if I meet them and need to improvise, anyway.

Bitch is... walking three dogs now? Well, walking with three dogs anyway. Same three as last night, I note. She doesn't feel all that purposeful to me, and she's not heading to Jean-Paul's location, which is where the bunch of them all met up before so I'm guessing he's sleeping in a hideout or something. Which makes sense, because he'd have a harder time than me trying to get legitimate housing without being found by the PRT. Then again, how have they not found him already aaaaargh.

Okay no calm. Calm.

I down my orange juice like it's a shot glass. It isn't, but it tricks the dumb piece of meat in my skull into thinking I'm relaxing at a bar so it helps some anyway. Associative manipulation! God, this would be easier if I could just point my power at myself. Oh well. At least I'm relatively stable. I mean, for someone who comes from such an awful, awful home situation, I'm pretty damn fine. So it's not that big a deal. Disappointing, but not that big a deal.

Jean-Paul's other associates are still being boring. Good to know. Not.

Oh right Cavedude. I'd forgotten about him. He's actually not in his cave right now. Hell, he's not that far from Killer. Significant? Eh, probably not, but something to keep in mind. Still not sure what to make of him. I make a mental note to keep an eye on him in the back of my skull. Something weird is going on there.
Fury's last-night-buddy has... just been woken up. Hm. It really is that someone woke them up. Another Ward, then? Though I didn't pay attention to how many of the fucking Nazis were kids so. Yeah. They're a kid anyway, which is slightly suggestive about the possibility that Fury is a Ward. Interesting, very interesting. Hm. Now that I think about it, Killer's not exactly a girl 'of color', so Fury tormenting her while being an E88 thug is... not impossible or necessarily all that implausible 'race traitor' etc etc- but it would be a little odd. Then again, a Ward who is failing at being an upstanding member of socie-

Pfffff. Can't keep a straight face.

So okay let's tentatively go with Fury and his or her buddy are Wards. Can I use that? Maybe pin down who Fury is, which Ward they are, bring the info to Killer, leverage that into I feel so much gratitude to you, Mistress Cherie -no wait I need a name uuuuh let's go with Cherish I like the sound of that- Mistress Cherish, I am eager to be pointed at whatever foul nemesis you want dead. And then let's make out sitting on Jean-Paul's corpse, if that pleases you.

Yeah, that sounds like it has all the makings of a good plan I can get behind.

... so yeah I need to establish beyond a shadow of a doubt that Fury is a Ward. Maybe get picture proof? That'd be tricky. And also hinges on me being right, let's not get ahead of ourselves girl. And also it'd be dangerous, especially depending on what Fury can actually do. Fury's willing to vent their frustrations on the citizens of Brockton Bay -gang members, maybe?- and now that I think about it the shifty attitude would make sense if Fury is trying to hide their less-than-noble activities from their goody-two-shoes bosses. So... Fury may well be willing to kill me to keep their secrets. Definitely need to be careful of any plan involving risking Fury's fury.

So: itinerary for the day. Get line of sight on Fury at the school. Then work out which Ward Fury is. Uh. Maybe I should actually look that up? Eeeeh. I can spot Fury and then do research.

---------------------------

I consider trying to turn this go-round into a jogging trip, both because exercise why not and because it would actually be a damn good cover story in its own right, but then I realize I have like absolutely nothing appropriate for jogging. Huh. Something to think on. Is that a commentary on me, or is it a commentary on how Daddy shaped me? 'cause if it's the latter, fuck yeah let's exercise the hell out of spiting Daddy. Impulse is to think it's the latter and shudder, because so far even though exercise is hard I'm not actually disliking it. Kind of suggests my failure to get into that scene isn't so much me-me. But let's not jump to conclusions! Instead, we shall study our own behavior in future, and also use royal pronouns at random because fuck yeah I deserve it. Damn. Broke the streak.
Oh well.

I do decide to just walk the distance instead of catching a bus, 'cause walking is apparently not anything you need particular clothes for unless the weather is bad somehow, and it's not like I'm in that much of a hurry or anything. I mean, I want Jean-Paul dead and screaming in agony yesterday, but my current plan has no chance of bearing fruit before the end of the day regardless. Might as well get the walking in.

As it happens I'm able to cope with the walk well enough. My time in the fam was walk-friendly for various reasons, so I guess that makes sense, but somehow I was expecting to be attractively sweaty and sexily panting by the time I got to the school. Nah, my armpits smell some is all. Totally disappointing. The media has lied to me. Lied, I say!

God, I think I'm a bit unhinged. Need to watch that. Not sure how to address it, but I really don't need to get into a bad headspace and then start making decisions in it. I can at least pay attention and just pass time not getting myself into trouble if I get bad enough. So far I'm just drifting into goofiness periodically, and that's not particularly bad, but if it gets worse...

Anyway.

The school. I debate actually stalking the halls to spot Fury that way, but that's way too risky. I also got here too late to catch them getting off the bus -though it would've been risky anyway as Fury and Killer were on the same bus- so that plan is out. Hm. Getting some binoculars and spying on Fury that way seems likely to be a bit too attention-grabbing.

Hmmm.

Ugh.

I end up hanging out in the general vicinity of the school for a while with no particular plan, dithering, and leaving the area around noon to make myself eat lunch at a fast-food place. Killer pops up onto the rooftop, which I didn't realize was what she was doing but is totally what she was doing the previous lunches. Seems odd to me. She's hiding from these people instead of striking them down and laughing maniacally, but she's doing so in a way that's a big hint to the fact that she's a parahuman if anybody notices her. Seems inconsistent to me. Is she one of those people who deliberately is setting themselves up for failure? Something to keep in mind.
Eventually luck goes my way -Fury and Killer go out to do sports-y shit. Jogging or something I dunno. Gives me a convenient excuse to walk nearby and be able to see them without looking suspicious at all. So I do so.

Thought the first: *if she's an E88 thug, I will buy a hat so I can eat it.*

Yeah, that Ward theory is looking waaaaay more likely now. I mean it's *possible* her power lets her hide her skin color and she's, I dunno, got tons of self-loathing going on or gets off on non-poetic irony or something, but it's a pretty outlandish scenario. Ward makes a lot more sense.

Speaking of, her buddy from last night is in a very different part of town surrounded by people who are much less unhappy. Not sure what to make of that. Should maybe look into that. Probably another school. Wouldn't it make more sense to keep all the Wards in one defensible school, though? Then again, this whole thing of sending the Wards to regular school rather than conscripting them *completely* as child soldiers reeks of impractical decision making anyway so I guess I shouldn't *really* be surprised. Hm. Wasn't there a... Young Protectors? Eh. Close enough. Pretty sure there's an organization that's supposed to protect the Wards from the Big Bad Scary Government.

Ah, the wonders of bureaucracy. Where the right hand wants to make a goddamn sandwich and the left hand proceeds to stab it in its goddamn palm because you can't just make a sandwich, you've gotta fill out paperwork first and do it according to federal guidelines and if you mess up at any point you've gotta start over from the beginning. And then get stabbed again because you didn't ask for permission to start over before starting over.

(Seriously Daddy, people would've *thanked* you for removing the stupidity from their lives, why couldn't you have had just a *tiny smidge* of ambition?)

So okay *Plan: bait Killer with Fury's identity* is looking pretty damn solid.

As such, I bail and go to check out Cavedude's place, because if today goes like the previous days we're still *two hours* from school letting out and I am so goddamn bored.

------------------------------------

I cannot find Cavedude's cave.
I mean, I know exactly where it is, but it's weird. The building above the magical cave of magicalness has no entry to the cave that I can tell - no one passes between the two places at all - and the building itself is just a high-rise office building with a big sign saying FORTRESS CONSTRUCTION. Sounds vaguely familiar, but it's not coming to me and I don't care. I'm not sure the people in the building have any idea what's directly underneath them, so it probably doesn't matter.

I circle around the area while trying to not look like I'm circling around the area, trying to see if I can find an obvious-to-me secret entrance to the cave, but nothing really leaps out at me. And there's certainly not any obvious This Is An Underground Thingy entryways of the non-secret sort. So I'm a bit stumped at what the hell is going on here. Apparently the place is meant to be secret, definitely. And is pretty damn competent at being secret, somehow. What is this, some kind of backup Protectorate HQ? Then why the secrecy?...

Cavedude, meanwhile, left the place at some earlier point. Since my emotion sensing doesn't actually let me see terrain directly, I have only a vague idea of the area he had to have passed through to do so. Right now he's somewhere else. Hm. Actually, is that the same area Fury and Fury's Buddy were in last night? Hmmm.

I decide to grab a bus, partly because one is like a minute away anyway and will cycle to near my destination in like twenty minutes, and partly because I want to see where Cavedude is before he leaves it. I wanna know. This suspicion is worth checking.

Thankfully, Cavedude doesn't move away from whatever boring task that demands he sit still he's doing. He pretty clearly has no particular fondness for said task, but he's also patient about it. He's not chomping at the bit, impatient to get away from it. I get the vibe that he's somehow getting something done he cares about at the same time he's doing whatever he's currently doing. An aspiring writer, working out plots for their book in their head while doing their day job? Doesn't explain what his cave is about...

I put that line of thought on hold while the bus drives me to nearby Cavedude's current location. Instead I focus back onto the other people I'm monitor- hey! What's Fury's buddy doing? They were at what was almost certainly another school, and now they're not... wait. Pretty much everyone is gone from what I'm almost certain is Fury's buddy's school. What? Fury's own school hasn't let out, I can tell. Okay, I know 'half-days' are a thing... maybe the buddy's school is just having one for some reason. Uh. Staff retraining, maybe? Is that a thing schools do? Not sure. I'll need to keep an eye on that, too.

... hm. Watching Fury's buddy, they might be on course to the same area I'm checking out. They're certainly not going to where they slept the night before. Interesting.
Jean-Paul finally fucking woke up a few minutes back. Jeez. Lazybones much? Bitch has been... walking around town. Isn't her identity public? Odd. We're well into normie hours, shouldn't that be risky as heck for her? Though. She does seem to be skulking around a pretty shitty part of town right now, going by the vibe of people in the area. She's on a mission, too. Not a clue what the mission is, but she's focused. And angry, but that hasn't been particularly unusual for her so far so whatever. The other two... I dunno. I think one of them might be grocery shopping. The other is having a lot of fun doing something that involves, I'm pretty sure, schadenfreude. I'm guessing trolling people via the internet, personally. Man. Jean-Paul's crew is so lame.

Ugh. Don't let their lameness make ya cocky, girl. Grue is still potentially scary, and I do need somebody to handle Jean-Paul for me. And being boring as fuck isn't the same thing as being pathetic in a fight. Not remotely. (See: Daddy)

Finally the bus arrives at my destination. Right at, it turns out, as the building has a pretty large lawn all to itself, which threw off my guesstimates. Very odd, why would the friggin' PRT need a giant-ass lawn?

Now I'm a bit confused though. Aren't the Wards tiny Protectorate people? (My eyes drift to the Protectorate HQ out in the ocean. Brockton Bay's Protectorate HQ is a bit infamous, really) I shouldn't be seeing Wards at the PRT HQ, should I? I mean, yeah, they're both under the same umbrella... but that still doesn't seem right.

Oh, and Cavedude is somewhere in the PRT HQ. So I guess his cave is some official PRT thingy. A backup HQ, if the main one is compromised? The real HQ, with the building in front of me being a giant decoy? Oh! Maybe the cave is a secret supervillain prison they don't let anybody know about so nobody can break the villains out! Like the Birdcage, but for people who aren't quite hated enough that sending them to the Birdcage will be considered natural and acceptable.

Yeah, that makes sense. I guess Cavedude is the warden, then? And needs to look like a normal PRT goober who goes to his normal PRT job to draw suspicion away from the mini-Birdcage, or something.

Interesting. I'll need to pay closer attention to the cave. It didn't read like a prison to me, but I've not paid that close attention to prisons that have been in my radius before, so maybe I'm just ignorant. Or it could be weird because it's a weird prison. Or both!

... though this raises questions about Cavedude's relationship to Grue or Tattletale. Hm. Maybe the Undersiders are a catspaw for the PRT? Or maybe Cavedude is just corrupt. Merits further investigation.
A tour bus pulls up while I'm waiting, and a bunch of hideously-dressed people pile out and make their way directly to the PRT building. Uh. The paramilitary organization for fighting superhumanly powerful criminals, said paramilitary organization's top agents being, themselves, secretive as fuck... does tour groups?

I give myself thirty seconds to reboot.

...

Okay, done. I mean, what the fuck, but moving on.

On impulse, I insinuate myself into the back of the group. I'm sort of vaguely disappointed when I'm given a 'tour pass' at the door with absolutely no emotional massaging necessary, just like all the idiots in front of me, rather than being ejected as not part of the pre-screened group, but I guess that's not really surprising. If you're doing fucking tour groups, how highly can you be valuing security, am I right?

I absentmindedly make mental notes of the emotional signatures of all the PRT employees I see as we go along, ignoring the tour guide's idiotic jabber. Wait. Yes, Fury's buddy has entered the building, from some other entrance. Not the main entrance. Confirmation that Fury's buddy is an employee? Hm. Now that I think about it, maybe I've been coming at this from completely the wrong direction. Maybe Fury and Braintwister -because mother of god does it do horrible things to my head when Braintwister does their thing- are actually outside agents trying to, I dunno, steal from the PRT? Worth considering.

Yadda yadda etc etc bored bored so fucking bore-

Wait, did the tour guide just say we'll get to see the Wards? Yes, yes she did just say that. Ooookay. I could've sworn the Wards were attached to the Protectorate directly. Puzzling. Takes me back to Fury and Braintwister probably being Wards, though. Not that it's damning or anything, but it does undermine the thing that had me doubting the Ward theory in the first place. So yeah. Little more interested. Impatient, though, because I do not give a fuck about how Armsmaster used to have a fancy-pants gear as his symbol or any of the other fucking bullshit she's jabbering about, and I'm apparently going to sit through like twenty more minutes of this shit before we get to see the Wards. And I'm not willing to twist anyone under these conditions. I mean, this is really a moderate risk as-is, if the Canadian PRT ever IDed me without me realizing it, which is totally possible. I don't need to add more dumb risk to an already-risky decision.
OH GOD THIS IS SO FUCKING BORING HOW HAVE THESE LOSERS NOT COLLECTIV-
-oh right they're thrilled to be here. Thanks power. Thanks for bursting my self-righteous
indignation.

sigh

Finally finally finally we get to see the Wards. Through some kind of glass that I would bet
money is super-bulletproof, naturally. There's like three kids there right now, and they wave
politely at us. The guide informs us that they are Aegis (Okay, now I've got a costume to go with
that name), Clockblocker (snrk), and Vista. Vista is Braintwister, which means it's already time for
me to retire that nickname. Sadface.jpeg. Goodnight sweet prince, we hardly knew ye.

Anyway.

Confirmation that Fury's buddy was a Ward. Pretty damn close to confirmation that Fury is a
Ward.

The guide indicates that people can toss out questions and she can ask the Wards them. Uuuh.
Okay. I immediately discard the possibility of asking a question myself. Don't be memorable.
Asking questions makes you memorable, even if it's expected. I make a point of listening in to the
other questions...

... until after I've heard the first four.

Goddammit. These are such inane, stupid questions. I thought people would be asking about, like,
power details, or 'scariest moments' -which would let me learn something about local capes-
or something. No, people are asking shit like, "What's your favorite food, Aegis." (Admittedly, it's
mildly informative that he can apparently eat basically anything, but it's not like I was considering
poisoning him or something anyway) LAME. SO LAME.

Still. I've learned some important, interesting stuff on this trip. Now I just need to get the dirt on
Fury such that Killer will believe me with minimal manipulation, and then leverage that gratitude
into murdering Jean-Paul, and then...

... hm. Uh. God, I dunno.
Well, whatever. It's okay I don't have a big plan (just like Daddy SHUT UP SHUT UP) for the moment. (SEE IT'S DIFFERENT)

... okay maybe it isn't that okay.

Fuck.

I go to my hotel room, tired and moody. I remember I haven't had dinner, then decide fuckit I'm too tired and I don't want to pay and I don't want to fuck up a shenanigans order so I'm just going to bed. I'll sort out a plan in the morning.

... hopefully.
Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 3.1.
Comparing the two directly adds a lot to the experience.

Cold Shoulder.

I do not wake up with a big-picture plan magically lined up, conjured from the aether of my dreams.

What I do have is a short-term plan: let's feel out Fury in person.

It's something to do while I think, anyway.

-----------------------------------

Funny thing: I cut through an alleyway on my way to Fury, impatient, and a dude tries to confront me with a knife. Silly boy. I put the fear of me into him and make him hand over the knife. It's a nice, big knife with a serrated edge, and I stuff it into my purse because why not. I could use a weapon. I can't get by entirely on good looks and mastering, and Daddy isn't around to object anymore.

Then I say, "Boo," and jam the guy with more fear and laugh when he goes running.

Okay, a bit flagrant of me... but I need a boost, okay? This whole existential dread thing is a bit of a downer. Teeny bit. Subtlety and gibbering madly, or lack of subtlety and being fucking awesome? Easy choice.

Fortunately, nobody aside from the poor ganger himself seem to have noticed that a big Asian man with badass tattoos just got robbed by pointing a knife at a helpless white waif. So I get to make
my way unruffled to Fury's house. Well. Apartment, same dif.

I talk my way in smoothly. The people find me inexplicably likable and my jokes strangely funny. That has nothing to do with my power how dare you suggest otherwise imaginary audience.

But seriously, this is ballsy and a bad plan but I'm doing it anyway because I don't really expect to come back. If, later in the day, they realize that having a strange white girl come in and be welcomed effortlessly is fucking weird and evidence of Master influence, they'll, what, up their security? Good for them. Have fun spending money on shit that won't help because I'm gone already.

There is a reason I'm doing this though, don't worry imaginary audience. It lets me feel out Fury (Actual name: Sophia. Whatever) and her silly family by leading them with questions. Why's Fury so angry? "Dunno."

Huh. Interesting. Not even an off-the-cuff lie? Just a straight admission of ignorance. I mean, this is a wee bit of an artificial situation, but that's still very, very strange. So I ask the mother, instead: "I don't know why that girl does anything. I never did." Angry, frustrated, largely given up on her daughter. This has deep roots. Huh. Curious, I ask if she knows her daughter is a parahuman, and promptly suppress the shock/surprise in everyone that I would ask that. Let's not get derailed people, answer your guest's questions please. The response is... interesting. 'Damn PRT taking over my child's life. They have someone go to school as her 'legal guardian', for shit like parent-teacher meetings, as if that woman is her mother. Makes me sick."

Fury herself is giving me a look, and clearly trying to wrestle loose from just sitting there blithely. I mean, everyone is starting to have this inkling that their feelings aren't right, but Fury is more effective at working around her feelings. Huh. Kind of surprised by that, I was thinking of her as someone being pulled about by her feelings, but apparently not? Or maybe the PRT has trained the girl. Would make sense...

Anyway, I'm wandering way off track here. I mean, it's funny just lurching into their house and asking them questions like I belong and making them feel like I do while they're actually going 'wait a second', but the whole point here is that I want to dig the dirt up on Fury.

So, pointblank: "Why are you tormenting a girl at your school, anyway?"

Oh, dull non-surprise from the mom. And the dad. (Wait, he doesn't look anything like Fury or the other kid. Step-dad?) Have to tamp down Fury's fury, she doesn't like being outed. Silly girl, your family may not have known, specifically, but they find it totally in-character for you. Fury goes
mulish, and I start massaging their emotions in the general direction of compliance buuuut... nope, nothin' doing'. Wow, the PRT must have some pretty darn good training. Okay, fine, Twenty Questions time.

"She the wrong skin color?" No, no reaction. "She steal your boyfriend?" Indignant and offended, but like the idea is an insult. Okay, fair enough, Killer isn't much of a looker, and Fury totes is. "Let other people know you're a thug?" Minor offense, but I think she's more irritated by how I'm framing it than by the accusation itself. No suggestion it's the issue. "Do better than you at school?" Little reaction. Not much. Okay, so probably a factor, but not really her primary motive. More an icing on the cake sort of issue. "Have more friends than you?" She laughs. Out loud and everything, so hard she's wheezing after thirty seconds or so. But. There was a reaction to the word friends. Hm. "So something about friends. She steal one of your friends?" There's aggravation at the first part, like she's mad I picked it out. So yeah, I'm onto something. The second part gets an eyeroll. She's also starting to eye her fork idly -no, none of that: apathy. No calmly contemplating mutilating me, plz and thx.

Hmmmm. Friends. Definitely something about friends. "She friends with someone you want to be friends with?" Oooh, closer. Not right, I think, but she's tensing up when I'm not clamping down on that, like she's worried I'll get it right. Awww, how sweet! She's worried about someone else. I didn't think she had it in her, really. "You wanna protect one of your friends from her?"

There. That got a response.

Interesting. Of course, that's still plenty ambiguous. Does Fury know Killer is a parahuman? Does Fury know Killer is a killer? I don't think the latter, at least, and I'd rather not let Fury know if she doesn't already know the former. I'm trying to get closer to Killer here, not give an enemy of hers a heads-up on critical information. Hmmm.

"Physical danger?" Not an actual laugh this time, but still laughable. "Emotional danger?" Pffft. I think Fury thinks 'emotional harm' is something losers admit to. "Danger to how she thinks?" There we go. That makes more sense, really. Fury wants control over this friend of hers? Probably. So she thinks Killer might undermine her friend. Switch tracks. "Is the friend that other civilian who knows you're a parahuman?" Ha ha bingo. Ooooh, and her family didn't know about that part! Yeah, I'm such a homewrecker, it's beautiful, right? It's going to be soooo funny listening in to the drama after I'm gone.

All right. So. Fury has a friend she thinks Killer might influence. She's tormenting Killer to avoid that scenario. Hmmm. Explains Killer's isolation -if she can get at the civvie friend indirectly, like her words and values spreading to the rest of the school and thereby influencing civvie friend, then what's the point, right? Fury's more on the ball than I thought, +1 respect points. Hmmm. If I recall correctly, civvie friend was also involved in tormenting Killer. So it's not just about isolating civvie friend from Killer. It's about... teaching... or modeling?... or perhaps
about refuting Killer's mindset? This is heavy, man, I was just expecting to find out Killer is a bitch or a boyfriend stealer or something. Base, pure motives. This is an ideological war. Hell, +1 respect points again, Fury, I didn't think you were one to give a fuck about this abstract bullshit.

Though I'm not sure how useful it is to me. I rather suspect being able to tell Killer that Fury is that thar Ward over there is a lot more useful, in terms of getting me an 'in' to Killer believing she likes me and wants to hang out with me for her own reasons. Disappointing.

Oh well. At least the chaos will be fun to hear unfold.

I sit up, pushing my chair back and out. "Thank you for your time, family of people I don't actually care about! Toodles!"

And then off I go!

I go back to the hotel to think, and draw a bubble bath. Because yeah this hotel has bubble bath soap. No idea why, whatever. 'tis cool.

Once Fury and her family left my grip, they got into a big, raging fight. I don't care enough to untangle it and guess at what it's about. I dropped multiple bombs, not even counting how they might blame her for the fact that I showed up on the logic that she's a parahuman, I'm (obviously) a parahuman, ergo it must somehow be her fault. Plus they weren't exactly a happy family before I showed up. They might be rehashing an argument they've had fifty times in the last thirty days.

Eventually Fury stalks off in a fury -heh- and... doesn't go to school. Hm? No, it's a school day, so that's not why?... oh, there she goes roof-hopping. Going to crack some skulls, vent some steam? Feelings don't fit, I'm not hearing hymns of battle here. Just determination and fear. Not much fear. Oh, and anger. Fear makes her angry, something to keep in mind. I guess that explains the violence, if being backed into a corner just makes her madder.

Aaaah. I'm a dummy, of course she'd go straight to the PRT. They don't believe her initially, she gets bumped up to... feels like the boss of the place. Definitely someone of at least modest importance. Still not believed. Gets mad. Says... something... that shocks the hell out of the person, though I suspect they keep it off their face. Hm. They still don't believe Fury, not really, but they're acting on Fury's whatever.
Things take long enough to unspool after that I end up focusing on the Jean-pals, cavedude, etc. It's not very interesting. Wait wait wait. One of the Jean-pals is... talking to cavedude? Wait a second, didn't I establish that cavedude was a Legit PRT Person? What the hell, man? Oh man, how did I not put this together before! Hmm. Little Jean, have you turned over a leaf? Are you and your pals actually secretly working for the law? What a tweest! I am slain by this shocking revelation! Okay not really I have no idea what the fuck, but it's definitely interesting. Corrupt PRT dude playing both sides of the game? Faux-criminals working for a legitimate handler, trying to be a sting operation? Something else entirely? It's all interesting, whatever it is.

Then my attention swings back to Fury and the PRT, because now? Now there's guards on her home, and a light cordon around the school. I think they're in plainclothes, though, because nobody seems to really be reacting to them. Huh. Fury must've let them know about me, and is... worried for her safety? No no no, don't be silly Cherie. Fury doesn't care about herself. She cares about...

... yes, yes she cares about civvie-pal. She has cornered civvie-pal at the school. Intense conversation, civvie-pal is nervous, eager to prove theirselves, ready to do whatever Fury wants I think. Wow, Fury, lemme give you Master 1 'cause I don't think you've got a parahuman ability to explain how devoted civvie-pal is to you. Interesting.

Even more interesting? Killer's tormentors back off.

Hmm. Methinks Fury didn't let the PRT know about her own misbehavior and is now being on her best behavior.

Killer doesn't seem to notice, initially. When she does notice, she gets antsy. Odd. I'd have expected relief. Hmm. Missing something here.

I get bored, go for lunch, have a goddamn heart attack when it looks like Oni Lee is coming my way via rooftop, but then he angles away and I'm good, and then re-focus on Fury and company when school lets out.

Killer is fucking tense, like she expects to be jumped any second now. Wow, lady, calm down. Fury is... also tense, but different. Oh. Oooh. She hasn't gotten her violence fix today, hasn't she? And... she goes on patrol like a good little Ward... but this time? She's accompanied by two people who came from the Rig. And so she doesn't get to have a fight. She has to fake like she doesn't want to stab or punch people, alllll the time.
Pffffhaahahaha. Oh my god this is great. I just wanted information! I wasn't trying to fuck her over, but now she's so paranoid she's fucking herself over! You go girl, go let those restrictive assholes who won't let you get your violence on know about how a big scary Master totally ninjad into your home and did absolutely nothing at all to you.

Hmm. Actually, I seem to recall... something about Master/Changer protocols? Something like that. On TV, from Before. Isn't she supposed to be isolated just in case my icky Master cooties are still all over her?

Meh, whatever.

...

Ugh. Now what? Checking out Fury was a bust, really.

...

New plan: let's just go talk to Killer.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I can't really risk confronting Killer at her school. It's a shitty plan in the first place, but now the place has plainclothes PRT goobers around it every day, all day. Hell, even the Protectorate Pals are swinging by the place a little more regularly! I don't really want to jump her in her home, because I suspect she'd find that threatening as shit. I'm trying to generate a positive first impression here, right? Right. So screw that idea.

That leaves me two options:

Confront her somewhere between school and home, in her civilian guise. Same basic problem as confronting her at home, really, just a bit less urgently threatening.

Or! I can run her down in cape mode. She keeps running around at night, doing... whatever it is she does. That'll be a lot less threatening, and I can be all, "Thank you for killing my Daddy you big
hunky-" errr wait um "-you wonderful, beautiful lady of heroism! Allow me to shower you in gratitude which may or may not be perverse in nature depending on if you find that hot or not and will you please kill my asshole brother for me?" because it's *totally logical* for me to be grateful to the cape, and... I'll find some way to elegantly sneak in that I already know where she lives and know probably more about her current life than *she* does.

Unfortunately this means I'm going to have to start sleeping days so I can keep up with her at night... pain in the *ass*.

------------------------------------------------------------------

Naturally, it takes like a week to run her down successfully. Seriously. A week. Fuck my life.

*Killer is ridiculous*. She bops about, occasionally shakes down some unfortunate goober, and goes zipping off elsewhere with random changes in direction I get *no warning on at all*. I can't keep up with her and I can't cut her off. I'm almost tempted to steal a goddamn motorcycle, except I don't think it would *help* with the real problem. Like, okay, maybe on the second night I would've caught up to her if I had a cycle, *maybe*, assuming the sound of it coming didn't run her off, but mostly I just have no way of predicting which way she'll go and she's *faster than a car* when she wants to be!

aaaaaaa

On the plus side, it occurs to me I really ought to like... have some cell phones. A burner phone to give to her, if she can't call me from her own home or doesn't have a cell phone of her own -I've never sensed her seeming to be on a cell phone- and a cell phone for me, so we can call each other. 'cause I'm not exactly moving in with her, and ideally I'll be directing her toward Jean-Paul from way, waaaay out of his reach. So the delay giving me time to think was worth *something*.

Finally she jumps a dude who was threatening another person -some fairly intense shit going on there, the person Killer rescued was fearing something worse than losing their wallet- when I happen to only be a couple of blocks away. I mean, I've basically resigned myself to not catching up... but she lingers. Well. Not *lingers*, but doesn't go jumping back up to the *goddamn* rooftops. Wanders off to... talk to someone on a cell phone? *Maybe?* Whatever the case, my heart rate goes up, my palms go sweaty -some part of me is convinced *I'm going to make it tonight*!

Shut *up* body, stop that.
I switch over to a jog, nonetheless, idly working on shunting aside people. Same principle as the pizzaboy: people coming our way get nervous, edgy, whatever, and they feel better as they get further away. Doing this to a large number of people is a pain... but we're in a kind of shitty part of town and it's late at night -have I mentioned how tired I am fuck this seriously quit making me work for this Killer- so I don't need to do too much juggling. It's a distraction, but not much of one except when ASSHOLES LIKE THIS ONE PIECE OF SHIT are being particularly stubborn, demanding more personal attention on my part.

I slow to a more normal walk and try to tune Killer so she'll hold still. Be cool, Cherie. I'm walking in like a badass who went straight from Toronto to the Bay and tracked Killer down easily and is just smoooothly handling this like it ain't no thang. Killer will be so impressed she'll fall all over herself in her hurry to please me! Hell yeah! You go girl!

"Heya, Killer."

Killer panics and throws herself behind a car.

...

Shit.

Not sure what Killer is thinking. She seems pretty analytical? Whatever. Still that undertone of panic. Let's do something about it.

"Jeez girl-" Minor confusion. Um. Is... Killer... trans? No, never mind. "-I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to thank you." I dose her with calm down girl. Subtly, because I don't need to be setting her off. It.. works, but not as well as I'd like. Her mood is doing that stable thing again, and she's... ping-ponging in a way that makes me think paranoia. I can't get it to stop, either. Hm. Too tied up in her nonemotional thought processes? I'm used to paranoia as an essentially irrational state. Strange. And frustrating. I swear under my breath, frustrated -shit, I think she heard me- aaand she's shifting about and fuck this let's be blunt. "This is about Heartbreaker!"

Killer goes still, in every sense of the word. Okay coo- goddammit she's hyping up for a fight. She must think it's a trap or something. Let's nip that in the bud.

"Will you stop that! I can tell you think this is a trick or a trap or whatever, but it's not!" Instant suspicion. She's going full-on paranoid. "Not a fucking mindreader." Oh my fucking god I hate how
she's reacting, stop that, *stop that I'm not a mind reader.* "It's emotion reading, stop that, stop being so suspicious, I was trapped, I tried leaving the family, but he'd just send some of my brothers after me and I'd be back in Toronto or Bumfuck Nowhere, Canada, wherever he was at the time, barely two weeks later, no matter how far I went or where I went or how well I covered my tracks, and it fucking sucked. I'm **happy he's dead.**"

"Jesus fucking Christ -shit I'm talking to myself." Stoppit Cherie just because she's **annoying** and **resistant** to my manipulations and -oh godfuckingdammit she's **still being suspicious of me.** "I'm here to join your team! God." Hahahaha I love myself. Yeah. Join her team. No, I'm here to turn her into a missile aimed at Jean-Paul and then sit back and eat popcorn afterward while I **watch.** Buut trying to make her like me and trust me. Works better if I pretend to be going for the subordinate-

-whoops she's confused. She doesn't have a team, wasn't planning on one, doesn't think I should think she has one. Misstep! Abort, abort!

"You don't have a team. I... fine, whatever, I still want in. Call it gratitude-" Fuck that's making her **more** suspicious what the **fuck** lady. "-okay don't call it gratitude you paranoid psycho, call it I **like being around interesting people.** I can **help you** with stuff like tracking threats-" Oh thank you baby Jesus she's actually reacting to **that** positively. "-Yes more of that please, seriously. I can track, I can scout, I can forewarn you of oncoming threats, I can do the social infiltration stuff, which honestly I'm pretty sure you're shit at-" A sort of resigned depression. Yeah, she **knows** she's shit at the social stuff. "-yep, called it- and I can do all kinds of **other** stuff too." Hehehe **other** stuff come on-

**seriously lady**

**girl**

I am **hitting on you** stop feeling confused

**ugh**

Oh! She's mulling it over as a posit- **SPIKE OF SUSPICION** OH FOR **FUCK'S SAKE.**

"**Oh for the love of-** Okay. Fine. I'm going to leave now. I'm leaving a burner phone." I lean down and drop it. "It has my cell number on it, it's-" **SPIKE OF SUSPICION** **arrrrrgh** "-fuck. Why are
you making this so fucking hard?"

Wait what was that she reacted to something internal fuck fuck fuck WILD MASS GUESSING TIME. "Oh. Lovely. No, I'm not whatever whorebag I remind you of. Okay? I'm not..." Oh Jesus that's right okay what's her issue um oh I know! She's got no friends at school, so they must've ditched her! "... disloyal?"

Close, no cigar. "No, traitorous. I'm not going to cozy up to you and then kill you, or manipulate you into getting yourself killed, or abandon you. I'm not going to be your best friend-" Wait what. "-Jesus, really? Best Friend equals brooding anger? Huh. I guess that explains something."

No, seriously, what?

"Look. I'm clearly not going to be able to convince you to trust me, but if you don't try, you're never going to get that-" Reaction! I hit some kind of nerve! Thank everything. "-back. That's not how it works, I can tell you know that's not how it works, and I realize trusting a supervillain's daughter when you killed her father sounds, on the face of it, stupid, but trust me when I say I would've killed the bastard myself if that's what it took, if I'd thought for even a moment I could pull it off."

Whew. I think I salvaged it there. Trust! I felt it! Tinged by- for fuck's sake, more skepticism. Trust with skepticism. She finds it plausible, doesn't actually believe it's the truth. Of course it sounds plausible, it's the truth! (Mostly) "Because it is, god!" Seriously, girl, truthiest truth that ever did truth. Mostly. Kinda. Come on, just stop making this hard.

... 

No, she's not stepping out of cover and throwing herself at me. Okay, do I do my trump card? Let her know Fury/Sophia is a Ward? Hmm. No, she's already anticipating manipulation, that's why this is so damn frustrating. I... think I need to step back, give her space, give her time to think on it, and find a new angle if this one doesn't work. Also? Jesus this is exhausting.

Okay. Plan: Back The Fuck Off is a go.

"... all right, I'm leaving the phone here. If you think it has a fucking... I dunno, bomb inside of it or whatever exactly you're thinking, you can just break it, or leave it, or whatever. I'd appreciate it if you actually took it and called me. We can have a conversation without you feeling like danger is
looming, you can ask questions, and maybe then you'll believe me, trust me enough to give this a shot."


"... Okay. Okay." Deep breath. "I'm leaving now. At least consider it, don't dismiss it out of hand, or you'll always be alone." Killer recoils, emotionally, damped down but still fairly strong. "Seriously." Second verse, same as the first.

Then I walk away. I am a cool babe -no pun intended- and she will like me and trust me and-

SPIKE OF LOATHING AND SUSPICION

"FUCK!" Wait I said that out loud again. Stoppit Cherie stop saying words outside your head that belong inside your head.

blargharghle this is the worst.

-----------------------------------------------------------------

Okay. Okay. Relaxing in the bath again, phone at the ready. Killer is... going somewhere. Hits roughly the edge of town... keeps going. Jesus, she's paranoid. What does she think I was going to?... hm. Maybe she thinks I employed more conventional tracking. I mean, I didn't exactly mention I have range enough to comfortably hear the orchestra of her brain from anywhere in the city or from a fair bit beyond it. She... might think I'm a short-ranged empath. Okay. Still a wee bit paranoid.

Finally she comes to a stop, and starts focusing. She's intense, but there's not a lot going on there. The suspicion has died away, replaced by an almost Zen-like laser attention. Hmm. Interesting. She has some weird... not guilt, but a moment where she's got loathing aimed at, I suspect, herself. No idea why. What possible reason could someone have for self-loathing while handling a cell phone? Hm. Maybe she hates herself for actually calling me. Ugh, that's not a useful theory. I give, whatever, she's a bundle of loathing, hatred, and suspicion. That's fine, that's good, I can work with that. Perfect for aiming at Jean-Paul.

Though wow she's fast. Mobile. I sort of figured she was just fast on top of rooftops or something -
that's when she was fast back in Toronto, and it's what she did here- but she's fast even outside of city limits. Hmm.

Then my cell phone starts ringing. I wait. I'll know the instant she's getting impatient, and then I'll answer the phone. Make like I was in the middle of something, like she is absolutely someone I'm prioritizing but also like I have many irons in the fire so she shouldn't just blow me off because I have connections and power.

...

Okay, this is taking longer than I thought it would.

...

There we go!

I hit the button to take the call, and get in the first word. "Hello... Whatever you call yourself." Come on, girl. Tell me your name. It's a great opening, you get to say something badass and clever to impress me and we do verbal sword-fencing and- she's not going for it. She gives no fucks. Dammit. Okay, fine moving on.

"... sorry to keep you waiting, I was in the middle of something, but I'm good for however long you need. Ask whatever you like."

There. I am an important lady who has many things going on but I am totally willing to spare time for you honey. Aaaaaall the time in the world because you're special, you're so special -heheh- don't you feel special?

...

Goddamn is Killer ice cold.

"Why on earth would you come all the way to Brockton Bay out of 'gratitude'?"
Lame. Come on, girl, give me something cool to play against. Fine, whatever, let's keep up the vibe. "My dad is dead and most of my family is locked up or 'reforming' by now."

Your fault I'm here, Killer. Totes your fault. I have all the time in the world because I am a cool lady, but I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. Pick up the subtext.

Nope, nothing. She's just listening calmly. Fine. Keep going.

"I don't have anywhere specific to be, and I didn't want to be a part of their crap anyway. Why not?"

100% truth. Also. Killer, it's your fault. You owe me. It being your fault means you owe me. Feel guilty goddamn you.

Well, she feels something negative, but it's pretty minor. Aaargh.

"And you're here, so I'm here."

IT IS YOUR FAULT 110% KILLER FEEL BAD AND ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU OWE ME.

...

....

You have got to be shitting me. Nothing. Not a fucking thing.

Okay, new angle. I want in on whatever she's doing. She's got to have a plan, right? Normal people aren't aimless fuckwits because their dad is a brainwashing asshole, right?

"Look, if you're not going to buy a noble motive, can I give a different, no less true angle?"
She makes a vague noise. Emotional response is still low. She's listening patiently, but she's not really reacting. Okay, fine, keep going.

"I stuck with my dad for as long as I did partly because the asshole would send family to recapture me, but partly because I thought the man had ambition. Get a cult-slash-family going, produce parahumans he can shape over their entire life for loyalty to him and his goals, conquer, I dunno, Alaska or something. Crown himself king, with the family as his superhuman enforcers. Thing is, he didn't pay any attention to me or any of my siblings, beyond punishing us if we annoyed him, and trying to trigger us. Before you came along, I was starting to suspect he was exactly what he appeared to be: a man granted an incredible power but with no vision."

Okay Killer, if guilt won't motivate you, will greed? Are you power-hungry? You want a minion who believes in your vision? I'm here, come on, be thrilled.

...

Killer, that is not thrillsville. Stop feeling skeeved out and... what is that satisfaction there? You haven't done anything! You're just listening to me talk!

...

You know. She's fast. Lethal. Ventured... pretty far out to kill daddy. Nilbog was a similar distance... eeeh. It's still such a stretch.

Let's stroke her ego and pretend she did it anyway.

"If he was planning something big, world-changing? Something that would get him and his a bigger piece of the pie that is life? I wanted in on that. You? You have vision, I'm thinking. You killed Heartbreaker, and... I'm thinking it was you that hit Ellisburg."

Wait. That's panic.

Wait a goddamn second. She did? Holy fuck, she did. Holy fuck, Killer killed Nilbog, wrecked the city's monsters? Not the Protectorate? They took credit for something she did?
Ohmygod I need this.

Stay calm Cherie. Keep going, paint the image, make her want you. Just... be smooth, Cherie. Be smooth.

"Hit a major villain nobody wants to take on in a suicide mission, decapitating strike. Twice, both in the northeastern North American continent. It's not a string of three, not yet, but it looks like the beginning of a pattern to me."

I am utterly full of shit and yet I'm completely right, going by Killer's reaction.

This is amazing.

"I'm not going to lie to you and pretend I share your presumably altruistic motives. Wouldn't have told you about what I thought my dad's plan was, how I wanted to be part of it, if I was going to fake that, you know?"

Okay, there, satisfy her suspicious suspicions of paranoid suspicion. See? I have a selfish motive, Killer. I won't betray you unexpectedly, because you can trust in my selfishness. It's logical, it's easy, it fits into your paranoia that everyone is an asshole with an angle. See? You know my angle, you know me.

"So I'm thinking you're trying to take down the worst of the worst out there, make the world a better place or something, and I'm not going to tell you that I particularly care about the world being a better place. No, I'm interested because you're going places. Kill the biggest, baddest monsters out there, guys who shape the world by existing? By yourself, no Protectorate backing, no government backing, nothing but you, your power, maybe some friends? That's insane, that's awesome, you'll go down in history as a legend."

Wait. Did... did she not realize?... she's genuinely confused here. She never considered that angle. Did she let the Protectorate take the credit? Killer is a strange lady. Whatever, it's all good. Kill Jean-Paul, twist her around my finger, have fun.

"And if I'm there, hey, they'll remember Cherish too."
Like Cherie, but cooler and more likable.

"Cherish?"

Oh. Right, I guess I maybe should've mentioned that back during the frustration-a-thon.

"Oh. Right. 's what I'm calling myself, now that my dad's dead."

's what I came up with while I was hunting you down you frustrating bitch.

"Oh."

Don't you 'oh' at me!

No, stay calm Cherie. Stay. Calm.

"Though I was actually thinking if you let me aboard I'd probably call myself Beauty or something, try to play off whatever your name is."

Awww. She doesn't like that name. Sad. Whatever, once she's mine it'll be fine.

Okay, come on Killer. Jump at the offer. I'm safe. I'm a selfish glory hog. You apparently don't care about the glory, so it costs you nothing to let me have it. I am a free minion you can actually trust.

...

...

arrgh Plan C.
"If you don't believe that either, which, honestly, I'm not sure I'd buy it if it were me on the line, true as it is... last thing I've got to say on the topic. You keep this up, I'm a part of it? There's going to be rewards. Even if officially we're condemned, there'll be money, power, guys and girls throwing themselves at us." What is that mess of confusion? "-all that good stuff. It's great. That make sense?"

I am in it for the rewards because I am selfish. This makes me trustworthy. Trust me goddamn you.

"Sure, I guess." A pause. "You sound like you've put a lot of thought into this."

What? No! No I have not you little- Christ, she's still expecting this to be a manipulative plan where I'm going to screw her down the line. She thinks I set this all up and plotted it out and prepared a little speech, rather than winging it with my glorious insight into the music of the human mind.

Deflect, deflect. Any good response just reinforces her belief. Off the cuff, sound off the cuff.

"No, really? And here I thought we met through blind chance and I acted on impulse."

Sarcasm is always a good answer. Baffle them with bullshit if you can't give a coherent and intelligent response.

"Point. But most people."

Oh fuck you.

"Really? I'm not 'most people'. My family was a power-enforced harem. My father punished us with superpowers. I was just talking about how I was legit expecting my dad to carve out Alaska as his own kingdom, using an army of brainwashed cape children. It would be a miracle if I was 'most people'."

Grow a goddamn brain, Killer.
"I meant that family is important."

Yeah yeah sure you did. Whatever. Asshole.

"My dad was a supervillain. My siblings were my competition. My dad tried to trigger us." She finds that repellant. No shit. "Yeah, he was an asshole. On the topic of powers-"

SPIKE OF SUSPICION AND PARANOIA

Redirect! Don't ask about her power!

"-I'm surprised you haven't asked about mine yet."

Smoooth Cherie. You are a smooth operator.

"I was sort of assuming it was basically Heartbreaker's, I guess. Weaker or less diverse, or something? I've heard so little about his kids I honestly forgot they existed while I was planning. I would've heard about you if you were literally Heartbreaker all over again, or something like that? I didn't think about it, really."

Okay, fair enough. Ignorant and wrong -how new to this scene is Killer?- but understandable. Let's correct her, extend trust. I show you mine, you show me yours.

"Well, yes and no." She's confused about something. Weird. "I've got a power that's similar to dear old dad's, in the same way an ostrich is similar to an eagle. His power let him directly dictate the way a given person felt emotionally on an arbitrarily selected topic. You already know the main way he used it, and in all honesty the only other vaguely clever thing he ever did with it that I saw was 'blasting' people with intense feelings. Subtlety of a sledgehammer, dear old dad. I sense emotions. Same general idea, different details. I can make people feel pretty much whatever I want them to feel, but it's just a random feeling from 'nowhere'. Heartbreaker could look at someone and make them love him. I can look at someone, pay attention to when they look at me, and have them feel a random surge of affection that they interpret as being caused by looking at me. Do it often enough, and it becomes real."

She feels shock. She's probably putting two and two together. Brainwashing! Hell of a drug. Yes, Killer, I am telling you this. So you know (think) you can protect yourself from it. Trust. Me.

Urrrgh still not working. Coup de grace!

"Not nearly as precise as dear old dad, but then he didn't track people at the outer edge of a city from inside a nice, comfy hotel room. Good trade, I say."

Yeah, Killer is putting two and two together.

Wait shit she's going to maximum paranoia!

"No, I can't manipulate you at this distance. I need line of sight, or something like that, to work that part." goddammit she's still on maximum paranoia "Even the sensing part of my power gets relatively weak this far out."

Filthy blatant lies, that last part is. Maybe if she thinks the song of her mind is being played on a shitty, half-dead radio she'll feel less like I'll be able to control her with a thought.

NOPE.

MAXIMUM PARANOIA.

Why am I doing this to myself?

Okay. Well, that thing she does provides a kind of resistance. Let her know about that, give her some assurance she's actually safe from my devious manipulations. (But not really)

"Whoa, slow down there girl! Yeah, I'm sharing everything, but it's not whatever you're thinking. Thing is, your power messes with mine. I don't know what your power is, so I can't speculate why, but a lot of the time your emotions are very stable, very dim. I was actually trying to calm you down when you were hiding behind the car, get you to listen to me and, I'll freely admit, maybe
get you to associate me with calmness so you'd want to hang, but it wasn't really working. I frankly have no idea why, but you're protected from me somehow. And I could tell, even before you had this little freakout, that you're a nice little goody-two-shoes that can't stand the thought of mind control. So, better to let you know before we partner up, rather than having you realize I'm borderline mind control and instantly murder me because you're mostly immune and not so moral you won't kill Bad Guys. 's part of why I'm interested in you. Not used to that particular combination of morals."

Oi. She's creeped out. Shouldn't have admitted that last bit. Too much honesty, Cherie.

Back up. Give her a new concession, so she'll let me in that inch I need.

"Oh come on, it's... look. I can't do it to you. I'm totally cool with you being head honcho on this. You want me for my tracking ability and stunning and totally natural good looks? Sure, I'll do that. Honest, swear on... I dunno, pretend I'm Christian and swearing on a bible applies. I won't touch that part without prior approval, and I can't cheat and make you give approval."

Slight improvement, not enough. Um. Christ, I'm really reaching here. Okay, um. She's stuck on this emotional manipulation thing, I think? Which I mean really people do that all the time, just without superpowers. Let's point that out.

"Plus, it's not really that different from what everybody does everyday." I can feel her disagreement like a jackhammer. Push on! "No really. You're trying to be, like a real-life Batman-" wait why is she confused by that name are you kidding me Batman is the best "-oh wow. Um. Never mind, point is, you're trying to make people afraid of doing something so terrible you come after them. I can totes help with that, it's not really any different from scaring the shit out of them by being a spooky-ass vigilante."

Yes I-

MAXIMUM PARANOIA

-very calmly set the phone down, speaker blocked. Then I take a deep breath, dunk myself in the bath, and scream.

It helps a little. I throw a shampoo bottle, one of those glass fancy-pants bottles only the rich can afford, and it shatters. Fucking hell.
Killer is sort of faintly puzzled in all this, in a distant way. I hate her. I hate her so much. I'm done with her. Done playing games. Fuckit, just saying whatever.

"Seriously. I can't get to you at this range. I can't do anything to you at all sometimes. A lot of the time, really, and anything I do doesn't stick."

Semi-truth. Does she buy it? No, she's

MAXIMUM PARANOIA

...

Screaming into the water it is.

...

Okay, better.

Seriously, actually, truly done with her. She's *fucked in the head*.

"I think you have an actual problem." Reflexive denial, I give no fucks. "I'm becoming concerned you don't know how to trust people."

Reflexive denial- wait.

Wait.

"Oh thank god." It worked. She's panicking. She's being introspective and she's *panicking*. She can't refute me! She *believes* it! Hahahaha oh my god why did that work that should not have worked. Everything I know is wrong, Killer. You are beautiful and I love how incomprehensible you are- wait. Brain, what are you doing? No, focus. Killer is having a breakdown and totally,
utterly panicking. Can I head that off?

"Look before you go into some spiral of self-loathing or whatever, can we just agree to this team-up thing and figure out the next big bastard to kill?"

No, she's not even paying the slightest attention to me. Fuckit, I'll come back to this later.

"You know what? Never mind, just call me again when you're not having a complete breakdown."

And click goes the phone. Why do phones make that click, anyway? Weird.

Jesus. I'm bathed in sweat, like I just ran a marathon. That was hard. That was... that was the most difficult conversation I've ever had that didn't involve being beaten up or Pauline. (But I repeat myself)

...

I need another bath, and then I need to sleep.

Jesus.
Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 3.2.

Chapter 5: Despair

Hokay! Awake! Aaaand... Killer is back home, doing... something. Not sure what. Lame.

Drat, okay. I got my way eventually, but she's not jumping right at me, thrilled to have a friend. Not sure what she's doing. Give her space, or try to call her?

...

Eeeeh, let's call her.

Okay, phone's ringing. Killer... hasn't noticed. Um. Still ringing. Stiiiill ringing.

Damn. She must not have it on her right now. I guess that means I'm giving her space by default. I mean, the PRT cordon on the school lightened up yesterday some, but they've still got people there. Don't wanna find out they have Master Sensor Bullshit by waltzing in and getting caught. I could try to meet Killer at her house, but... her fam' is still there. Would be a pain to try to talk her into caping alongside me while, you know, trying to avoid letting Daddy Dearest (Or whatever) in on the secret. Trying to get Killer to like and trust me here, not scare her with Creepy Stalker Behavior.

So... Uh. Shit. I think this might be a bust. Damn. Put a lot of effort into this, too.

...

Okay, new plan: sic Lung on Jean-Paul.
Finding Lung is easy, since I've already marked him out via Oni Lee. Dressing for the encounter takes longer, honestly, since I want to cover up all my skin, get a black wig on, and look plausibly Asian. So no burqa, which would be the easy answer.

I end up being pointed to Noh plays by the internet, which involve face-concealing masks, and are traditional Japanese blah blah culture whatever. The point is it lets me dress up like I'm totally Asian. I also dress up to cover myself underneath the costume. Less for the chill and more for the coverage. Hood, so I can cover my blonde hair. Pants, so I can cover my pale legs. Gloves, so I can cover my pale hands. Etc. Totes Asian here. Honest.

Then I track down and listen in to some local Asian ladies in my age range. I was worried I'd have to put on a ridiculous accent, but while some of the girls have a bit of something going on, most of them are indistinguishable from any other girl's voice. Muttering under my breath and comparing?... my bigger issue is I don't have an American accent.

I work on faking the American accent on my way over to where Lung is brooding -dunno why a dude who 1v1ed Leviathan needs to brood, but whatever- and even stop a block away for five minutes to practice until I'm reasonably confident I don't sound obviously non-local.

Funny thing to me is Lung is apparently hanging out in a dojo. I mean, I guess it makes sense if you want to hide a giant muscled Asian man. It's either that or a gym, and he's clearly got some In Home Country pride thing going on, Asian Bad Boyz and all. So. Yeah.

So I show up in my ridiculous Noh costume, tweaking everyone so they're mildly amused, aroused, or confused if they look my way. Nothing to see here, certainly not a cape, oh no, just a random fan of traditional Japanese Shakespeare. A hot babe, though, don't forget. But not a cape, nosirree!

Oh. He must be in a back room. Dang. That makes this a little trickier... though I take the opportunity to make him calm, Zen-like, before he can actually see me. So if... Uh... Shit, I didn't pick a name. Xu... Um... Shit. You know what? Noh One. Simple fucking pun, done. Aaaaanyway, so when Noh One shows up, he'll be chill as heck and most certainly NOT set me on fire. Probably. Whatever, life's not worth living if no one is at risk of dying! Or however that phrase goes.

Okay? Okay. Make all the students and teachers apathetic to that Noh fangirl -helped along by
loudly proclaiming my love for Noh and throwing in some outright irritation at me 'in response' to that- aaaaand through the door!

Swag. Dude's got a throne. Oh, huh. I thought the devoted goobers who were looking up to him were bodyguards. Wow. I totally misread that. Nope, they're giiirls hanging themselves on him. Skimpy clothes, of course. Looks like an enforced dress code of those... things Asian women wear I dunno I never read much about Korea or whatever.

... unless you count the comics where Captain America punches out the dictator of North Korea. Kam ill dong or something? Whatever, those were good.

Oh right. Lung. Fangirls. All staring at me with a mild interest, like they realize I'm noteworthy but don't care much.

"Who dares?" I think Lung intended for that to be intimidating, but, haha, he sounds so zoned out it's just... 'Duuurrr lemme read my lines. While stoned. Yeah, gimme another hit.' Hahaha. Awesome. This is great, I didn't even think of that when I was making him calm and happy.

Oh right intro!

"I am Noh One, here to offer my services in exchange for a simple favor!" Tweak him, make him curious.

"Oh?"

Seems to be working. No dragoning up anyway. "The death of the cape known as Regent is all I ask!"

Shishitshit he's disgusted and mad, why is he disgusted and mad? Oh shit is he getting taller? I think he is.

He *growls*. "You mock me."

Oh god I have no idea what he's offended by. Wait no, it was Jean-Paul's idiot capename. He's
offended I'm asking for Regent's death. And trying to push him toward calm is not working oh god I've made a terrible mistake! Fuck. Okay, back up, back down. "No, mighty one. I have a grudge, and cannot approach the boy myself."

There! Natural curiosity! Rage simmering, instead of rising. He stands up, though. Don't like that. "Oh? Why would that be, I wonder?"

Ooooh riiiiight. Right. Forgot for a second, people somehow don't know it's Jean-Paul, he of the Hijacking. Whoops. I probably just insulted him by asking him to kill someone he viewed as a nobody. "Have you heard of the Canadian cape, son of Heartbreaker, known as Hijack?" His eyes narrow behind his metal mask, and I'm pretty sure he does recognize that name. "This 'Regent' is the very same, laying low and pretending to be less than he is, and I am one of his prior victims. It doesn't wear off."

Let him think whatever he's going to think Jean-Paul did. Which. I mean. Stuff happened, but it's not why I want him dead...

Anyway, he's talking. "Ah. And what do you offer in exchange, that you think I would agree to this?" He's interested. Ooooh, I think he already hates Jean-Paul, no assistance needed from me. Trying to go for poker face, though, not let me know he's interested. Makes sense, and I don't mind.

I make a fancy bow. That's a thing they do in... was Lung Chinese? Malaysian? I forget. Whatever. "I am a tracker supreme, able to sense people at great distances. I know exactly where the boy is right now, as well as where every Protectorate cape-" Minor lie, still marking some of them out. "-is at this very moment."

I could share on the emotion sensing... nnnnaah. Definitely not letting him know about the influence, either. That didn't go over so well with Killer, and I don't need a dragon trying to eat me and/or incinerate me while I'm right there. And if I want to become the new ABB head honcho - which would be hilarious- then I need to make sure nobody is getting all suspicious of me. Well, more than the minimum just from showing up out of nowhere and taking over. Hm. Might have to be slow about it? Eeeeh not sure I care that much.

Lung starts walking down toward me. "Where, girl?" He's really, really interested. Jean-Paul must've pissed him off but good. Or... maybe it's his other underpals that are the target?

Lesse... "Northeast, slightly more north than that, about six miles away. Currently-" Playing video games. "-relaxing in his lair."
One meaty hand falls on my shoulder. "Come, girl."

Shit. Hm. Tweaking him to be disinterested is a bad plan. Can I make him feel... no, sympathetic is out of his usual range, I've never heard him feeling it. Too suspicious. "He'll take control if I get too close, tap my senses-" Reaction! He didn't know that, he thought Jean-Paul just controlled people. Interesting. "-and he'll skedaddle, or use me to lie to you about where he's going."

His arms cross, and he glares at me. "If you are lying..." Hahaha. Yeah, he's already hooked.

I throw my arms wide, massage his 'scape so he's inclined to take me as truthful. Juuust in case. "Nothing but truth. I want him dead, seriously."

There's a bit where he's staring at me, but I'm cool as cucumbers because I can tell he's decided to go with it and is just trying to make me sweat. Power play? Probably a power play. After a delay, he grumbles out, "Phone," and one of the sexaaaay ladies pulls out and tosses a cell phone to him. He keeps staring at me while on the phone. Oni Lee answers the phone nearly instantly, and while I can't hear his side of the conversation per se... well. He's also kind of hard to read. Right. Dangit.

"Lee. A girl cape claims she knows where the Undersiders lair." Yyyyyeeeeeep, it's not just Jean-Paul he's pissed at. "You will go, and confirm this, and if you see them, you will send them a message with a corpse, to not interfere with me and mine." After a pause in which he looks pointedly at me, he adds, "The white boy, Regent, is preferred."

Neat.

Lung rattles off some street names I guess must be in the general area I pointed to? Then the phone clicks off and Oni Lee starts cloneporting. Still creepy.

Then it's just... waiting.

Watching Lee cloneport, not sure what he's thinking because he's so dead inside. Lung staring at me.

Um.
Starting to sweat here.

This is genuinely tense.

Did I maybe make a teeensy weeeensy itty bitty mistake? I can't seem to calm Lung down when he does get mad, so if this goes wrong... eeeeek. Um. Crap. Wait wait he's kind of like Daddy, I can definitely use that shit. What does Daddy do when I fail him? He punishes me with his power. Lung's power is to set me on fire.

Don't hyperventilate, Cherie. Don't show fear. No fear. None. It's all good, Oni Lee is in the right area, it'll all work out.

I jolt when Lung's cell phone rings. He takes a moment, lets it ring twice -power play- and then answers it. "Yes?" A pause. He moves the phone away from his mouth, and talks to me instead. "Can you tell how close Lee is to the boy?"

Yes, yes I can. "He's like fifty feet due east. Um, I mean, Oni Lee is fifty feet east of J-Regent, not the other way around."

Phone back to ear. "The tracker says you are fifty feet east of the target." Click.

Back to sweating, listening to Oni Lee advance- Jean-Paul just jolted! He noticed something! Hahaha you are dead bro, dead. Dead dead dead.

Not sure what he's doing. Panicking, in his lackadaisical manner, yeah, but not sure what specifically. He's looking for something... gear to defend himself with? A cell phone, to call the Jean-pals? Whatever it is, he's found it -and Oni Lee is on top of him.

It takes a nervous five minutes for Oni Lee to handle that job. I'm not sure why. Eventually Jean-Paul's denouement goes, and Oni Lee... still feels nothing. Creepy. More... I dunno. Oni Lee doing something, while I'm trying to not let Lung notice me sweating and/or being triumphant.

Finally Oni Lee is done with whatever and goes cloneporting to... somewhere. Phone rings, but this time I'm half-expecting it. Lung answers it. "Is it done?" Pause. "Good. Treat yourself tonight,
Lee." Pause. Call ends. Just noticed he doesn't say goodbye or anything. Are the two of them close? Or does this have to do with Lee's utter lack of actual feelings?

Lung claps me on one shoulder just as I'm registering that he is pleased. "Congratulations, Noh." A pause. "You will pick a better name before openly associating with my people, of course," he says in this conversational sort of tone that makes it extremely clear this is actually an order. Also I can tell he is deadly serious. This matters to him. Yipes.

I nod wildly. "Of course, boss!" Oh jeez I'm not even sure if I'm just thrilled by Jean-Paul being dead and so easily at that or terrified out of my mind why did I do this.

New plan: fuck this shit, mission accomplished, I am leaving this bonkers town.

Thankfully, Lung is feeling magnanimous, so when I say, "Do you need me for anything right now? 'cause the 'rents will kill me if I go missing too long," he simply makes a go on gesture.

I leave as fast as I can without looking like I'm fleeing.

Lung notices, but is amused. Which. Is convenient, but I am getting out of here regardless.

Hahahahaha Jean-Paul's dead and I'm not and everything is swell! Gotta get out of Crazytown, of course, but- wait, what's going on with Killer? Wait. Wait, did the introspection work? What is this stew I'm having a hard time making sense of it, narratively. Anger, thinking it's self-directed, frustration, determination, reluctance, fear. Is she?... yeah, school's letting out and she's going home, looks like. Huh. Marching with Determination! And reluctance.

Okay she has no friends so either she's made some resolution to, like, reveal she's a parahuman to that person she lives with... oooooor I'm thinking she's decided to accept my generous offer! So. Thinking the latter. More natural, more logical.
I need to jump on this before she considers changing her mind.

... crap, first I need to ditch the Noh One costume. Good thing I'm wearing my regular clothes under it and am a stupidly good sensor!

I go into an alley, ditch the costume out of sight between a dumpster and some other big city widget -nobody in the buildings adjacent, not anybody positioned to see me at least- and walk out the other side as Perfectly Ordinary Girl Cherie Vasil. Uh. Hm. I should maybe consider coming up with a last name nobody will recognize as Daddy's. Practice introducing myself with it. Cherie... vvvv-no. No V beginning.

Ugh, whatever, it can wait. Killer! Making my way on foot to her house. Apartment. No, it's a house, don't be doofy Cherie, there's nobody else living close enough for it to be an apartment. Probably. I guess it could be an empty one... no, stop getting distracted. It's a suburban neigh- stop getting distracted. Killer. I am making my way to Killer, to...

... uh....

... wait I just killed Jean-Paul via teleporting assassin via dragon.

Uh.

Hm.

Fffffff.

Shit.

And I... abandoned my Noh One costume and reeeaaaally don't want to go work for the rage dragon who can resist my attempts to unrage him. Or try to take him over, even though that would be so cool. Soooo cool. Goddamn would that be cool. And it would be great, so great, to one day down the line reveal that the girl underneath the Noh mask is le gasp! no actually that's a terrible idea so I'm not doing it coolness be damned.
Um.

So.

I?

Um.

I should.

Next I.

...

Fuck.

I sit down at a bench in a crappy park, and put my face in my hands and just breathe. Calm. Be calm, Cherie. The existential crisis is stupid. You're a smart, intelligent, beautiful and all-around competent lady of awesomeness who can do anything you set your mind to.

You just have no idea what to set your mind to without Daddy telling you what to do.

Fffffff.

Shut. Up. Just... just shut up, brain. You and your logic. Th-that's retarded. You're retarded. Yeah, go me! I am winning an argument with myself about how stupid I am which proves how smart I fffffff

fffffff

no. Dammit.
No.

No no no stop hyperventilating. It's fine. You're golden. You can do *anything*. That's all this is, it's freedom! Free as a bird! Freeer than a bird, even, none of that pesky gravity and Earth's atmosphere and so on binding you to some stupid planet. Metaphorically. I think I've lost myself with this one. Never mind, just... never mind.

Okay, sitting at the bench and breathing is helping. It is. Kinda. And not just 'cause I'm telling myself that. I'm not imagining it. Oh god am I crying? Tear check, come on hands. No, dry. Just... hiccups. From the stress?

Wait, am I sad I killed Jean-Paul?

....

He *was* the least worst of the powered sibs. I was so mad at him because he abandoned me, and now I've killed him so he can *never* un-abandon me.

ffffffffff

S-stop being sad. He deserved it. Definitely. Totally. It's fine. It's *awesome*, even. Hell, he probably thinks it's *awesome* a teleporting ninja did him in, instead of something lame-o like throwing himself in front of an Endbringer. Badass death even to the end.

....

Okay that *helps* but yeah I-I fucked up. Something about my power feeding me his last moments? Just... generally caring? I dunno. I... I don't remember being this sad. About anything. Ever. Daddy... didn't do sadness much. Didn't like it as a punishment. Crying is loud, annoying, messy. Gets in the way of him having fun. So he didn't do it, not to the kids. (Let's not touch his goddamn fetishes with an Endbringer-sized pole)

N-no. I... I was sad I couldn't watch cartoons, after I triggered and it gave me nausea. Not this sad, though. Never this sad.
Ffff. Uck. I didn't think I cared this way about him! Goddammit, this is so unfair. No undo button. No take-backs. No... I can't even apologize for getting him killed. Fuck, is this what guilt feels like from the inside? I don't like it. It's awful.


What... I was doing something before I sat down. Before. Before the Sad.

How long have I been sitting on this bench? Too long. Killer is at home, doing... something. Getting frustrated. She wanted to do something and it's not going as smooth as she thought it would. Right. Yeah. That. Yeah, fits with her accepting my offer. Looking for the burner phone, forgot where she put it? Yeah, I think she's doing a search and failing. Fits better, better than outing herself to her pops or whatever and getting frustrated over him not being home yet. Which okay he isn't, but she'd be expecting it to take a bit for him to get home, unlikely to be getting so frustrated while looking for something. Hm. Well, I suppose she could be looking for... a camera or some-

No, forget it. Anchor. Move forward. Attach, stabilize. Proceed under the assumption she's ready for me, wants me. If not... I-I-I.

No, go. Go.

I stand up and make my way to Killer's house.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ring doorbell. Killer notices, but initially ignores it? Then her curiosity piques. Fits with her lack of friends. Probably nobody visits her anymore.

Yeah, the routine is helping. Study, analyze, theorize, test. Learn. Poke some more. I can do this. I-I can move on from being Sad about Jean-Paul. It's okay.
Okay, prep yourself Cherie. She's coming to the door like *whoa* fast. Smile and wave for the camera! Peephole. Whatever. We're friends, she wants me--

**MURDEROUS RAGE**

**FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK**

**SHIT**

**MISTAKE**


Eventually the door opens, and Killer gestures for me to come in, face stone-cold.

She seems... puzzled. Analytical. Something about me is confusing her.

She makes... tea? Ew. Tea. Ew. Doesn't offer me any. Deliberate snub? I think it's a deliberate snub. Whatever, tea is *ew*.

I-I wanna talk, but it's hard. I just watch while she makes the tea, and sit down, and then. Um. I try to talk. Twice. Have to cough to clear my throat. Not sure why. Because I was Sad, earlier? I don't know.

O-okay. Sell this shit, Cherie. "I didn't mean it that way." Whatever way she thinks I meant. Feels like it should be obvious, but I can't *think*. I just know she was mad. Didn't mean to make her mad. "I was clear you were going to call me, I got... I got a little excited, okay?" Truth mixed with a lie. I-I'm not excited. I just. I *have* to. Go forward. Anchor. Attach. Move. "I already told you about the tracking. I thought you knew that I knew where you lived. What school you go to. All that." Really, I did. It's *obvious*. But I also. I. I wasn't thinking? I should've let her call me. But I. I can't wait. Anchor. Keep going. Don't stop. Had to. Had to be now.
She sips her goddamn tea. Little reaction. Weirdly little, after that i-initial thing at the door. "Is this actual guilt?" she asks, sounding and sounding idly curious, like she doesn't care either way.

Freaky. "Mortal terror." Hahaha I delivered it without stuttering! I-I can't stop in my head but my words are still smooth. Y-yes. Excellent. Q-question. "Could you have killed me?" She sure as shit felt like she could.


No no no stop pressuring me. I-I. I nod. I don't trust myself to talk. I'm all kinds of not-right. N-not right. Wrong. Hehehehe fuck. Fuck. Something wrong.


"Cherie, have you ever heard of capes having a... gentleman's agreement, something like that?" F-fuck she's talking again. She was quiet and just sipping her tea and I could think and now she wants me to talk? A-and the fuck is she talking about? Capes murder. Cheat. Steal. Have fun. They have power. They do what they want, so long as they can get away with it. L-like anyone. Always. Everyone.

And then she leans forward like she's going to share some secret with me and HOLY FUCK WHY IS SHE CLAMPED ONTO MY FACE

"There are rules."

OFFOFFOFF WHAT THE FUCK do I-I do I try to make her stop? Would that provoke her? I can't tell what she's thinking! She's not even mad! WHY IS SHE CLAMPED ONTO MY FACE?!!

"You do not unmask capes, unless they are monsters, the kind that get kill orders put out, that not only will no one cry if they die but you will be paid money for their death. If you connect their cape life to their civilian life, even accidentally, you don't touch that. You don't touch the civilians in their lives. You don't do anything that looks like you might ever intend to do any of these. If you are unsure whether a given course of action is appropriate, assume it isn't unless they have a kill order on them." She says all this in this. This monotone.
I-I. What? What is she talking about?

"If you know where a cape lives and sleeps, and it's not an actual lair? If it's a home with family inside it? You don't touch it, you don't go there, you pretend you don't realize it exists." Slow. Languid. Creepy.

Oh sweet baby Jesus I can never, ever tell her about dropping in on Sophia's fam' or she will literally kill me.

... oh and she's also mad because I-I came to her home. Right. O-okay. She doesn't know about the other case. The worse case. N-need to never, ever tell her. Fuck.

"If you respect these rules, you can get healing, you can go to jail, you can have any number of things happen and people won't unmask you. If they recognize you in your public life, when you're out for ice cream, they won't pull a gun and kill you, even if you're a notorious supervillain or a hero they personally hate and want dead. But if you do violate these rules, teams will form to kill you." She's still talking in this just... flat. Flat tone.

And.

They'll what? Why! I-I wha- why? They don't care about murder, b-but they care about identities? N-no that can't be right she's crazy she's so obviously crazy what the fuck Killer. What. The. Fuck.

"When I say 'teams' I mean that Lung will happily fight shoulder to shoulder with Armsmaster to ensure you die." What? That's crazy. I-I've never... no? Maybe? Wait, was that why Termirix and Goody Lad k-killed Delver? N-no this is crazy she is crazy- "And then when you're dead, whether you unmasked a hero or a villain, they will shake hands, congratulate each other on a job well done, and go back to life as usual."


Then she lets me go.

I-I can't even. She's nuts. That's ridiculous. I don't even know where to begin and I don't even know if I should what if she tries to kill me and I-I need. Anchor. I. What do I say? Do I d-disengage,
ignore it, pretend this lunacy didn't happen? D-do I apologize? I-I already admitted I don't feel guilty, would she even accept an apology? I-I was better off with Lung. M-maybe. No. Can I edge off her anger? I couldn't. With Lung. She's... she's resistant, she is, weirdly. Sometimes. B-but if I can edge off the anger? Make her not wanna kill me, when she's mad? M-maybe this is safer.

I-I

Door. The guy, living with Killer. Them. I-didn't even notice. He's not invisible to me I just. All wrong. Everything wrong.

"Hey kiddo I-" The man steps in and stops, abruptly. He's shocked. Like, shocked there is someone here who isn't Killer. Pleasantly shocked, once he gets over just shock. Y-yeah she hasn't had friends over in... ages. And she used to? A lot? Probably? I'm thinking.

"Hi dad. This is Cherie, and she was just telling me about her break-up with her boyfriend," she says in this chirpy, fake, happy way that is nothing like she's ever actually felt that I've heard.

I-I still don't know her name. Oh. It's a prompt. For me. I. I can say something, stick to my script and talk to her. "I regret it completely."

She buys that. She's pleased by it. O-okay. Good. Good. I can work with this. I can... probably... work with this.

Killer's dad looks back and forth, pleased but also utterly lost. "When-" he starts to say, probably asking when I 'became friends with' his daughter. Haha I just realized I-I got it right. He's her dad. Male. Father. Yes, go me.

"I met her last night, invited her over if she couldn't find a place to stay that was safe from her boyfriend, excuse me, ex-boyfriend. Sorry I forgot to mention it, Dad." She sounds so apologetic. It's weird, because she's actually dead inside. A little annoyed even, I think at the interruption. I-I didn't peg her for an actress? Or. She's hidden she's a cape from the school, and her dad. So. Maybe I'm being stupid?

Her dad is just fucking thrilled to hear this. No joke. "I'd have preferred a heads-up Taylor-"

Reaction from her, minor upset. O-oh! I know her name! Taylor. Unless it's like... a tailor. That happens. I-I whatever. "-but we can put her up for two or three days while she gets her head on straight, if she needs it."
I-I... ya know. I-I'd actually appreciate that if Ki-Taylor, Taylor wasn't a murderous psychopath who is eyeing me right now like I'm a piece of meat? And not that way I actually kind of like, mind, the creepy way that implies cannibalism. So. Um. "That's okay mister-" wait fuck. What's his name? Their family name? I dunno. C-come on Taylor, I'm looking at you, n-notice. Stop staring blankly! Name!


Useful. I eye K-Ki- brain, stop that, Taylor. I eye Taylor because c-come on girl. She just is confused, doesn't let it show on her face. Back to talking. "It's okay mister Hebert. I just needed a shoulder to cry on, I actually have other arrangements, but they don't know the full story and I'm not comfortable sharing it with them. Taylor was actually there for the important bit." Y-yes I've still got it! No stuttering! Smooth as butter! Or yogurt. Or. Sexy skin. I dunno I don't care right now I just. I need out.


Relief.

Okay.

Danny-dude talks again. "Good. That's good. That you're already situated, I mean." A pause. He looks at Taylor. Then he shakes his head, instead of saying whatever he's thinking. Nnnnot sure what he's thinking, other than relief. There's some mixed feelings in there. Mostly aimed at me. I- I'm not on the ball enough. I haven't been monitoring how he feels about me. I dunno. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything." He's fleeing, it's a retreat. He's glad for Taylor, but he's not comfortable... intruding? Wait. Wait, does he think-? Does he think we're girlfriends? Ha-hahaha- I. That's funny. For so many reasons.


I c-can control her. I can. Safe. Anchor.
Heh. She. She's trying to not show it, but she's getting excited. Looking forward. Slightly happy. She's going for it. Hehehehehe oh jesus down down down s-stop being murderous STOP BEING MURDEROUS EVEN INSIDE IMAGINARY SCENARIOS STOP IT.


She mulls it over. Actually mulls it over, not trying to hide a decision from me while pretending to think. "Tonight. Uber and Leet."

Ppffffff. Wow. Really? "Those losers? You're going to kill them?"

Sh-she's offended. Really, Killer? Taylor? Taylorkiller? Then she talks, still sounding irritated, still feeling irritated. "No. They're not monsters. I'm capturing them." S-sure. Capture. Right. Totally. "I'd intended to do it last night, but I don't know where their hideout is."

Hehehehehe she needs me. "So you need my help to track them?" Hahahaha why am I needling her. I. Cherie. Stop.

Y-yeah. She's not pissed, but she's giving me a Look. Testing her patience. N-not the time, Cherie.

"You can stop that. We're a team-" hehehe yes! Victory is mine! I-I no stop no smile- be. Be smug? Be smug. "-until you do something to piss me off. Like needling me."

Hahahaha we use. Same words. Argh. I need out. Too... too scared to just flee. Let me out, Taylor.

U-ugh. We have to... we talk. Details. Where to meet. What her costume -pffffffshehehehe really? A blanket? I thought she had a real cape. Baby Taylor baby Taylor ugh can't stop myself snarking- looks like so I'll know, which. I mean. I know where/who she is anyway. I don't know why she tells me. Blindfold, she suggests. I can do better. I can do two. You know, for both the idiots? Two. For two. What else is a blindfold for? Except. Except executions. E-execute. No. Stop. Stop being paranoid. She approves of two. She's fine with. It's. It's unrelated. For the idiots. She just was. Not thinking?
And.

Finally.

She lets me go.

H-hotel.

_Hotel._

Calm. Smooth. Rest.

_Hotel._

I go.
Chapter Summary

This chapter overlaps with Monster 3.3 and 3.4.

Chapter 6: Riding it out

Hehehehehe hotel.

Okay. I'm. I'm here. Whatever staffguy, stop pretending to be happy while thinking whatever judgy crap you're thinking. Imma. Imma wink at you and smack you with feelings so you suddenly hahaha yeah he has no idea how to interpret me now.

Heh.


Bath.

Aaaaaah that... helps more than it has any right to.

...

...

...

I startle awake, but not much time has passed. Urgh. I feel... not good. Bad. Less bad than before I fell asleep in the bath. Wow. Ugh. Okay. Killer is... right. Taylor. Taylor is her name. I think. Yeah, I actually asked at the end there? And she confirmed it. Wow. Out of it.
Right. Taylor is at home. She's... wow, she's excited. I. I didn't really think she was? Is?... something happening? 'cause I don't... I don't think she's that excited to be partnering up with me? She wanted to *kill* me several times tonight. I.

You know.

I kind of wondered, back when she was going for Daddy, if she wanted privacy because murder-as-intimate-act? And she felt hot for him?

Now I'm kind of scared she *is* hot for me. Because she's looking forward to ravaging me. And not in the good way.

Okay. But.

...

Uuurghle. Existential dread. No. Hate. I... can do this or... I can... try to find a better answer. Which I keep failing at. Wait, what did I say to her again? Didn't I give some big speech about... killing the greatest threats in the world, becoming kickin' rad famous that way? Something like that. That. I can get behind that, actually. That would be... a goal. Uh. So maybe I can... aim her at people who aren't me? Just. Endless cycle of murders for fame, profit, and funzies. With me happily not-dead. Nononono not endless. Ssss. Don't... Don't think that, Cherie. Makes it sound *pointless*. Cyclical. Awful.

Goal. We'll. Make the world a better place via murder? Kill the worst. And. Then I find a new goal? Once we hit a threshold? This can be a. Trial run! Practice. Inspiration for how I do it in the future. Better anchoring. Less. Less *needy* anchoring. 'cause I'm a badass.

Kickass.

*Awesome babe.*

Yes. Yes, pep talk helping. Yes, this is a... an acceptable plan. Definitely. Good. Great!
Ugh, this bath is *gross*.

I'm taking another one, after this drains.

Okay, and while this one drains... get my face cleaned up. Makeup off. Ugh, I look horrible. You can even see *handprints*. Huh. Is that what the hotel staff guy was being judgy about? Whatever. My hair is perfect, of course, like always, but otherwise... gonna wash this off, because wow.

Okay, new bath. Second bath.

Aaaaahhh.

And *this* time I don't fall asleep. Ugh, what even *was* that? Okay, yeah, I was... yeah, I've been up nights and stuff. Wow, my sleep cycle is a mess if I really think about it.

Ugh.

Food. I should eat something. I totally forgot to do that... all day. Ugh, I thought I was done with that. Definitely gonna treat myself tonight.

Not gonna *pay* for it of course....

---------------------------------------------------------------

I actually do pay the delivery girl in the end. I do the thing of trying to manipulate her and it *works*, she's *so hot for me*, but it actually. Makes her more stubborn? That her liking me makes her want me to pay her more?? I dunno. Natural-born gold-digger? I just give up and pay her instead of trying to tune her into leaving it alone. And I also make the lust evaporate real fast once she has her money, just 'cause I don't want her bothering me later. (And because it's funny)

I'm trying to have *plausible* events here that people don't question. Trying to tune her into accepting the lack of pay would be missing the point. Money is less important than staying under
the radar. Don't need someone calling the PRT.

Especially not if I might be living here more long-term, to support Killer. Taylor. Ugh, Killer suits her so well. Taylor, though. Practice it, don't blurt out the other one. I don't... I don't want to find out how she'd react to that particular nickname. Don't want her living up to it. At me.

Oh. Right. Meeting her tonight. Hm. Should I try to get more sleep first or not? I'm a pretty light sleeper, hotel has an alarm clock... maybe. Bears thinking.

Need to make a better impression this time. Third time's the charm? I guess? Ugh. Maybe fourth, actually. K-Taylor is... well, she's giving me a chance. Uh. Actually, this... could be an attempt to lure me somewhere she can kill me without it impacting her civilian life. Fffffff.

No, she felt honest. I mean. She caught me off guard with the goddamn face thing. But.

...

Fffffff.

Okay, scout her out. Go for the meetup, if she feels hostile or anticipatory or whatever, nope out. If she doesn't... awesome. Go ahead and hope everything works out. I mean. She didn't kill Aunt Cordelia or the new girl, when she killed Daddy. Hasn't killed Fury or the other jerks at her school. She's got some restraint, come on Cherie. She's not some roving murder machine indiscriminately killing everyone she meets and/or who irritates or offends her.

So just... step lightly. She wants to ki- uh, capture? Not sure if serious or euphemism. Anyway, she wants to do that? Yeah, okay, I'll be the best darn assistant ever! I'll go above and beyond, anticipating her desires, better than perfect! We'll just... brush all this initial nastiness under the rug. Yeah.

...

Oooooh, I should come up with some good names! We'll be... uh... wait, shit. I still don't know her cape name! Dangit. That makes this harder. Was hoping to dazzle her with my brilliant name awesomely playing off her own, a complementary pair, a dynamic duo, Batman and Superman! Only hot. Well. Okay, Taylor isn't flush with feminine beauty... or masculine beauty... or
androgynous beauty...

... I probably shouldn't mention any of these thoughts when we meet.

Okay, so... I'll just... come up with a huge list of good names for me? I guess? Maaaan. That's boring. And doesn't make me sound clever and brilliant. Makes it obvious I put a lot of time into this. Dangit. Spontaneity is key! I'll just... let the words flow when we meet. Probably. I mean, she's been the skulking type so far... but there's gotta be times where we can talk...

Aaaaanyway. Okay, I already kinda knew about Uber and Leet, never paid close attention because lol they're losers. I do remember Leet was the guy with the gadgets. Uber had... something subtle? Like, he looked basically normal, but wasn't? Hm. Don't remember details, but I'm pretty sure I can be confident neither of them will have ranged attacks outside of tinkertoys. So it's a matter of, uh, Taylor. Doing whatever thing she does. Which. I know she's fast and can jump roofs... really fast... and sometimes resistant to me trying to tweak her... undoes what I do to her sometimes... ugh. Dunno. I sort of hinted at the idea she was, like, that Velocity dude only she's protected from me when she's in Speed Mode, but her reaction didn't jive with that. Urgh.

Ooooh I know what I should be doing. Psych profile. Duh. Wow, I've been discombobulated.

... this means I'm going to have to watch their stupid videos, doesn't it. Yay. Nausea ahoy.

----------------------------------------

An hour watching bits and pieces of their stupid videos on the hotel computer later, I think I've got the basics. Probably. And a need to lie down, but whatever. The nausea will pass.

Leet's insecure. Not in an obvious way, not a constant hammering at other people of LOOK AT ME I'M INSECURE, but you can see his dismay whenever one of his devices fails, how he tries to hide flinching or shrinking back or whatever anytime someone talks shit about him and he either doesn't say anything in response or he blusters. I should be looking for someone who's nervous, maybe a bit fearful, but doesn't back out of situations that scare them, because otherwise he wouldn't be caping would he? I'm kind of surprised to come to this conclusion, but I think he actually genuinely gets along with Uber, too. I'd sort of figured there was friction and they kept it on the down-low for their show for whatever reason, but in my skimming I didn't catch any little tells like that. Leet trusts Uber to have his back, is totally comfortable with letting Uber get behind him, etc, as far as I'm seeing. Huh. Feel kind of bad for coming after them.
Sucks to be them!

Uber is harder for me to parse. I'm wondering if his power helps control his face or something because he was a lot smoother, a lot more controlled, but still had these occasional moments where he was caught badly off guard and things showed on his face I'm pretty sure he didn't want to show. Seems a lot more confident than Leet, a lot calmer, a lot more ready. But it might just be his power. So I'm not sure how he'd show up to my power. I'm listening in for pairs of people who are showing affection and so on for each other, focusing on cases where one of them is insecure in a low-key way and then looking for more confident partners, but I'm hesitant to actually assume that's right about Uber. I might be ignoring him and not realizing it. So I'm basically tagging a lot of pairs as maybes I want to eliminate and it's frustrating. I was thinking I'd be able to get things down to a half dozen pairs and it's really more like a hundred, more when I'm actually counting the questionable-but-possible ones. Even more when I include people whose affection seems to include more sexual undertones. I mean, Uber and Leet going at it is possible, but I don't get that vibe watching them in action. (Heh, action) So those are 'unlikelies'.

Semi-upside to this ridiculous 'not actually written conventions of cape culture' thing Taylor believes in (Does she still believe in the Tooth Fairy, too? Come on) is that I can eliminate as look-sees any pairs that are currently hanging with other folks (Since she'll be mad if we actually find them hanging out in their civvies), which cuts the number of folks we're going to actually look into by. Like. A lot. Yeah, let's go with that.

Eventually it's getting to the point where I need to actually, like, pep talk myself into actually going to the stupid park Taylor picked out for us to meet at.

Hoooooo boy.

Yeah.

Fun times.

...

Eventually I turn to outright going into the bathroom and fiercely telling myself via mirror I'm totes going to do this or else I will be very sad forever and that's obviously unacceptable so go get 'er tiger!
Yyyyyeah I'm awesome!

...

ohmygodi'mgoingtodie

So! Wandering off to a park in the middle of the night in friggin' Brockton Bay.

Have I mentioned this is kind of an ugly and terrible city? It's like Gotham had a child, became very disappointed with it because it wasn't classy enough, and kicked it to the East Coast until such time as it was worthy of returning to the manor, which is never going to happen because it's a coke addict. Those Brocktonites who brought me here are crazy.

Seriously, I have to fend off a purse-snatcher, two guys who try to hold me at knifepoint, and a Thick Chinese Accent Girl who wanted to rape me or something I dunno she was eyeing me and talking up how pretty I was anyway and that was cool but then I got bored and terrified her away. All before I reach the park.

I sure hope Taylor wasn't expecting me to maintain some kind of low profile or something because hahahaha no.

Then I have to wait in the park for like twenty minutes until Taylor does her thing and... climbs up in a tree or something? Gets nearby and stops moving, anyway. Point is two different drunk smoker dudes in black leather jackets try to hit on me. Like. The second one shows up while the first one is still at it. I'm bored and tense and could use some stress relief so I take ten minutes to get them tonguing each other instead as a minor little challenge and then get bored and leave for a different bench while they try to figure out what the hell happened. Hehehe. I made out like I was offended they lost interest in me, partly so neither of them will think I made it happen and partly because it's just funny.

Heh.

Anyway, so Taylor shows up, I start making my way toward her, gauging her. She's anticipatory, yes, and I'm thinking there's simmering murderousness, but I can tell when she spots me and there's
not rising anticipation. It's still backdrop stuff. So I don't think she's looking forward to ambushing me, I think she's just looking forward to us finding Uber and Leet so she can kill them. Or capture them, if that's really her intent. I guess.

So.

I keep approaching like everything's cool. Keep it cool, Cherie. Cherish. Eeeh I'll stick with calling myself Cherie internally. This whole 'secret identity' thing is pretty silly anyway. Keep approaching. She drops and holy shit what was that. No seriously, freeze-frame! Back the video up! Instant playback! Why couldn't I be a fuckin' tinker! Well okay I actually like who and what I am but I wouldn't say no to stealing one of Leet's camcorders or something. Or the Snatch. Or was it Sneetch? Anyway, seriously, she dropped and what I saw was larger than she is and all flowing and shit and it's too damn dark for details goddammit.

As I'm approaching I see a hulking shadow right where my power insists Taylor is being all unemotional. Then just as I'm getting close enough to make out more than the suggestions of curves and all, abruptly she's just Taylor in pffffhahahaha her costume is hilarious. But I keep that on the down-low because I don't wanna die. Instead, I wave a hand and greeting and call out, "Heya Boss."

Submissive, subservient, safe. Your will is my command. Stop considering killing me goddammit.

She doesn't really react. Dammit. Instead, she just asks me, "Did you bring it?" while holding out a hand. Uh- oh right! Yeah, I got a couple of scarves. Off the Chinese accent girl. So sue me, I forgot and didn't have much time. And they're nice scarves and she wasn't even accenting her look properly I mean she has no idea how to color-coordinate goddamn. So then I take off the outer one, grinning 'cause fuck yeah I'm awesome! Then hand it over.

Oddly, she tries to pull it apart a couple of times. Uh. Okay? Hogtying is in our future?... I'm down with that.

"Turn around." Er. Wait hold on. Hold on wait. Hold wait on. What? Fuck, is this where she does that ambush-without-feelings thing from before and I end up buried under a river? Is she going to tie my hands and give me to the PRT?? (Is this why she only wanted one?) What is this shit?

What I'm getting from her feelings is a bland sort of urgency. She wants to move on and do whatever it is she's actually planning to do, getting kind of irritated at me not hopping to, but there's no... concern or anything. Either she's got no fear I'll catch on and flee (Because she'll just kill me?) or she's doing something else entirely.
O-okay. I'll... turn around and hope she doesn't kill me and be ready to jam her with insane amounts of -dammit she's gone resistant on me again. Oh god. Just. Be cool Cherie. Don't let it show.

Okay she's wrapping it around *my* eyes. Alarming, but less alarming than some of *what just touched me why is it going down my arm* wait what was that was that that some kind of respect? Huh. **HUH.** I mean, you can respect someone and put a bullet through their skull *anyway*, but that's *interesting*. And possibly an in? An- goddammit she can't tie a simple knot. I handle it myself. Jeez.

Okay. So. "So Boss, done. Not what I was expecting when you asked for a blindfold, buAAAAAAA!"

What the *shit* is going on she's doing a horse routine only holy *crap* is my 'scape changing fast, this is faster than a car on a highway what is *up* with URK WHY ARE WE GOING UP OH MY GOD I'M GONNA DIE

and then we go horizontal again and I need off ohmygod I'm still kind of nauseous from the videos and the stress and ulp.

Yeah.

Puking.

Off the scarf goes and let's -we're on a rooftop? Whatever, nearest thing I can lean against and puke over! Which is the rooftop edge! Fuck those two hobos down below! At least I think they're hobos and *oh god is this puke nasty*. Ew. Ugh. Horrible.

Taylor is weirdly patient. After all that urgency and creepiness and all I was expecting her to get mad. It's what Daddy would do if I inconvenienced him with my autonomous biological functions because he's an *asshole*. Was. *Was* an asshole. Whatever. No, she just... sits there. Quietly. Unbothered. Actually, she's not even like low-grade disgusted. Odd. That's not a controllable response. I was assuming her power was, like, protecting her from *my* power for some reason, but puking is disgusting, end line.
Eventually I'm done. Done with the puking, and dry heaves, and the shakes of an adrenaline high. Yikes. So I turn around and let's get some goddamn answers. "What was that?"

What?

Why is she looking at me like that?

Seriously, what? Now she's all sort of vaguely repulsed and confused? Not when I was puking earlier?

Seriously, stop looking at me like- "Fast travel. Can you track Uber and Leet?" she says.

Fffff obviously you jackass tart. I'm not... er... okay. Actually haven't explained how I experience and track people's emotions. Maybe she doesn't realize I can tell. So why withhold informa- oh. Dammit. She's still not over the trust issues. Right. Fine. Answer her question while she ignores mine, extend trust, then she better goddamn reciprocate. "I can guess, but I can't guarantee anything without having confirmed that a given emotional signature is a given person. I could find you again because I already knew your signature. I've never met them." Don't think I don't sense your disappointment, missy! "However, I can make an educated guess based on their general personality, and see if I can find a pair that fits."

Okay, let's see how you like them apples. And give me an answer goddammit! She nods, a stiff, quick back-and-forth. Looks off. "Would this work better with a stable position, or if we were traveling?"

"Traveling," traveling TRAVELLING oh my god was it fun albeit terrifying. Fun because it was terrifying? Eeeh maybe. I mean. Totally irrelevant to me and my power but oh my god I wanna go some more.

Oh stop staring at me like that, girl. Stop feeling mildly creeped out. There is nothing creepy about having fun. Nothing.

She shakes her head, not sure exactly why. "Blindfold on."
Yeah okay, awesome, we're- oh right uh. Oh! There it is. I rush over and get the blindfold on and stop shaking hands stoppit we're about to have MORE AWESOME FUN.

She does that thing again of getting under me and haha I let out a whoop because hell yeah this is fun albeit terrifying albeit fun albeit FUCKIT I'M HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE HERE!

"So I was thinking -left, go left- I'd maybe be Beauty." No, she doesn't like that. "Yeah OK it's a bit weak, but it's also not taken." Hm. "Well, if you -okay just a little more left no no not that far left yeah straight ahead from here- if you insist. Any particular reason for the mute act, anyway?" Dangit, not even a useful emotional response. "Well, you're not breathing hard..." Actually. I can't hear or feel her breathing at all. "Are you breathing at- yes! That was great!- at all? And what is that noise?" Seriously, it's weird. An intermittent scraping, skittering, chipping sound, like a blade against concrete only muffled a little and I hear splashes sometimes.

Also whatever is going on with her there's some kind of... I dunno. Jello? So weird. Maybe the source of the little wet noises. Weirdly warm, comfy, embracing. Thin enough layer of it I can clutch right up against her Bizarro Body without issue, but thick enough to be noticeable as something more than just a wet surface. But I'm not sure how to bring it up. Don't want the ride to end early because I offended her or something. Adrenalin is a hell of a drug.

I'm only half-paying attention to what we're ostensibly doing. "So anyway maybe Stalker?" Wait shit shit shit! Wasn't one of the Wards named something-or-other Stalker? Was that Fury? Oh god backpedal, shift away, don't let the one-sided conversation risk going there! "No?... oh wait, there's a Ward named, um, Darkstalker or something, isn't there." Also yeah she didn't like the name. Wonder if, like, she subconsciously sees similarities between Fury and her Ward self and yadda yadda associative dislike etc. "Yeah, good point. A little bit to your right. Too edgy for my tastes anyway." Not really, but, uh, now that I think about it Taylor might dislike it because I basically stalked her hahahaha ohgod. "I'm thinking contrast, Beast and Beauty, Fafnir and Damsel-" Fafnir would be a fucking badass name don't you tell me otherwise. And she'd be Damsel of course, because fucking duh. ":-Terror and Cherish, not Scary Cape and Other Scary Cape. They're up, you'll need to climb.

"Maybe Dame? No?" Okay that's probably taken anyway. "How about Skirt, like, sneaking about and -no left more left- and like okay fine." Darn it, I liked that one. "Maybe Velvet and Gauntlet?" Iron gauntlet, velvet glove... no. She doesn't like it. Bleh. "I could be Princess, kidnapped by the terrible beast of the night!" I even lean back and make a dramatic swooning gesture and goddammit she's ignoring me entirely.

"How about Adieu no it's still farther ahead come on keep going. Like." Uh. Like. Uh. Shit. I swear
I was going somewhere with that. "Okay never mind. How about Precious?" Lame, she doesn't like it. I mean, it doesn't have shit to do with my power but it'd be hilarious to have her introducing me as Precious and then I make people shit their pants in terror. "Maybe, uh, no no, turn left, and down, no more down, anyway maybe Genteel? It's like- okay I don't actually know what it means shut up it's a cool name fine never mind."

Change tacks, maybe something nastier. Taylor's a scary girl, maybe she'd rather we are Scary Cape And Other Scary Cape. "Harpy! 'cause I'm like. Female? Okay fine." Yeah that's pretty terrible. Uuuuh. "Banshee? Banshee. 'cause they're all about the feels? And 'cause sounds." Er. Wait. Have I mentioned that? Let's not hint at that, actually, never mind. She doesn't really care and pay attention to me dammit. "Fiieee I'd be fine with Lady. Or. Is that taken- yes it's taken darn. Darn. Is Counte- of course it is why am I bothering to no no no left, then forward, yeah almost there, anyway how about Moll? Like I'm a tough-talking mobster goil and you have no idea what I'm talking about and won't talk never mind."

Uh... "Temperance?" 'cause I change people's temperament. And like, tempering in a forge. I guess. She seems pretty meh about it and I am too so. "Pride, maybe? Mmmmaybe? Okay I'll keep that as a maybe." Not great but not terrible. Probably taken but oh god I'm tired of rejecting names because they're taken, especially when we can't just Google this crap. Oooh, how about- "Kat? No? Aw, come on." She has no taste. Okay... "Shi- no no no, don't turn left now, a little further on, anyway, Shine? Like, you seem to like the night and so it could contrast with like Night and Shine and really come on fine. Fine. This is me pouting."

Seriously. I do pout. I liked that one. Oooh, Rise and Shine would be awesome- ugh. Okay, fine, um. "Radiance? No? Seriously, it's a good theme- fine. Mytho- whoa no you're going past it, we need to go up. Anyway, mythology, Siren! I am totes a Siren the boys are allllll okay fine you can stop with the gross feeling, fine, jeez. Maybe Bewitch- fine. No Master names?" Yes. "You take all the fun out of being a cape, you know that?" Come on, accept the teas- seriously she is just ignoring me.

Okay, um. "Centerpiece? Like I'm the center- oh right no Master names fffffine. Diamond? Like. Something valuable that sparkles in the... ugh. Turn left. Priceless! Because that's me!" Oh fuck you too. "Affection. Like the feeling, but also like pretending. Affectation, affection. No? How about... uh... Waver?..."

Oh god.

I keep going for a bit on pure momentum, but eventually just... give up. Pride. Sure. Fine. Whatever.

Seriously, she has no taste.
In all this crap I also have to have us dodge around capes. Like Fury. Oh god I don't wanna meet Fury. Why is she even up so late? I could've sworn Wards didn't patrol after midnight. Aren't they supposed to have a bedtime like ten or whatever weenie thing is being enforced by the Child Protectors? (Was that their name? Eh) Plus Oni Lee, which is a heart-stopping moment but thankfully Taylor listens to me when I say we need to get down and inside a building now, even though she reacts like I'm being silly. To be fair, I don't tell her I know it's Oni Lee because I'm still trying to decide how much I should let her know I know, but still.

At least she seems to have stopped with being all paranoid and murderous about me now that we're doing something. She's just tightly focused, intense and got her anticipation on a tight leash. Looking forward to it, not wanting to get too excited and end up disappointed, I'm thinking. She was running around pretty aimlessly for the fffcovering week I was trying to catch up to her, so maybe she was looking for them and failing? Something to keep in mind.

Friggin' finally Taylor stops, and I can tell from her reaction we've found them. Or found people she thinks are them, anyway. I'm hearing a couple of male voices, so more likely than half the jerks we've checked tonight. (I'm still embarrassed I misread the one lesbian couple as potentially-Uber-and-Leet. Thank god Taylor doesn't seem to have taken it as a strike against me. I'm seriously hoping she completely forgets) Soooo. Time to have some fun. I whisper, "Oooh, watch this!" and slam Uber and Leet with piss-yourself-fear and get... one.... dammit. One of them is blocking me? Seriously? Fucking tinkers, argh come on how does that even work. Oh come on the other guy is zenning himself through the fear! Bullshit! Total, utter bullshit!

"Master security!" Oooh that's Leet's voice! And I don't like those noises, all metal and- he's got robots, doesn't he. Of fucking course.

Okay, well, not a big deal, Taylor is obviously going to-

-get really mad and run.

Shit.

Wait, why is she running? Go in and do your thing! You dealt with Daddy just fine, these losers should be easy! Arghblarghle what even is going on?!

Ooooh boy I don't like how mad she is. And I don't know where we're going. Or what her power is. Do I try to get off this crazy ride while the getting is good? Wait shit if I manage to panic her or
something right now she'll just throw me off and I'm going to go _splat_. This... is not my best plan. Okay no, don't panic. We're pretty far away and she hasn't tried to eat my gizzard or anything, which means either she's trying to find a good place to hide my body (calmcalmcalm ignore it) or she intends to actually _talk_ to me about whatever she's mad about. I mean. That's the only two possibilities I can _see_, anyway... but she's really messing with my head, swerving unexpectedly. Makes me nervous.

Then we go _waaaaay_ up and I feel some relief. Like, okay, sure, she _could_ hide my body on top of some tall building, but it's honestly a pretty obviously poor choice for actually _hiding_ it. It'd make a lot more sense to try to try to dump my corpse in the bay or something, make it hard to find and encourage rot. I'm thinking she's looking for _privacy_, instead. Which... might involve yelling and/or hitting me, but is probably not gonna just end me.

Hokay Cherie. Calm. It's okay. This is manageable.

We get up top and she moves to make me sort of slip off and I oblige. She touches the blindfold for a moment, and I get it off, and just look at her while her jaw works under the scarf. I wait. And wait. Aaaand there she goes pacing. Huh. Okay. I back up and sit down on a convenient bit of rooftop whatsthis, and just watch her go back and forth. This is different. She's still _mad_, but she's not... _doing_ anything. Okay. So I was right she's got restraint, that she's not just anger->act on anger. So I can loosen up a little. Poke and figure out what ticks her off without _constantly_ worrying it's going to end with me six feet under.

I can work with that.

"What did you do, exactly?" There's a brief delay before she tacks on, "Pride?"

There's some odd expectation there I apparently fail to match up to. Not sure what. I just answer as honestly as I can. Kinda. "I hit them with fear. I was thinking it would take the fight out of them, leave them helpless." I wait a second and then admit the _real_ reason. "And I maybe thought it would be funny if they pissed themselves in terror." Present it second, make it sound like it was _secondary_. Not actually lying!

Taylor sighs and goes to touch her forehead, apparently forgetting the bicycle (pffffft) helmet. "This was scouting. I wanted a _plan_, _before_ they had any idea anything was coming. Now they'll be on their guard for who knows how long." She sighs. "There might never be as good an opportunity again, if they ramp up their security in response to this." Irritation spikes a bit.

"Oh." Not much else to say. She starts pacing. So. "... so we weren't going to hit them tonight?" I
"No, we were going to hit them tonight, but I wanted to investigate, see if they had any minions on-site, see if I could find some of their security, maybe listen in. Then I would've gone to a nearby rooftop and we would've hashed out a plan. Then we would've hit them, assuming we didn't decide hitting them was a bad idea. Instead, all we've learned is that Leet is immune to you for some reason, and that they have special preparations for capes like you, while they now know someone is gunning for them. They're going to up their security, maybe move to a different location outright, forcing us to start over from the beginning, or worse yet lay a trap for us." She pauses a moment. "Bad things happen when you go in without a plan." Shit! What was that about? Some broody, scared/angry spike. Bad memory?

She's still pacing, though she seems to be trying to fight down the anger. Eventually she asks me, "Can you still track them?"

Heh. "Absolutely Boss, anywhere in the city, for the rest of their lives." She finally stops pacing at that, and I can sense her surprise. Really? Come on, I laid this out already. Let's show off a little. "Right now they're making a sweep of the perimeter and trying to convince themselves they didn't see something scary, that they were spooked by their own stuff. Uber would rather believe there was somebody watching them, he doesn't want to blame Leet. Leet is ashamed. He thinks it's his fault. They're arguing, it's an old argument. Uber isn't willing to listen, I'm getting loyalty here, probably Leet is trying to convince him to split, saying it's for his own good or something." Yyyeaah I'm totes impressing her awesome. Let's keep going. "They've stopped with the perimeter sweep, they're caught up in the argument, Leet is being really pushy and it's starting to piss off Uber." Oooh, opportunity! Maybe she'll forgive the fuckup if I note... "Ya know Boss, if we hit them now I think we'd get them with their pants down, they're on the bottom floor."

Got it in one. I don't even wait for her (verbal) response, cheering and getting the scarf over my eyes so we can go go go, 'cause yeah, she's going for it.

Yyyeaah this is still fun if terrifying! Going straight down a building's side, like I'm falling to my death, but I won't because fuck yeah! Hell yeah! Whooo! Yyyeeea oh Taylor is getting annoyed maybe I should quiet down we are almost to the losers. Alright fine, whispering instructions it is.

Heh.

Okay, we're here... Boss is stalking, I think... Uber and Leet are having some big blubbery reunion, gag me... er wait what's Taylor doing? We're right there! I can hear them, there's gotta be an entrance, why are we going elsewhere eep! No seriously, what? Oh. Okay, Taylor's feeling amped up, ready to go now. Sneak attack, I guess? Okay, sure -and she wants me to get off, I can do that. Easy peasy. Heh. This is gonna be fun. Actually, this has been fun! I'm really enjoying myself
when Taylor isn't threatening me. Neat.

And... off... she... goes!

Uber startles for a split second and then he's down. Huh. Is that unconsciousness? Wow, I guess Taylor was serious about the capture thing. "Surrender." (Leet's digging his heels in, I can tell) Wow. She *is* serious about the capture thing. (And sounds *hilarious*. Is that supposed to be, like, authoritative? 'cause it's *so* not) Hm. Okay, Leet, let's see if... nope. Nothing. Just a tiny bit of concern/annoyance on his part. Tinkertech letting him know? Or something about Taylor's stance? Hmmmm.

"Never!" Wooow Leet. So melodrama. Hm. I wonder if that camera of theirs is around, him playing to the crowd? Does he think Taylor is someone who's going to play along with his doofiness? You know what, I should come in. Maybe I can give him a shove or something, speed this up. To take off the blindfold or not, that is yadda yadda joke. Eeeeh. Heck, let's try *not*. Just to see how they react.

Okay, feeling out... yeah, window edge. Oop, careful, still some glass in it. Okay, *carefully* climb in -dangit, I made a noise, and Taylor is reacting (Little surge of pleasant surprise! Because I kept the scarf blindfold on? Because I'm coming in to help?) and Leet is all startled, too. I think he thought Taylor was alone. Okay, I can't make out exactly what's going on, Leet trying to do something and getting frustrated when Taylor interrupts it, and he gets knocked down, and there's some nervousness on Leet's part for a moment and then-

-uh?

???

*What the fuck is going on with Leet?*

Argh the braintwisting! He's here, and he's moving, but actually he's *not* moving, and my power is insisting he's both still a few feet away but *also* much, *much* further out than my range actually *goes* and aaarghblargle.

Oh and there's a bunch of battle noises or something, but I'm just trying to make the headache go aw-
... uh. Now the-Leet-who-is-here is gone. But there's still a Leet waaaaay outside my actual radius I'm somehow detecting. Okay, seriously, what?

"What happened?" I ask because oh god what. Seriously, what?

.... aaand she's totally ignoring me.

"Seriously, Boss, come on. I know a thing happened, it happened with Leet. Heeeeey. Boss. Come on. Boss. Booooss. " Take off scarf or no?... eeeeh. If she was pleased at me keeping it on earlier, I think I'd rather keep it on for now. And pester her. Not that she's being annoyed, really, she's waaaay focused and ignoring me. "Don't make me sing the song that never ends." Heh.

Okay, fine, I'll leave her alone. For the moment.

... okay now Taylor's feeling concerned, some dread. Odd. And. Now she's waiting... wow. This waiting is going on forever. She's got some kinda anticipatory thing going on, but whatever it is the payoff doesn't hit, I think. She just gets all bothered and vaguely annoyed and frustrated and then Uber moans -huh, not as unconscious as I thought?- and that aggravates her for whatever reason and then WHOOP THERE GOES MY SCARF.

"Jeez, give a girl some warn-"

She keeps on with the ignoring. "Do you have a cell phone-" Yes! "-not affiliated with your civilian identity?" Dammit, no. And she's a teeny bit disappointed with me. Dammit. "That's fine, just go find a public pay phone and use that to call the PRT and let them know Monster-"

Wait, seriously? "You're calling yourself Monster?" I thought she was like trying to be heroic or something, with all this insistence on captures and killing a couple of Big Bads and so on and so forth and she's named like someone in the Slaughterhouse Nine?

"-and Pride have captured one cape, while another cape is likely dead. Make sure they're clear we consider the death unfortunate, too." That is some clinical language right there. I'm sorry authorities, we accidentally-possibly-intentionally murdered a dude, and that's totes unfortunate we definitely feel kind of bad honest. Not that she does seem to feel bad. Does she not realize...
how distant and uncaring that sounds? I mean, if she doesn't want me to fake being all upset
I won't... but I'm a wee bit confused here.

Okay, do I ask what the fuck happened with Leet or?...

She gets irritated. "Just dial 911, you don't even need to pay, ask to be connected to the PRT."

Okay fine whatever.

I wander off to do exactly that. Not that I have any goddamn clue where any payphones are, so it
takes a stupid amount of time and I have to fend off some grabby drunk (By 'fend off' I mean 'hit
with terror until he's convinced I'm a demon and flees while I don't even break stride 'cause I'm a
badass mofo like that') and aaargh. And the 911 lady is all, "What's your emergency," and I have
to be all, "It's not so much an emergency as two capes beating down two other capes, now hook me
up to the PRT so they can bring the live one in," and then there's a moment of silence (Ooooh is
that her? Yeah, I think I've pinned down her current location via her surprise and mild
horror. Finally someone sane in this stupid city) and then she's all, "One minute," and elevator
music plays and oh god why is this my life.

When a PRT person -yes, actually in the PRT HQ, pretty sure- gets on the line I basically end up
trying my damnedest to be as outrageous as possible without actually lying or anything, just
because the fellow's bored monotone (And if I'm pegging the signature correctly, that is his honest
experience) is soooo making me want to make him do something, anything emotional at all, but he
just takes it all in and says, "A truck will be with you shortly," without inflection after I've told him
where I'm at. (And then he hangs up on me! Jerk)

Which was a mistake because it means I have to then wait there and drag them over to where
Taylor is waiting over Uber's drooling body why didn't I memorize the street names for there argh.
(Also scare off another girl who doesn't understand boundaries while I'm waiting for the truck)

So then they show up, PRT starts loading everything up, and Taylor and I are answering questions,
me with the scarf over my eyes because Taylor liked that, right? Oh wait shit I should be calling
her Monster, shouldn't I? Dangit, secret identities are stupid. And annoying. Okay, so I'm standing
behind Monster, partly 'cause I'm sort of hoping no one looks at me and goes Vasil! and freaks but
mostly because let's set up the Boss as the Boss. Pay no attention to the beautiful and badass girl
behind the curtain, focus on the somewhat unattractive but badass girl staring you down and
contemplating eating your heart.

(Okay not really, but Ta- ffff, Monster is all upset at the very bland way the PRT trooper lady is
handling this whole thing, 99% sure, and I wouldn't be surprised if there's some kind of fantasies being entertained, but she's not actually all murderous and stuff like that)

I make a point of calling T- argh. Boss. I make a point of calling her Boss. A lot. To drive home the point. And also because pffttt she named herself Monster? Yyyeeeh let's just go with Boss. Maybe it'll catch on, like a disease of awesome. And... fuck. Paperwork. I've gotta fill in paperwork. Explaining my powers. (Fffff gotta describe 'em so it's plausible that I've done what I've done but without making it obvious I'm one of Daddy's kids and oh god) And my costume. (Let's just go with, um, poofy dresses and blindfolds? I don't actually have a costume right now...) Label myself... uhhhhhh let's go with Indie Hero? I think that's what the Boss is trying to be. Fuck, can't ask her. And what is your experience with the PRT? is doofy as fuck. Let's just write up something about... uh... it was satisfactory? Yeah, satisfactory. Nice and bland and not entirely wrong. Okay, team or other affiliation... Monster's. Yeah, that sounds right. She's got no team name, yeah?

(At some point she leans in to look at my paperwork and there's a little stab of irritation and I have no idea why but nothing comes of it. Aaaargh)

Eventually we are finally done with all this bureaucratic hoop-jumping nonsense and we can go back to having fun!

... which the Boss promptly ruins by going to a roof and being all whingy. Not aloud, not for a while, and in fact one time she opens her mouth and just stops, but it's pretty clear she's all upset. Still about the trooper? Eh. Whatever. Still an overall good night.

"Che-" She stops. Huh? "Pride." Oh. Right. Yeah, seeecret identities. That. She gets all mad at herself. Eeeeh. Not a big deal. I wanna wave it off as exactly that but she's faster than me to talk. "How do you... uh, feel, about... tonight?"

Amazing, that's what! "Fantastic, Boss." Fuck. She doesn't like that response. Why? We got the thing done! Two harden- pffttt, okay, two complete losers have been dealt with. And it was fun! And easy! What's there to feel bad about? Why should it being great be bad? Ugh. And here I was thinking about asking about the Leet thing, and now I'm all worried it'll set her off worse. Okay, divert, distract, change the topic! "You tired? I'm exhausted, and you've been doing most of the work."

She's not. Not reeeaallly meant to be a genuine question, just an out, an escape. (Also I am totes exhausted, whew, been a long day, followed by a long night...) Not sure why she's not tired, but she isn't. 99% sure. Not surprised at all when she lies with, "Yes. Yes, I think I am."
She is so bad at lying. So bad. I might need to get with her on that if we do go long-term. I mean, seriously. I get to cheat and I'm better than her at this.

There's a momentary pause where she turns a bit away and then catches herself. Huh? "Do I need to drop you off somewhere?" Oh. Ooooh. She almost left me! Jeez. Okay, uhhhh... fuck, where was that little tea shop located?.... right. Okay. I name that spot's streets. Not too far from the hotel.

Last ride of the night. Little too tired to properly appreciate it, but seriously, going this fast, wind blowing and all... 'tis fun. 'tis nice.

I basically just collapse into bed and sleep, when I get back to my hotel room.

It's all good.
Ooooh boy. Groggy when I wake up. How long did I sleep? Ugh, I don't remember when I got in...

Good night, though. Weird, but good.

Uuugh. This outfit desperately needs cleaning. It's a good thing this hotel is fancy enough to have laundry on-site!... wait do I have enough quarters? I'm not sure I have enough quarters.

Ugh, I do not have enough quarters.

Okay, shower, change into a different outfit, head out to break a fifty, go do my own laundry...

While I'm doing all that, I listen in on the city.

I'm still not sure what's going on with Leet. It still feels like he's an impossibly far distance away, well outside of my range and yet somehow detected by me anyway. Having slept on it, the headache he gives me puts me in mind of the braintwisting Ward -Vista? I think Vista was her name. She does some kind of space-twisting and I guess that's why she messes with my head. So... something to do with twisting space, then. That ball was an access point to some pocket space, I guess? Whatever is going on with Leet, he's in pain and miserable and feeling hopeless and scared. So I think he's trapped. 'kay.

Uber is in the PRT HQ. He's surprisingly cheerful and optimistic. Oh, he did go down before Leet did, didn't he? Huh. Either the PRT hasn't told him about Leet's Unfortunate (pffff Taylor, really?) Accident or I was right in my original thought that the two of them don't get along so well. Leeeeaning toward the first, given what I saw last night.
Lung is cranky. Soooo many possible reasons for that, but I wouldn't be surprised if he's cranky 'cause 'Noh One' hasn't reported in for ages. That'd be funny. Oni Lee just keeps on trucking -oooh, whoever he's interacting with is having a bad day. Ya know, I don't think I've ever caught evidence of Oni Lee having a day job or anything. Wonder how he gets by. Just gets paid by Lung? Or something. Eh.


Okay, Ki- ugh. Um. Okay, do I call her Taylor or Monster right now? Screw it, Imma call her Taylor. She's... being all grim and trying to hype herself. Like. She makes me think of someone hyping themselves up to throw themselves off a cliff. That's... weird, given she's at home when this is going down. Then she's all dread and gut-roiling sickness on her way to the school. And much the same once she is there. PRT cordon is almost gone at this point, I think it's just like two guys and they're clearly not taking this seriously. I think one of them is hitting on someone, actually. Suppose they could actually be off-duty... which would mean there's only one PRT trooper doing the plainclothes protecting of Sophia. I think she knows it, too, 'cause she's ramping up anticipation anytime she's around Taylor. So probably plotting something she wouldn't have done when there was a more serious cordon. Honestly tempted to fuck with her just to drive home that she's not safe just because I haven't done anything to her in a while. Not sure when I'd fit that in... don't really wanna swing by the school itself, just 'cause Taylor might freak if she finds out, with this whole private/public life separation thing she's doing.

Okay, got my laundry finished, time to take back to my room- I haven't eaten anything. Goddammit. Okay, it's nearly lunch anyway. Why not.

Sort of funny how Taylor seems to have an affinity for hiding out on rooftops. Lunchtime at the school, she just goes to a roof. And broods. Sooo broody. Minor bit of amusement peeks in... Sophia and other girl are stalking the grounds... Hm. Hadn't thought about this before... but... is Taylor hiding from them? Didn't fit my mental image of her before and... well... she's not as murderous a badass as I'd thought before, but it's still weird to think of her as a hider. But she did flank Uber and Leet, sneak attack them. So I guess to her hiding isn't an act of cowardice, isn't backing down or losing a fight, it's... maneuvering to win the fight? So... maybe she's amused because she thinks they're looking for her and they won't be able to find her and so that's a win in her book?

Clearly I need to back away from the Killer mentality and readjust my mental models. Oh! This might be a hint why she hasn't just blended the school! Maybe she's plotting, looking for a better opportunity to make a tormentor die without being caught. She's been patient, she maneuvers for advantage and then strikes. She's not impulsive, not like I thought she was. So maybe she's putting up with this crap because she's waiting for The Perfect Moment. Yeah, okay, that makes sense. Fits to what I've seen, and is badass, just in a different way. Cool.
Lunch ends and I go... well. Honestly, I nap for a bit. I slept hard, but I was up a lot yesterday and I'm still a bit wrung out and if last night is a pattern I'm going to end up spending a lot of time working with Taylor at night, so. Might as well catch some Zs midday. Especially since... man. I couldn't have gotten a full night's sleep, actually. Why did I wake up so soon? Ugh.

Anyway, I nap. And wake up after a few short hours. So whazzup Taylor? Oh cool, you're still at school and now you're stressing like someone is actively stalking you with intent to kill. Wow. That's... weird. I mean, yeah, she's stressed sometimes while at school, but before it was mostly just crankiness, like everything is irritating and she was frustrated by feeling like she couldn't do anything about it etc etc. Right now she's acting like she is literally about to die.

Meanwhile, if we flashback to when she was going after Daddy, she was sort of vaguely nervous, a bit repulsed... but mostly just patiently waiting.

... 'kay.

More showering. Go out to grab a bite to eat. Listen in to Taylor going utterly and totally ballistic such that I'm surprised no one dies, while still at school. Weird. Eh, not my problem.

Doo doo doo, la la la. Food's good. It's fun listening in to the city, insane as it is. Ice cream is nice.

Last night was good.

... huh. Wonder where Taylor's going. Wait is she going to the PRT HQ?... nope. Going on past it. Still pissed off. Still murderous. Okay, outside city limits now, roughly, nowhere near any humans. Huh. Waaaaait a second. Is that where she went to call me, before? Did she?... did she leave the phone there? What the heck, Taylor. Why would you do that? Oh! Is that why she didn't just call me when she'd decided to take me aboard? Goddamn, I could've avoided so much trauma if she'd just remembered the cell phone, really? Really? Ugh.

... wait.

... does that mean she's intending to call me, while that pissed?

Uh-oh.
I get out my phone, careful to avoid nicking myself on my awesome knife, and head out the café to go somewhere with some privacy. Phone rings once, and I answer. Be cheerful, pretend like you don't realize she's feeling murderous! "You need me, Boss?"

In a dead monotone she says, "I need to kill someone." Oh shi- "Someone who actually deserves it."

... oh. Whew. Okay. Don't need to make plans to flee the city. That's fine. She's just... bad at communicating. "Need me for my tracking services, gotcha. Anybody in mind?"

Waitin'.

Uh. What the hell navel-gazing is she doing now? I just asked for a target of interest and she's turning contemplative and a wee bit disgusted and sneering. The heck?

... still waiting.

Fuckit. "... Boss? You there?"

She startles. "Skidmark." Doesn't really show in her voice that she's startled. Good control? Or lack of affect? Something else?

"... who?" Seriously, I have no idea who she's talking about. Is that a name? I mean, really. Who would name themselves that? Roadkill is at least kind of badass sounding, but Skidmark... eeh. A car power of some kind, I guess? Or maybe it's a speedy power that leaves marks? Wait, I don't know any speedsters aside Velocity in this city. Teleporters, yeah, and some people... fuckit, whatever.

Taylor has some self-recriminating stuff going on, not anything serious. Eh. "You familiar with the Archer's Bridge Merchants?" she asks, sound a bit less monotone, a bit more engaged.

Uh okay. Lemme think... I looked into crap in Brockton Bay... "Druggy gang or something, right?" Sounds vaguely familiar. Vaguely. Kinda.
"Right, yes. Well, Skidmark is their leader. Lays down zones that push things a particular direction, not much else to him as a cape." What, really? Lame. Lame power, lame name. "He's a scumbag, and he has no..." She trails off for a moment. Oooookay. "... no honor, I guess. Doesn't even participate in Endbringer defenses-" What's the relevancy of that? "-or otherwise make him worth tolerating. This is a dude who gets children hooked on-

Yeah okay whatever. "Boss, I don't actually care. He's small-fry, but sort of important. That what you're saying?" Taylor grunts, and oh god flashbacks to Daddy. Moooooving on as fast as possible. "Got any idea what kind of personality he has?" Another long pause, while Taylor is all struggling with herself. Wow, whatever happened at the school musta rattled her badly. Or... maybe she's not nearly as together as I've thought she is. Hmmm.

Eventually she comes up with, "Well, the gang includes a lot of homeless. Just looking for concentrations of homeless would be workable. Can you do that?"

I wrinkle my nose and try to not think too hard about how I'm standing like twenty feet from somebody who seems to be sleeping behind a dumpster. "... yeeees? Gross, but yes." Yay. Hunting down icky homeless people. Fun. Not.

"Where's most convenient for you to meet me at?" And now Taylor is starting to sound eager and wait a friggin' second does she mean she wants to meet right now?

"Wait, are we doing this in daylight?" I was sure she was all about the night. Totes Batmaning it up and all. (Even though she doesn't know the name, goddamn)

"YES."

Okay, okay, jeeze.

Okay,... um... squint. Yeah, let's go with those two streets over there. Nice little park. Well. Nice by Brockton Bay's standards, which pff. I relay the street names to Taylor, she agrees to meet me there, and... yeah.

... time to wait, and start scanning for homeless-y people who behave like they may or may not have powers.
Great.

I'm waiting on a park bench, a scarf acting as a bandanna. Taylor liked it when I was wearing it, right? And wanted me wearing it while she went caping for... some reason. Not wanting me to see whatever the heck happened with her as I approached? Not like I'm in any danger hanging out in a park, blind, not with my powers. Not that anybody is bothering me right now, just some people getting a little confused, some a little fearful. Probably wondering if I'm actually a cape. (Which I am, but that's not why I'm wearing it)

Also, it's cool to, "Heya Boss," her as she's approaching while I'm 'blind'.

Ha! She startled! And she didn't get particularly mad or anything.

Yyyesssss. This can work. If I'm very careful... I can start trying to tweak her again.

... very, very careful.

... probably.

... Doing it anyway.

She gets up close and pulls the scarf off. Awww. "We're just going to be two friends on a walk. Not costumed." Ooooh we're going to act like we're friends? Awesome. I can work with that.

Alright then. Sunglasses on, jacket inside-out, pull up skirt and pin it in place, let hair loose. No
longer am I the Boss's professional and intimidating assistant! Now I'm just a random teenage girl hanging with her bud. Ooooh, and she's impressed. Nice. "So, any more specific ideas of what to be looking for?" 'cause yeah I've got a decent pool of ideas but... uh... there's a lot of them. And oh god I'm hoping she comes up with something that avoids poking hobos with sticks all day.

... and now she's staring vaguely at the sky and being contemplative. That's starting to get- "What are we calling you?" she asks, voice low and paranoia ramping up a bit.

Oh, I've got this. "I am Carlia Smithson, new friend to one Taylor Hebert. My boyfriend, now ex, was a jerk, and now we're out on the town to cheer me up, maybe you too given the day you've had-" Taylor doesn't like hearing me refer to that. Yeah, I know how shitty your school day was, though I wish I knew why you found it so miserable. "-even if our eyes are bigger than our wallets and we know it. We'll probably wander the town for a few hours, look at cool stuff, talk about whatever with each other, and then part ways once we feel better."

Haha! She's impressed again!... and a little creeped out. Dangit.

She spends a minute just thinking, but I leave it alone this time because it doesn't read like she's getting distracted.

Eventually she gives me a description to work with.

"I'm thinking he's probably acting angrier and tougher than he is, acting more confident than he is. Maybe is genuinely confident with non-parahumans, since he has a power and they don't. Overall more bark than bite?" Taylor is very hesitant all-around, very unsure of her description. And it's a pretty limited description.

I cover my annoyance, grabbing at one arm because we're being gal-pals, and... she flinches. Doesn't actually break away, but is clearly bothered. Doesn't like being touched? She didn't mind last night. After a second she starts walking, but she still doesn't pull her arm loose, and isn't having any reject-y feelings. Hm. Not sure what to make of this. I'm reminded I should be following her when her movement is starting to threaten to break the connection, and catch up appropriately, and then tug her -carefully- more to the right because I do have a few individuals who could fit and they're all right-ish.

From there I start up my Practiced Teenage Prattling routine, developed scientifically to act as a cover for when I'm going out with Daddy.
... I have got to stop drawing parallels between Taylor and Daddy. So much ew. Stoppit, brain.

Taylor is clearly tuning me out. That's fine. Doesn't damage our cover and I'm not saying anything important, and -why is she spiking paranoia why is she giving me a sidelong look stop that seriously girl. Anyway. I keep talking and -oh jesus fucking christ. Ignore it Cherie! Ignore her stupid random spikes of paranoia. Just keep talking. It's fine. It's all good.

Oh hey she's trying to engage back! That's different from Daddy! Yes, say something bland about how pink is a nice color for drapes, you go girl- oh my god why is she having a depressive spiral why why why. Edge it off, do it carefully oh jeeze she's still getting worse let's point out that (filthy, rotting) apartment complex Target Possibility #1 is in, jam her blatantly with a tiny spike of triumph to communicate that the apartment building is the spot, and though she gives me a look it actually puts a stop to the stupid depression spiral and there's not that much actual irritation involved. Excellent.

From there it's getting into an alleyway that no one has a good angle to, saying, "Found him," and pointing the way. Smoke curling out of a window on the second-floor, and I can sense a dude who broadly fits the description she gave and I'm pretty sure is a parahuman. Not 100% sure. Could just be a gang member who got involved in parahuman fights, that happens.

"Close your eyes for a minute." Sure. Easy-peasy. Imma hum a tune to myself in the meantime. No wait she's tapping me on the shoulder being all embarrassed. 'kay, eyes open. Watch her as she pulls her hoodie up, hides her hair inside of it, and- "Can you go wait at the park we met at? I can find it again, pretty sure."

Alright fine whatever.

... this is not busting my murder-as-intimacy theory.

Alright, time to listen in as I walk.

Taylor... hops into the building after a bit. There's some relief. Confusion. Heavy disgust, now I'm really confused as to why me puking didn't gross her out, she's got the emotionally damped thing going on right now, this is very confusing. Also a spike of paranoia, which I'm going to assume doesn't have to do with me for sanity's sake. Okay, she's moving again, still incredibly grossed out. Cautious, careful, patient. She's in the zone, none of this stupid depressive nonsense. Niiice. Still a lot of disgust, but it's fading away into focus, analytical curiosity. Given she's barely moved, I'm pretty sure that's a focus thing, not her getting away from-
Okay dude no you are not attracted to me now is not the time. Off switch.

-the stench or whatever it is that's been grossing her out. I guess I was on the money as far as this guy being gross and all, though. She's... reacting with some growing confidence. Evidence this is 'Skidmark'? Unsure. Taylor being a little nervous, but only a little, stopped for a moment. Maybe considering opening a door or something, but worried about actually doing so? Bit more maneuvering... comes back to the point she was nervous at... has a spike of nervousness while the guy in the room reacts slightly, but, nothing more. Hm. Unsure if the guy is asleep or if Taylor's just being really sneaky. Taylor moves out, feeling some surprise, some being impressed. Hm. Kind of hoping she's impressed with me, but realistically she's probably impressed by something she just found.

More maneuvering, a lot more up and down. Why hasn't she touched the guy yet? I was expecting her to go in, maybe indulge in something indulgent, and then kill the guy. Or 'capture' him, I guess. She's confused... lotta confusion. I get to the park and start searching for a bench before she stops being confused, goes back to focusing. Wait no, some more confusion. Oh, the dude's gotten up and starting moving about. Focus. Confusion. Focus. Oop, Taylor approaches him and fight-flight kicks in!... but not a fight, even though maybe-Skidmark is scared and angry and Taylor's expecting a fight and they're practically right on top of each other. So basically either, like, a door, or Taylor has a Stranger component to her power I'm unaware of. Oooh, this metal bench is nice. The weather's decent, too.

Anyway, Taylor. She's disgusted again, nervous. Skidmark is... not stable. Aaaaand... now she's climbing again. Fast. Stops as high as I ever caught her going, so probably the top floor of the building? She's got an angle, I'm sure, because she's not acting like anything I'd expect for giving up. Just not sure what the angle is. Okay. She's doing something, careful and focused, and... Skidmark is freaked out. Really freaked out, trying to stoke himself into anger I think, but more afraid than actually angry truth be told. Aaaand now Taylor is grossed out again. More grossed out. And confused. Taylor is... coming down toward Skidmark... seems like he hasn't noticed her at all, though, even though she's going fast. She's not actually silent, I know. Well. Not entirely. Hm. Then again, she's not roof-hopping. Maybe it's harder for her to be quiet when she's sticking a landing?

... Skidmark turns around, still afraid and stoking his anger, but now there's another layer there, something careful and controlled. Taylor's feeling cautious, approaches carefully... focuses... some confusion and a bit of triumph... but also frustration. Hm. Not sure what to make of that.

Then Skidmark starts moving and Taylor freaks and Skidmark is exulting wait now he's confused and Taylor's calmer but confused as heck. Lotta confusion going on here, and I'm not even counting the guy who's been eyeballing me for a while who I keep chucking random minor feelings at just to watch him be confused by his own feelings. He makes great expressions. Ah, there's disappointment from Taylor. Not sure why. Okay, Skidmark is dropping toward her and
she's angry and frustrated and he's exulting but insulted and also she's grossed out and now she's panicking. Like. Actually, fearing-for-her-life, panicking.

... starting to think I shouldn't have left her alone. Do I try to run back and intervene? I'm not strictly line-of-sight, I can get him through the wall, she doesn't ever even have to know, if things work out... but she's faster than me, way faster at times, and she's not stupid. Risky, if she's gonna go ballistic on me for disobeying. Okay, now things are just going fast and chaotic and I'm having a hard time parsing it. Oh, Skidmark didn't like that, whatever just happened, but it's a low-grade annoyance sort of thing, not like real fear or anything. Aaand now Taylor is motoring, but she's not at all happy about it. Oh, wait. I think that was Skidmark hitting her. Ouch. Okay, those must be some pretty badass ground-marks he does.

Okay, seriously. I push myself to my feet, planning to intervene, and... don't even get to the park's edge before Taylor has reverted to calm and in control while Skidmark is angry and... just sitting there. Taylor's having a bit of anger and frustration. Okay, Skidmark is confused. Angry and scared and bluffing. Taylor is... calm. Not her focused calm of before, but a casual calm. Very very strange.

Some stuff happens fast, Skidmark is amused for a moment, and then... horror. Fear. Nothing.

... well then! Our little Killer is all grown up. And this time there's no goddamn tinker shenanigans like how I can still detect Leet what is that shit ohmygod.

Taylor feels triumphant and oh boy I should get back to my bench and make like I never did leave it. And drive off that one guy I was toying with, who has been 'inconspicuously' following me. And now she's feeling a bit disturbed. Huh. Was Skidmark creepy in death, then? Oh hey I think that's a PRT truck I'm detecting heading her general direction -yes I am hearing the actual siren now, that's a PRT siren.

Okay, Taylor has some weird frustrated/angry moment on her way out. No idea why. Still, she seems to be doing better than before this went down, no depressive spirals and all. Awesome.

She gets to the park, still stewing, and... huh. She looks nice out of glasses. Not amazing, she's still not flush with feminine/masculine/androgynous beauty, but it makes her face look different in some nice way I can't put my finger on. Though she's clearly struggling a bit with them off. I've known blinder people, but it looks to me like anything too far out is basically incomprehensible to her, maybe even some problems closer up, not sure. She's still all frustrated and stuff, and it sort of peaks as she's getting close and... she's not talking, eyes darting to people nearby. Ooooh. Oh. She's nervous about actually talking about whatever her issue is while she's half-blind and all. Yeah, okay, fair enough. "I know a place."
Flinches again when I touch her. More nervous and all than last time. Feeling vulnerable with her glasses gone? But she doesn't break away or anything, doesn't freak, just follows me in silence while I take her to Casa Del Woof. AKA that one place with a whole lot of dogs one of the Jean-pals hangs out in fairly frequently. When we get there, Taylor gives me a funny look, all confused. I shrug. "Someone's keeping the dogs here. They're way on the other side of the city right now, feels like they're in a scrap actually, but the point is I know it's possible to get in here but also there's no one here right now."

Taylor accepts that readily enough. Then she psychs herself up, deep breaths and all. "Hit me with guilt." Pause. "As hard as you can."

'kay, no prob. Guilt! Massive, massive guilt! Yep. Boss is crushed by guilt. Well. Actually, her face isn't really chan- "I know I'm be-"

Okay no. "I just did it." Power, are you lying to me? Guilt rays. Guilt rays. Guilt rays. Goddammit

"I don't believe you," she says with a mounting sense of horror, which is reflected on her face. GUILT RAYS. GUILT. Yes power, you are telling me it is working, but I am almost completely certain you are lying.

Uuuugh. "Seriously, I did. I don't know why it didn't work, but I pushed it and it didn't work." (Actually am pushing and not seeing an actual response, but whatevs... GUILT RAYS)

"Hit me with sadness." Okay fine.

Okay, this is working properly. I see her eyes doing that thing like she might shed tears, and she's biting her lip and lost in memories and acting a bit sad.

... but not as sad as my power is reporting. It says she should be a sadspllosion. Not sort of considering maybe crying in a few minutes.

What. The. Fuck.
"Did you do anything else?" she asks. Seriously. What are you, girl? "Happiness. Now."

Sure fine, let's go max, since nothing is fuck- OH MY GOD WHY IS SHE CLAMPED ONTO ME "You're my best friend, Cherie." WHAT THE FUCK TAYLOR. Why is being happy equate to lunging at me? I don't need flashbacks to the face incident! You know, the one that happened last night? Less than twenty-four hours ago! Down, happiness, down! Stop clamping stoppit!

... wait, she thinks I'm her best friend? Holy shit we've known each each for like one night. How lonely was she?

She lets go- wait no that was nice! Shit, is it too late to push her back up? Would that piss her off? Shit, she's already moving to some other possibility- and then she stops. Oookay. No wait there we go. "Fear."

... Why would you want me to test that?

Okay, sure, fine. I already -fuck. Actually, I don't know, given my power is apparently misreporting its results on her. Yeah, let's test-

-off she goes to huddle in a corner, muttering terrified ravings I can't properly hear. Yeah, okay, test complete, that's about right for what I hit her with. Dial it down, off it goes. Then she just... pats her pants, getting some concrete dust off of them, and comes back like it ain't no thang. Wow. Badass. "Jealousy."

Sure oka AAAAAAA SHE'S CLAMPED ON ME AGAIN wait why would she clamp onto me if she was jealous? What is that? Owowowow let go let go dial her down!... and she lets go, feeling all embarrassed.

"Okay. Okay," Taylor says, most assuredly not okay.

"Bo- Taylor. Um. You- well, this is where other people would ask if you're alright, but uh, no, you aren't." She's not. This is worse than the depression spiral I cut off earlier. Um, do I-? "You're kind of... having a big breakdown. Um. Do, uh, should I just hit you with happiness again? I mean-"
She rubs away some of her tears, having apparently only just noticed them. Oh jesus she's getting murderous and sad and depressed and nope nope nope edge it off, faster! Faster! Aahhh okay she might be-

"Stop that." Shit. She means it, coldly focused murderpulse backing it.

Fuck.

Fine, push her back in the right area. Oh god no stop that. Okay, no, no, stoppit fuckit I hug her. Hugs. They make things-

"Stop using your power it's wrong that's wrong -"

-better goddammit stop that. I close my eyes very deliberately. "Not using my power." 'cause I can't affect her much at all when she's got this thing going on, and it's like, sight-based? Maybe? She goes calm and actually feels better and stops with the death spiral bullshit.

God.

After a minute she pulls away, and I start to ask her what that was about, but- "I want to stay at your place tonight." Whoa there girl! It's been less than a day and you're going that fast? Wow. "Can- can you call my dad and, um, tell him we're... having a slumber party or something? I- I just can't face him tonight. Tomorrow. Just... not tonight." What the fuck girl.

Oh dammit Jean-Paul's dog-pal is coming this way. Paste a smile on, do it Cherie. "Sure, I can totally do that, but we might want to get moving first. Whoever has been taking care of the dogs here is heading this way, and they're mad."

Taylor nods, and we leave, heading toward the hotel, while I start mentally rehearsing how I'm going to handle Taylor's dad while she's listening in to the phone call.

God this has been a crazy day.
1.T: Unfold

Chapter Summary

This counterparts to Monster 3.x.

It also is missing some of the formatting of the Sufficient Velocity version, fair warning. Ao3 doesn't do size variability for text.

Chapter T.1: Unfold

Taylor

I'm only hearing Cherie's side of the call, only seeing her smile and nod, but it sounds like it's going okay. And she's doing less lying than I thought she would.

No guilt. I can't feel guilt. Not even when Cherie uses her power. But I still feel like it's wrong that Cherie is better at not lying to Dad than I am.

In a way, it sort of helps. Not a lot, because I've been hiding things from Dad since well before I got my power, but I can see how maybe it got worse after I got my power, and not just because I was hiding being a parahuman from him, but because I guess my power cut guilt out. So instead of lying to Dad, feeling bad, and resolving to avoid feeling bad in the future, I just spun a lie and moved on. I can see how it might've seemed easier, after the power came. Which would make it a little less my fault that things ended up this way.

Only a little, though.

And it means it will be harder to stop. Not more miserable, but just... fighting against the current. Fighting against gravity. Always having to watch myself, wondering if I'm not feeling guilt because what I'm doing is okay or if I should be feeling guilty for what I've done but don't because of my power. Is this why I found going after Nilbog and Heartbreaker easy? (Well, not easy...) Would I have felt worse about killing Nilbog, who in the end was a scared, lonely man, if my power wasn't affecting me? Would I have stepped back and reconsidered my plans? I mean, I can't see myself regretting killing Heartbreaker, but... I dunno. Maybe I would've done something different. Maybe I would've left Uber and Leet alone, out of some lingering guilt over Nilbog. Or maybe I wouldn't have tried to run down Skidmark.
I dunno.

But I need to stay on top of this, watch myself, watch other people. Think about my actions, my choices. Don't let my feelings alone guide me.

I don't think I'd really regret anything I've done so far, not anymore than I do -killing Leet was an accident- but.

I dunno.

Something would've gone different, surely?

...

I dunno.

The phone call ends and Cherie grins at me, takes my hand, and we walk after a moment.

This... is a fancy hotel. And a fancy suite in the hotel. Is that champagne? (Does Cherie drink?)

I thought Cherie was on the run?

"How are you paying for this?" My suspicion is that she isn't.

Cherie rolls her eyes, pulls a wallet out of her purse, and displays a sheaf of... wow. That's... that's a lot of money. Did she steal that? "Daddy wasn't fond of paying for things himself. Beneath him or whatever. Whenever I came along to scope out a target-" eugh "-he just made me carry basically all our money, for those times he couldn't use his power to stealthily skip out on paying for something."
That... sounds plausible... but... I can't help but wonder if she's just telling a lie I'll find palatable. I'm not sure. She's smooth at fakery, but she's also only really lied to Dad when I told a lie first, and told me a lot more than she had to tell me when we first met and urgh I don't know. I just... I dunno.

I drop it, though. I'll try to keep an eye out for evidence she's stealing from people, but I don't think there's much point to pressing her on it. If she's lying, she'll just keep lying, and she's good at this. I won't be able to catch her in a lie if she doesn't want me to, I'm pretty sure. I'm not... practiced at deception, Dad aside.

I drop into one of the chairs, Cherie watching me, and study the suite. Ugh, I don't like how high up we are. I'm imagining being attacked and having our only escape route being jumping out the balcony. Maybe I'd survive that, but Cherie wouldn't. I catch a glimpse of Cherie's clothes in a wardrobe -fancy hotel- and I just... find myself thinking of my own closet, which has shifted from things I like and am comfortable wearing to things that hide stains, protect me. Cherie's outfits are whimsical, colorful, flattering. She hated Heartbreaker and lived with him for almost her entire life. Why is she so comfortable with herself? I had a good life until Mom died, and even then it didn't turn awful until Emma and Sophia decided to make my life a living hell. Why is a couple of years of misery enough to grind me into dust, and over a decade of suffering has left Cherie okay?

I'm disappointed with myself. Feels like I must've done something wrong, like I could've powered through, maintained myself like Cherie has retained an upbeat personality, and that it should've been easy, if Cherie could manage it under worse conditions.

I drop that line of thought as too depressing.

Cherie starts removing the warmest layers of her clothes. That makes me the monster for a bit, and there's something calming about that, but once she's done I'm left restless. I wanted to stay with Cherie to... I dunno. I dunno. I didn't want to go home to Dad. I thought we'd... I dunno. Talk or something. Like Emma and I used to, before she turned awful. Instead I'm left feeling like I need to go out and do something, even though I already did that and ended up killing someone who... I think that was probably deserved, but I didn't know much about the guy. And now there's the doubt, that maybe I'm okay with killing him because I can't feel otherwise. Well, I could, but... I don't think I'd mourn him, regardless. I didn't know the guy, and he didn't get sympathy from me before he died. Maybe I'm wrong, though.

And Cherie doesn't have a laptop. I thought she would. In retrospect maybe that was stupid. She's on the run... then again, she can afford this hotel. So I don't know. So there's nothing to occupy myself. I'm not a TV person, I never was. Emma was the TV person.
"So, care to share what all the feels were about?" Cherie asks me, sounding light and calm.

Oh god I don't want to think about that again. Just... no. I came here to get away from all that. I shake my head, and that's my entire response.

"Okay then, we can talk about something else. You have any plans for the near future?" Cherie sounds friendly, interested. I can't tell if it's fake or not. She's better at that than I am, quite clearly.

I turn away, uncomfortable with thinking about that. "The Dragonslayers." They're terrible, and now I have a tracker, so... it's doable. I think. I have mixed feelings, because Dra- no don't think about it.

"Okay, makes sense. Stop them from further impairing Dragon, yeah?" Cherie says it like it's the most natural and obvious thing in the world.

No no no don't think about Dragon that entire idea sounds crazy but it fits and oh god. I settle for, "Not... exactly." I don't... I feel crazy thinking about Dragon as Nilbog's girlfriend. I feel stupid thinking it.

"Dragon bothers you? What, she too goody-two-shoes for you?"

I wish.

I take a second to psych myself up. Cherie isn't Emma, or Sophia, or any of their hanger-ons, but it still feels like I'm opening myself to danger to even consider telling her the real reason. But... I need to work on the trust thing. So. "P-" Ugh this is so hard and horrible. "... promise not to laugh?"

Before I can even start dreading her response properly, Cherie is already saying, "Not unless you tell a joke, Boss." There's motion out of the corner of my eye, I don't know what she's doing, I'm stubbornly focused on the corner I'm staring at, trying to keep this... less horrible. Emma and Sophia always wants to see me suffer, if they can. (Were they watching, somehow, when the teacher called me over? I was too mad to really pay attention...) It's easier if I'm not looking at Cherie, if I act like I'm talking to the wall, or to myself.

Couple deep breaths. Come on, Taylor. You can do this. "I think Dragon was Nilbog's girlfriend."
I see movement, but no talking, and turn the chair to look, and Cherie is raising one hand and I'm reminded *vividly* of when Sophia went to slap me once, but then she stops and... "Huh." Tapping her chin, looking thoughtful. No judgment, no hostility, no sneering or acting like I'm stupid or crazy.

In a way, that's worse, because it feels like she's *humoring me*, and the dam breaks. "She tried to stop me when I attacked Nilbog and I just can't imagine why she'd do that he's a villain and she's a hero and he *killed an entire town* shouldn't she have been *helping* me and they covered up that I was there and Dragon got the credit and it's a stupid tinfoil hat conspiracy theory but I believe it *anyway-*" Cherie stands up and starts walking toward me and I flinch, expecting a slap. "-and it's horrifying and dumb and I'm dumb for believing it-"

She interrupts by *hugging me*.

I.

What?

And now she's murmuring to me, low and soothing and I can't really understand the words, I'm not sure there's actual words.

I... feel better. Slowly. This is nothing like anything Emma or Sophia did. It's more like Mom, if Mom had ever hugged me as the monster. Not the best association, but something overall positive, if a bit bittersweet. I... don't think Cherie is doing anything to fake it. I just... Why does she keep *hugging* me? I'm the monster. Why would she do that?

Eventually she pulls away and looks me in the eyes. "Could be a Master effect." Simple, matter-of-fact.

...

That... would make a lot of sense. Nilbog's creations could do so *many* things, but it never occurred to me mind control might be one of them. It might even explain why he was content to sit in Ellisburg. Maybe he was sneaking mind control parasites into people... vicariously experiencing the world through them. Or something.
I'm not crazy, I'm just stupid.

A topic to come back to later. For now...

"I want the Dragonslayers dead because nobody else is going to do the job. Heroes tolerate them because while they support military juntas in Africa and occasionally parts of the ex-Soviet region, most of their work on US and European soil is restricted to killing villains... you know, except for when they steal from Dragon. Also, I-" How do I word this... "-am free of school for two weeks anyway and I suspect hunting the Dragonslayers down will take considerably longer than most of my less mobile and/or less well-hidden targets. So I was thinking we could tell my dad that we're camping or something for fun, turn this negative into a positive."

Cherie grins, easy. Good. I wanted to move on. "Cool, when do we start?"

"Tomorrow. I need a... break." I need to step back and think about myself, what I've been doing, what went into it, shape myself into a better person. Not just... throw us into the hunt right away.

Cherie nods. "Fair enough." Then her grin turns big and... odd-looking. "So are we going to... get to know each other better tonight?"

O...okay? "I guess." I didn't think Cherie would want to talk. I mean, everything I know indicates her life sucked. I figured she'd want to not go there. But if she does... I guess we can. Not a lot else to do, with the two of us cooped up in a hotel room, alone.

"Now, obviously, you already know the basics of my life, but I don't really know much anything about yours. You first?" Cherie asks.

Wait, she's curious about me? I thought she wanted to talk about her. "Th-there's not really anything that interesting about my life." I mean, really. I was nobody important before I became Monster, before I took down Nilbog. She's the one with a parahuman father, parahuman family. I was just an ordinary kid before I got powers.

Cherie covers her mouth a little, and... is she laughing at me? What the hell, Cherie? "There's gotta be something, if you were completely boring you wouldn't have triggered." Triggered? Cherie cocks her head at me. "... and you don't even know what a trigger event is, do you?"
Now I'm feeling stupid. "I... sorta assumed... you were talking like, um. Trigger warnings?" I'm expecting her to laugh at me again, and I'm not looking forward to that.

But no, she sighs for a moment, and then straightens up, puts a saucy grin on (???) and starts... lecturing me? "A trigger event is when you get your powers. Bad shit happens to you, I mean seriously bad shit, shit like you've been buried alive and you're slowly suffocating while your siblings stand around taunting you and you beg and scream and your dad just slams you with more fear and-" Uh. I think she just accidentally told me what hers was. Yikes."-and, um, yeah. Bad stuff. Worst day you've ever had by like a hundred times. You black out, and you wake up with powers." Wait a second, her father did that to her? With the help of her siblings? Fuck. I thought I had it bad with my best friend betraying me, but this was Cherie's family! Goddamn. Goddamn is he a revolting piece of shit and I am so glad I killed him. "So since you're a parahuman, you've got to have a story. Not that I'm asking for you to relive your trigger event or anything! I just mean that you can't possibly be a Boring Ordinary Girl or else you wouldn't have a power, that's all."

That's... not at all what I had thought. "So it's... not like X-Men? No power puberty?" I knew there were, like, third-generation people with powers as little kids, but I'd always figured it was some kind of... genetic thing? Like it got passed on and the fact that your parents had powers means you have powers and it comes faster and easier, so the first generation was adults, the second generation is teens, the third generation is kids. Roughly.

Cherie has one hand on her forehead, muttering to herself. "Oh my god she knows about X-Men but not Batman? Why. Why."

I'm vaguely offended. I liked the X-Men comics. The ones we had, at least. "They were my mom's. Said they were good comics for girls, or, well, she said they were good comics for girls before they noticed they were popular with girls and added in a bunch of sexed-up bimbos no teenage girl would actually relate to in a panicked attempt to appeal to said girls. I've never been a comics person, though. Seemed redundant with real capes running around?" Why read about ye olde power fantasies when I can turn on the news and see much the same play out in 3D?

Cherie makes an inarticulate noise of frustration. "No, no 'power puberty'. Worst day of your life, black out, wake up with powers. Okay? Trigger event. Done."

"Oh." That... kinda sounds like power puberty to me anyway...

The conversation dies, and after a minute of staring at me Cherie flops onto the bed, flipping channels. Stops on a nature documentary for some reason. Huh. I would never have pegged her as
a nature person. Shows what I know, I guess.

...

So... I have powers because Emma betrayed me? Because I got shoved into a locker filled with filth and couldn't escape? I... that gives me a headache. Am I fucking up, on some cosmic scale? Was I supposed to use my power to avenge myself on Emma and Sophia, like some... not-actually-dead ghost? Is that part of why my power has cut out bits of me? It wanted me to kill Emma and Sophia and feel justified, no guilt whatsoever? I think I'd have missed Emma anyway, but... that's a depressing thought, in a way, and I'm not sure how to feel about the whole thing. Like, I'd hate to have killed Emma and Sophia just because some... other force wanted me to, and then find out it wasn't really my decision, by some metric? But it also leaves me wondering if I'm misusing my power, in some sense. I don't think anyone has ever lost their power, so... if there's some deity passing out powers, or something, I don't think it actually cares about what we do, overall? But I still feel vaguely like I should feel obligated to pay back getting my power, and if it wanted me to kill Sophia and Emma... does that mean I'm failing my part of a bargain?

Then again, I never asked for this. The power was thrust on me without explanation or warning, due to the actions of others. I didn't get the opportunity to say yes, and I'm not sure I would have, if I'd been asked. There's... things I like about my power -in some ways it's nice to not need to sleep, anymore- but it literally dehumanizes me, and metaphorically has dehumanized me too. I know I could feel guilt, before, and my power is the only thing I could see explaining the change. It's not really fair or appropriate to shove something in someone's hands and then demand they hand over fifty bucks to pay for it. So... I dunno.

Then there's... do I credit Emma and Sophia for gifting me a power? I've killed one of the worst men in the world, and also Nilbog. I'm doing good with this power, overall, I'm pretty sure. If Emma and Sophia hadn't done this to me, I'd just be... boring ordinary Taylor. A high school girl who... I'm not sure what I would've done with my life, if Emma and I had stayed friends. I did good on my grades, before the break, but I don't really recall being passionate about anything in particular. I can't help but see myself flipping burgers and asking people if they'd like some fries with that, up until some cape ended up killing me by accident or intent. I was enthusiastic, happy, but... I dunno. Maybe I'd have left high school with a clear life goal and become CEO of some company, but I can't see myself doing that. Not just now that I'm Monster, but even before it just... I can't.

So that makes that whole thing a knotty, complicated mess. Sure, they didn't mean for me to get powers, but you could say they gave my life a real purpose anyway. Isn't that the kind of thing you should feel grateful over?

The whole thing just... gives me a headache.
And it raises other questions.

Nilbog: I know my power has fucked with my head, and I know now you get powers through misery. Was killing Nilbog really just in any meaningful sense? How much of what he did was his choice, and how much of it was his power interfering with his head? I don't think I should regret doing it exactly, but I do wonder if I should feel bad about the necessity of it. Killing Nilbog probably made the world a better place, but Nilbog himself might not have been a monster, not in some... internal way. It was hard on me, how he reminded me of Dad and all, how he was scared and sad when I was about to kill him, but I was able to gloss over it before. Everything is scared when it's about to die, right? But now I wonder if this is less like executing a serial killer or hit(wo)man and more like killing a puppy that hasn't gotten bladder control yet because it urinated on your priceless whatever. No, that's a terrible metaphor. More like killing a starving man who stole from your garden. Or... no, that's still not right. More like killing a vampire, I guess? Not the sparkly kind, the kind that has to kill humans to survive. Like, vampire fiction gets played for tragedy, right? So I'm wondering if killing Nilbog was less the hammer of justice coming down on the wicked and more tragic-yet-necessary, something that needs to be done but is grim and unhappy work regardless.

In which case... I dunno. It feels like it should change something...

Heartbreaker, too. I don't regret killing him, especially not now that Cherie's let slip her own trigger event, but now there's a layer of doubt to it. Was he such a monster before he got his powers? Was that potential always lurking in his metaphorical soul, just unable to be unleashed prior to acquiring his powers, or did his powers make him into a monster, themselves? Was he someone where, if you found him before he triggered and gave him mind control powers with no strings attached, he would've... I dunno, gone to the government and used it to reform the unreformable? Only made into a monster because his mind was changed when he got powers? Maybe he lost his ability to feel guilt, like me. Maybe he did something mildly bad, and felt nothing but a little joy, and no hammer came down, and it all came from there, not a conscious choice to be a monster but just sliding down a slippery slope made of a series of little choices that lacked the things that make people decent. Justice, or tragedy?

Then there's... Mush. (Who calls themselves that?) I was already pretty ignorant of him, but now I have to wonder... justice, or tragedy?

Do I care? If so, why? If I don't care, is it because my power made me not care?

I don't know. I feel like it should matter, but I can't pin down why I think that.
I roll these thoughts around for a while, while background facts about bees and dragonflies and other bugs wash over me. Occasionally Cherie says something, asks about my hair, or my clothes, or... whatever. I don't really engage her. What is fashion when compared against morals?

Eventually she bounces to her feet and announces, "I dunno about you, but I'm hungry. I'm going to go get something good, do you want anything?" I hesitate, and I think she can tell. I still suspect she stole her money, and I can't help but feel that her paying for something with dirty money for my benefit makes me responsible somehow. But I can't really confront her about that, not right now, and compared to having killed four people, one of whom definitely didn't deserve it and three of whom might not have deserved it either, in some sense, knocking her for maybe having stolen a few hundred dollars feels... grimy. So I ultimately ask for a pizza and a soda. Keep my costs down, keep my... lack of guilt... down... I dunno. It makes sense to me, anyway.

Cherie smiles and says sure and toodles and wanders off to make dinner happen.

I brood as the monster. My first temptation is to explore the room more thoroughly while she's gone, look for... drugs? I dunno. Signs that she's being dishonest with me, is the point... but she knows where I am at all times, knows what I'm feeling. Rummaging through her things while she's out getting lunch is as obvious to her as rummaging through somebody's things while they're right there, looking at you. So I don't, and just remain where I am, thinking. This is all heavy stuff. Unpleasant, and reframes... everything. Even if I can't put my finger on specifics, this matters.

She comes back with Chinese for herself and the pizza and soda for me, and we eat.

The fact that I'm eating food she bought me pushes my thoughts a particular direction. She's helped me relentlessly, shared her private moments -accidentally, sometimes, but often intentionally- and I've kept her at arm's length the whole way. Have I... shared anything about myself with her? I mean... she didn't even know my cape name until I was sending her off to call the PRT. That's... I feel... I dunno. That seems awful of me, in a way. She's giving me so much, and I'm giving nothing back unless it's pried from my tightly clenched metaphorical fingers.

So, with much trepidation, once we're done eating I... well, I look at the window and start talking.

"I used to be friends with a girl called Emma." Start simple. Try to not think too hard about... Emma. While talking about her. And why I'm so mad at her- move on, Taylor.

"We were so close we were practically sisters. One day, for reasons I have never understood and never gotten an answer on, she decided she hated me and became friends with another girl, and the two of them cemented their newly formed friendship by bonding over tormenting me at school." I
"Their actions started small. They said mean things about me. They tripped me. They stole assignments from me. They broke things of mine. All under the teachers' collective nose, all ignored by staff, even as they began to build up a host of cronies that either enjoyed participating for their own reasons or simply hoped to become popular by pleasing the popular kids, all for the low, low price of their soul." Going over it verbally vividly brings back the memories. The pounding of blood in my ears while I tried very hard to not attack them. I just. No. Move on, keep going, not the point. Sharing with Cherie, here. That's the point.

"Initially I fought back, but they'd thought this through and made sure I always got the blame, or at least that no one got in trouble. I switched to trying to tear down their arguments, but it wasn't about logic, it was about meanness. I tried being mean back, but that just made them laugh. So eventually I moved to just... trying to get them caught. Initially that didn't work at all. They were cannier than I was, more aware of where the teachers were, more aware of which teachers would do what thing in what situation. When it did work, it was only getting one of their hanger-ons in trouble. The terrible twosome disavowed all knowledge of her actions and left her to rot." I was dully unsurprised by that at the time. Emma had already turned on me. Why wouldn't they abandon Madison? Obvious, really. Terrible of Emma and Sophia, but not surprising.

"This helped a little. The other hanger-ons were a little less eager to participate, made more of an effort to stay out of the way. Emma and her new friend stepped up their game in response, and did their best to turn it deeply personal." Focus. I still need to... talk about the other thing. "Did you know my mother is dead?"

In the corner of my eye, I can see Cherie nodding. Her expression makes me think of someone looking at a beartrap. I don't know why. I focus, keep going.

"It was a car wreck. It involved a cell phone. Emma told me it's my fault my mother is dead." I take a moment to recollect myself. The memory still hurts. "It's true. My mother is dead, and it's my fault."

I finally turn to face Cherie. I dunno why. I smile. I won, right? That deserves a smile. "I didn't let Emma see the hurt. The light died in her eyes as she saw me stare back impassively, unaffected by the worst thing she could think to do to make me suffer. I'd won." Of course, I hadn't really. It was a victory, but a Pyrrhic one. I suspect it would've been better to 'lose', to cry and scream and flee. Maybe the teachers would've turned sympathetic. Maybe Emma would've finally realized she was a monster. I don't know.

I can't maintain eye contact anymore. Seeing Cherie stricken to hear this, knowing what she's been through -her family buried her alive- it just... no. I turn to face the window again. "They left me... why? What could motivate that? What did I do? Was I really so bad a friend?..."
alone for a bit. It proved I'd won. They couldn't hurt me anymore. Not by twisting the knife. So I was very surprised when I discovered that my locker had been violated, filled with tampons. *Used* tampons." No no keep the anger out. It was disgusting and horrible and I hate them and *why would anyone do that*—no. No no. Control. Quiet.

Speak. "That was disgusting, of course. I think I threw up. My memory isn't entirely clear. What I do remember is being shoved inside, the door closed behind me. Everybody went to class and ignored my pleas for help. The smell, the *fucking* taste, the claustrophobic space, I wanted out. I wanted out so badly." Just remembering it makes me feel wrung out. This is hard. Why am I doing this to myself again? "I hit my head somewhere in there. Convulsing, I think. I don't remember why. It was strange and terrible. I remember wondering what could possibly motivate Emma and her replacement friend to go through all this effort just to fuck with me. It didn't make sense." *Nothing about Emma makes any sense. I wish it did.*

"At some point in there I-" Wait. What *does* Cherie think my power is? I look at her, thinking. How do I ask this?... how much do I give away? Should I share or?... "Car-" No, I've no reason to call her Carlia anymore. "Cherie? What do you think my power is?"

Cherie shrugs, and answers... weirdly calmly. "Well, you shrug off my emotional manipulation somehow. Erratically. I know you killed Nilbog. -" I still, trying to not flinch. "-and Daddy-" I can't *not* flinch at this vivid reminder I've killed someone's *parent*, awful as the man was. I still expect Cherie to knife me over that at some point, in my heart of hearts. "-so you're apparently pretty scary-dangerous." Accurate. I wait, and just when I'm essentially convinced Cherie is done-"Also you apparently turn into some kind of landsquid or something?"

I think she's trying to troll me. She was touching me, so acting like she didn't know... but no, ignore it. I've got what I wanted to know. Roughly. I turn back to the window, not wanting to see her looking horrified for my sake -it's too *wrong* and continue talking. "I became the monster for the first time there, in the locker. Shoved the locker door so hard it ripped out, freeing me, fled straight home, never did go back to school that day." Trigger event. That was my trigger event. A weird, new thought. "I guess I triggered in the locker." Do I?... I think I should share this. Give something back, something of myself, not just my history. "I still wonder sometimes what Emma and her friend think happened. If they guessed I must be a parahuman, it didn't convince them to stop harassing me. Maybe they blamed it on adrenaline? I dunno. It's been ages since I understood Emma, and I *never* understood her replacement friend." I dunno. I don't really *care*. I've just wondered, sometimes.

Turn to face Cherie again. Story's done, that's how you do this, right? "So now you know my story, same as I know yours." Fair. Kinda. *Closer* to fair.
I don't like how Cherie is looking at me. I don't want to see it.

Then Cherie comes bouncing out of her bed and she's coming at me, reaching out for a hug, no no not again I don't deserve-

did

did she just slap me?

Yes, hand goes to cheek: it is warm and tingly and hurting.

She just slapped me??

Why did- "Seriously. I've already told you I'm not like your whorebag ex-friend. Stop expecting me to be like her. It's really fucking offensive."

Cherie's hugging me before I can really think that through. I just. What? I'm.. not I'm... I'm not... am I?

does that make me a bad person?

I should stop doing that. Am I doing that? I thought I wasn't, but... she might be right. I mean... my first thought when we met was... she reminded me... of... Emma... I think she's right.

I'm a bad person.

I should stop doing that, stop thinking of Emma and treating her like Emma. She's a new person. There's... yeah, there's similarities, but... I'm letting it color everything, she's right.

She pulls away, starts to say something, then looks confusedly at the cheek she hit, which is already fine because she made me the Monster. I turn away, not... I dunno. I don't want her to see
it. "I heal." Leave it alone. Um. Something else, make this about something else... "When are you going to bed?"

Cherie grins at me. "When are you planning to join me?"

I stare at her. I wasn't planning on it. I mean... the original reason... was because she reminds me of Emma and that's a thing I did with Emma and no, but... I don't want to admit that's the reason. It's not the only one anyway. The other is- "I don't sleep."

Cherie looks disappointed in the extreme. Weird. Then her face does this complicated thing, with frustration -she pulls at her hair for a moment, too- and disappointment and other things -and then she stops, abruptly, eyeing me suspiciously. "... Taylor, what were you planning on doing all night?"

... shit. I don't... I don't want to see her looking at me all confused and hurt.

So I look away. "I'd thought you'd have a laptop I could do research on." Stupid, stupid me. "As is... probably just brood all night."

Because I'm a bad person.

"Come on Taylor, into the bed with you." Cherie jerks me out of the chair, and ignores me protesting that I'll turn into the monster and shoves me with surprising force into the bed and declares, "We are doing cuddles. Cuddles make everything better. You are not leaving this bed until I leave this bed."

I'm a bad person.

"Stay here."

I don't move.

I'm a bad person.
Cherie leaves, and comes back after doing... whatever all she does in the bathroom. Removing her makeup, I guess? She looks at me like I grew a third head, and says, "Come on, let's change you into something actually comfortable to sleep in."

She pulls something out of the closet, drags me to the bathroom, shoves me in, *audibly* taps her foot outside while I change -it's a nice dress- and shoves her way in almost immediately after I'm finished, perfunctorily looks me over, and declares, "Good enough for now."

For now? What's that supposed to mean?...

Then she shoves me over to the bed, turns out the light, climbs into bed and starts *hugging* me again, makes cranky noises when I try to shuffle to avoid cutting her, and finally declares, "Good night."

I can't talk like this, but I'm not sure what I would say if I could.

There's nothing to do but think during the night. I *could* just... break away from Cherie, but at first I'm not willing because I feel like I've been awful to her, and later because... it helps. A little. Which makes no sense, the monster can't even feel that level of pressure! But it helps anyway. For some reason.

Baffling.

Yeah. In retrospect? Yeah. I was letting my experience with Emma taint my experience with Cherie.

It's a weird realization. Cherie is the mind-controlling daughter of a mind-controlling monster I murdered. *She* should be the paranoia-inducing, suspicious-as-all-fuck horror show.

But no.
Emma made me this way.

All the more reason to get a break away from school, away from Emma.

Still a weird realization. Bizarre and baffling and confusing and counter-intuitive and true.

It honestly probably takes four hours for me to work through that. It's just too strange. It should be wrong, yet it's not.

I resolve to treat Cherie better.

I also resolve to figure out... something to do about my personal(ity) difficulties.

I have no idea what.

Those two resolutions are pretty much the entirety of what eight hours or so of thinking accomplish before Cherie wakes up.

I don't think much of her waking up initially. It's sort of earlier than I figured she'd wake up - I dunno, I pegged her as the sort of person who would sleep in until noon if they could - but whatever. Maybe it's another Emma-based bias. (Not that Emma was prone to sleeping in, but whatever) I'm a little confused when she goes to turn on the TV, making funny faces, but not hugely so. But then she starts lingering on news channels, looking grossed out even though nothing particularly grotesque is happening on them, and... I step to where I'll be Taylor. "What? What's going on?" She waves a hand flippantly, but then-

"-reported arriving at Canberra thirty minutes ago. All parahumans willing to volunteer for an Endbringer attack are urgently asked to report to your local PRT office if at all possible. This is the Simurgh, Ziz-

Ah. "We're going." No room for argument. Unequivocal act of good, no moral quandaries, no me wondering how much is me and how much is my power editing me, no questions of whether it's a net good. I refuse to back down.
Cherie argues anyway, looking... scared? "Boss, I can't contribute anyth-"

No. We're doing this. Period. "Search and rescue."

Cherie doesn't give up. "What about you? I'm pretty sure you, what, can't maintain the squid state when people see you?" Fuck. "So how are you expecting to contribute in a great big fight with lots of people? Do you even have any powers other than turning into the squid? And that regeneration, I guess."

FUCK.

I mutter about the vague, unhelpful 'human presence' thing... but really. It's useless.

"So no, not really."

The one pure good thing and I can't contribute.

That... I have no words. I just want to do *good*.

Cherie interrupts my thoughts, throwing her hands in the air. "Okay fucking fine, would throwing a sheet over you work?"

Wait. But... maybe? I... that seems *ridiculous*, but... "I never thought of that possibility. I... I don't know?"

Cherie makes a big, put-upon sigh, and works a sheet off the bed. Once it's off, she tells me, "Hold still," and blindly moves about until she can throw the sheet over the monster. Which she does. "I'm opening my eyes now."

Nothing happens.

*Nothing happens.*
I'm still the monster!

It can work!

"We're going to need a bigger sheet." Cherie sounds un-thrilled, but that's fine!

I throw the sheet off. "We can do that! You've got money, we can just buy a big sheet, is there a size bigger than King I forget-"

Cherie interrupts me. "Are you going to wear a costume?" Pure pragmatism. Well, almost. Some irritation, too.

I... uh... "If I'm under the sheet it shouldn't be necessary?" Here's hoping she buys that. Because. Well. This is actually a bad idea, but I don't want to go retrieving my costume, I want to go, help people, right now.

Cherie seems determined to rain on my parade, though. "Were you able to see from under the sheet?"

Well, no... but... "I can cut eyeholes in it!" Her Debbie Downer routine is not preventing me from doing a Good Thing! Oh, actually, I should clarify. "With my limbs. They have blades, you know." Because I'm not sure if she knew that or not.

Cherie heaves another put-upon sigh. "Can we just... not do this?"

A pure good thing, the one pure good thing I can do without worries or qualms. "We're helping." This is not optional.

She sighs, but finally gives in.

I can't stop grinning.
I'm helping.
Chapter Summary

This chapter overlaps with Monster 4.1 and 4.2. There's also a slight loss in formatting compared to Sufficient Velocity, as with the previous chapter.

Chapter 8: It's in my BRAIN

Seriously fuck my life. ffffffffff

Okay so we're making our way to PRT Headquarters -ffff do they suspect Pride as being the girl who dropped in on Sophia? Shit. Oh! The sheet keeps trying to come away! I point it out to Taylor, we stop for a moment, and I start to ask if this is a good enough reason to cancel but Taylor gets angry -not imma murder you angry, just back the fuck off angry- so I drop it before I've even really started.

Dammit. Of course not.

So there goes that out. Fine. Play along. "We can work with this." Not remotely the circumstances I'd hoped to put knot-tying skill to use, but okay. I conveniently know some damn good knots -and thankfully Taylor seems too thrilled at that to wonder why I'm a knot master- so... I do that. Tying them around a bladed... whatever is up with these legs... is a new challenge, but eventually I work out a trick to use the blades as an anchor point... ugh. Here's hoping it doesn't cut through at speed as we go. The blades look sharpest and shiniest where they converge at the tip into an arrowhead, so I'm not too worried because further back they're more rounded and glint less and that's where I'm tying the knot off -heh- but I still have a vivid image of going splat because Taylor is rocketing along at over a hundred miles per hour and a knot comes apart and I go flying. The injustice of it is that she regenerates, so she'd probably be fine.

The thing I resent the most is how I can't even really enjoy the run. I mean, Taylor isn't leaping from rooftop to rooftop or anything anyway, but just streaking along ground level, the world a blur and the occasional early riser startling as a girl mounted on an oversized and spidery Casper ghost skirts around them -not even getting into the reactions from people in cars, heh- should be enjoyable, but. You know. Going to get mindfucked by the Simurgh.
I pull my blindfold on when Taylor starts getting excited and also I can tell we're like a block away from the PRT headquarters. I feel like I should be getting in character, but Pride is just... a name. It's not an identity or anything. So. I just kind of 'listen in' -oh jeez Oni Lee is coming this way. Oni. Fucking. Lee. Ooooh shit I hope he doesn't recognize me. Wait, does that mean he's volunteering for an Endbringer defense? Dude. Duuuuude. I... you cut up a child -my brother- actually you know what let's drop the line of thought that gives me chest pains and focus on the fact that WE'RE GOING TO THE GODDAMN SIMURGH.

Yes, that is still a mood improvement. Why you so craycray, Cherie?

uuuugh

Finally it's time for intake. I... was not expecting an intake process. Goddamn, we're messing about with governmental bureaucratic bullshit in the middle of responding to Angel Godzilla wrecking a... well, I was going to say a 'major city', but I know fuckall about Australia. Whatevs. PRT why you do this. Fine! Whatevers! I'm... honestly more bothered by how Taylor takes this completely in stride. Aren't you trying to be a hero, girl? Shouldn't you be bothered by the inefficiencies of a vast bureaucratic machine vis-a-vis negatively impacting your ability to 'do good'? Rage against the machine! Rage against the machine!

sigh

I have to explain to the trooper that Monster isn't, like, a projection or anything, and her current appearance has to do with her power. The trooper takes that in stride. Kinda. There's some skeptical judgy thing going on there but I'm not sure about or all that interested in the line of reasoning they have. Whatevs, troopa. Then the dude comments that it would be appreciated -special emphasis and everything- if I didn't participate in the event of having major psychological issues the Simurgh might exploit.
I glance at Taylor (Her response to me doing that blindfolded is so fun), but she's still all determined and there's suspicion and anger at the idea I might be questioning this idea.

fuck

I smile brightly at the trooper. "We're all good here, thanks." Nah, I'm a nervous wreck following around a murderous psychopath for the Greater Good because I'd have a nervous breakdown otherwise. Plenty of baggage here! I'm so fucked. So, so very fucked. But I think Taylor would remove me from her life if I didn't do this. And I don't just mean haha she might kill me this is not a joke why are you laughing, I mean she'd probably cut ties even if she didn't try to kill me. No more caping together for us! No more anchor for me. And I'm imagining staring into the gibbering void of personal oversight, in which I must decide what I want and figure out why I want it, and no. gg no re, SAN loss, game over, return of Cthulhu.

The mindfuck Endbringer is less SAN loss. Probably. I hope.

ffft

Then the trooper pulls some techno-collar whatsit out of a box -a cardboard box- sitting next to him and holds it out to me. Then he looks at Taylor, and there's doubt, and he looks at me, and I nod ever so slightly and hey I don't even need to massage his emotions to get him to get out a second collar.

I regret this the instant he starts explaining they're collars for 'sploding our heads if we spend too long in the Simurgh's radius. Fuckin' what.

... is this why the Simurgh has the lowest turnout of paradummies to fight off its attacks? I mean, wow. Thanks. I look at Taylor -hahaha her response is so funny- but yeah she's still super-de-duper determined to keep on with this literally suicidal plan. I... okay, I think I'm getting an idea of how she psyched herself up to go charging into Nilbog's territory. And Daddy. Does she not have a survival instinct? Does she not recognize the existential horror inherent to the Simurgh making you into something you're not without you even realizing it? Rhetorical questions, bitch! Obviously the answer is a big fat NO!

...
Blah blah blah we wait for a bit. There are other people hanging about and I give no fucks. Taylor seems surprised briefly, no idea why, no care. One dude looks at us and is all contemptuous and he snorts oh you did not. Poke poke poke come on dude. Glance at us. Lust! Just a little. Glance again. Lust! Haha. Yeah, reconcile that to your casual dismissal of the greatest parahuman who ever lived! Also her bladed Casper. Hahaha he's trying to cope and failing. Yes dude, you are hot for some teens. Deal with it.

Uuuuh. All of a sudden there's a line burning itself into the grass... "Okay right quick are we waiting on anybody before we go because I am in high demand let me tell you lads." Hey- "And lass." Better. I like this lady. Could I get away with... eeeh, probably not. Darnit. A teleporter would be convenient.

People respond. One of the dudes is all, "Man, I don't know nuthin'." The wolfmask dude -waaaait is that Hookwolf?- who I've been messing with shrugs. Phasing biker dude shrugs. I shrug, 'cause apparently that's the hip thing to do if you're a cape in Brockton Bay. (oh god we're going to the Simurgh)

Teleporter lady shrugs, claps her hands, and starts circling us, drawing a line, same as the one that inscribed itself before she arrived. Hmmm. I wonder what her limits are?... "Hold still lads and lass and whatever the ghost with bug eyes qualifies as, ya don't want to have anything outside the circle. Trust me. Also, don't be alarmed by anything you see in transit, it's na' anything to worry yerself over."

Don't wha-

JESUS CHRIST WHAT THE FUCK. They don't just look like demons, they're- I can sense them! Amusement and hunger and I just. Fuck. I do not need this before going into the Simurgh's zone. Why are we apparently teleporting through Hell? And of fucking course Taylor is peachy keen. No survival instinct whatsoever. Girl's a loon! And I'm the worse loon because I've made her my boss!

The teleporter lady who did this to us makes sympathetic noises at the screamy phasey loser. "Always hits the crybabies hardest." Haha! I would like you if you weren't dragging us through Hell. Mental note: nope nope nope, no way, no how, no toy.
There's a *pop* in my ears as things are abruptly - I have to blink against the change in lighting - replaced by grass and shit. Ugh. Teleporting fucking *sucks*. I was so distracted by the *goddamn demons* I wasn't thinking much about it, but I... this is disorienting. When we teleported out of Brockton Bay, I went from having a somewhat dense city of people, animals flying, climbing, and burrowing about in basically a hemisphere with stuff above ground level (Except for that one underground prison thing) and... okay, the ocean has fish and stuff, but most of them don't really register so whatever. Anyway, in *Hell*, the whole sphere of my range was filled to the gills with terribleness. Overload! And now we're in Canberra and it's like Brockton Bay but with more panic and fewer people. (Evacuation? Smaller city? Ugh) More animals, though.

Welcome to Australia, I guess.

Do I sense the Simurgh? I mean, I'm not sensing anything that stands out particularly, but I'm not sure I'd sense that she's bigger than people. Okay, she'd be in the air -oh. There's a bunch of fliers looping around and being all aggressive at... fucking nothing.

... 

Damn. In my heart of hearts, the innermost optimist residing deep inside me, I'd hoped she'd be susceptible to my power and this would be the start of Cherie Vasil: God-Empress Of All Mankind, By Way Of Mind Controlling The Goddamn Simurgh. She'd be my little Zizster! Big Zizster. Oh never mind, it's a dumb pun. The *Simom* is where it's at!

Alas, the world is a dark and terrible place in which No Fun Is Allowed so the bird-lady isn't even visible to my *radar*. No song-

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{\delta^2 r}{\delta t^2} &= \frac{g}{r} - g \\
-\text{what was that.}
\end{align*}
\]

No seriously, *what was that*. Don't you fucking fuck with me! I'm Cherie Vasil! *I* do the songs in people's heads! Fuck you imma sue!

don't hyperventilate girl we'll only be here like fifteen minutes and everything will be fine everything *is* fine look at how Monster is all serene and calm and happy and goddammit fuck her stop being so calm
No no no no no no no no

Oh hey Taylor is all impressed with me! And... concerned? Uhhhhhh. Um. Oh! Maybe she thinks I feel sympathetic stress when around other people? Well... "Not much, Boss. Reading emotions isn't feeling them, and, well, I don't care." Hah! She's impressed-

-d with godfuckingdammit get out of my brain.

Okay calm. Be calm. Boss likes it when I'm calm when she thinks I shouldn't be. Calm Cherie, fucking calm. Nothing but Zen.

arghblarghle

No wait Taylor is moving from impressed to... depress- oh fuck you! "Oh goddammit stop that depressive bullshit I'm trying to concentrate here, it's not actually easy picking out people who are wounded or dying or whatever instead of just panicking or giving up because they're defeatist or whatever." Seriously, the one good thing from this trip is Taylor being chirpy, and she's getting all -oh god is it the Simurgh warping her please no. No. No.

LALALALA NOT LIIIIISTENING.

Okay, no, focus, people who are probably injured. Gotta impress the Boss, gotta Get Shit Done, gotta get out of here- there! That dude is bleeding out or otherwise losing consciousness! "That cluster of trees."
We get that girl loaded readily enough, and I briefly check if Taylor wants to search for more or go drop them off where I can tell rapid transit capes are coming and going and she gets all excited at the former so that's what we do. We collect a dude with awesome looking guns who I'm betting is a tinker and I seriously consider taking one of them but when my hand moves in that general direction there's all kinds of meanness from Monster so that's a no-go. Pout. Ignore how Monster is distinctly Unimpressed. Whatevs.

We load up two more folks, a little girl who even I feel the tiniest twinge of protective bullshit - seriously, why is she here- in the most I'm A Ballerina Princess costume ever plus some other dude who... well. Looks like a hobo. I'm not sure if it's a cape with a shitty costume or a Gen-U-Ine Australian Hobo. He's Gen-U-Ine-Ly gross though, staining the sheet with brown crap. I mean. It's not very noticeable given how blood is soaking into the thing...

With that many people aboard and making me feel all gross and squished up and also one of them keeps banging into my shoulder, we zip off to drop them off at the Teleporter Hodown. Don't even have to ask Taylor. Awesome.

Putting a knife to Little Jean's throat. Laughing it off as a game.

Then we grab another few folks. I... find it hard to care. I just can't motivate myself. Tired. Headaches. Everything feels off.

Hugging Taylor, warmth, comfort, acceptance.
Time feels weird. The collars beep every minute, but sometimes it feels like they beeped just a second ago and sometimes it feels like

*Go out and Collect. Impress Daddy. So he won't put you in the Box again.*

It's been half an hour since the last one and I can't pin it down.

We get... a lotta people. I guess. Our collars beep and announce that there's five minutes left. I'm just sort of relieved. At least Taylor didn't try to attack the Simurgh. I don't know what to make of what Taylor is feeling. Dunno. Don't care. Just glad to be done.

No. Wait. She's... alarmed? Concerned for me? Oh. Uh. "Fine, just fine, we just got up early is all." We did. Kinda. Maybe. When was that again?

Playing tag in the woods with Jean-Paul.

Taylor's still alarmed. Okay. She goes... to the place. We wait, and she's dancing back and forth, concerned. Scared. For me? I dunno. Tired.

We sink into the dirt via a silly teleporting cape.

I jerk awake some when Taylor tries to approach a wall in... wherever we are. Baseball stadium? Blorgh. Whatever. She wanted... safety? Security? Oh. She wants her back to a wall. Very paranoid of her. I mutter into the blood-and-gore-streaked sheet, "I can track threats just fine." She doesn't seem reassured. Bleh. I direct her until we're standing among a cluster of people who have been calm and... yeah. Not psychopathic murders. Like Taylor.
Ugh. I was... dreaming about Jean-Paul?...

Taylor gets all antsy as the whiny crybaby normies start being whiny crybabies. Simurgh been around so long they're... isolating the place or something, so the normies are wailing. Families or something. Hehehehehe Taylor's frustration is delicious. Wait that's wrong. Why do I taste?... tastes like sherbert. What?

Meh.

"Miss Moriarty, postcog detective extraordinaire." Uh? Oh. Yeah, some... lady who's been wanderin' about. She dumps an avalanche of stupid bullshit (ie her power) on us and Boss keeps pushing me to, like, ask questions or whatever. So I do and don't let on that I don't give a fuck. Ugh. Feel hungover. Like I did all the drugs and then chugged a keg and then got a concussion. Maybe not in that order.

... wait, don't the goddamn suicide collars prove we're- oh god I don't care stop infodumping on me girl. Why. Why. Stop talking. Please. Okay fine you could've stopped at 'easier to fool than my power', god! I get it! Just... do the touching.

She does the touching. For some reason Taylor gets all wiggly and embarrassed and -ohohohoho. Ooooh my. I need to keep that reaction in mind. Tuck it away in my heart and/or brain. She's all squooshy about the cuddling! Hahahaha why is Moriarty staring at me. Oh come on lady, you've gotta have seen way weirder and/or creepier shit in your time, stop being all skin-crawlingly creeped-out and suchlike. And hey! Why are you judging me and not her? Bullshit! That's, uh, species-ist? Whatever, that's bullshit is what it is!

Boss says no to the touching. Embarrassed? No, wait, there's a stab of... something else. Some other concern. Blurgh. If I didn't have this headache... I dunno why she's saying no. Mori-whatever says I can go. Nu-uh. No way. "Not leaving the Boss." Also not risking being MIBed into secret PRT villain-hating facilities of awfulness. I'm staying right here where I'm safe with my murderous psychopath of a boss. Hahahaha Taylor is being all offended by Mori-blah looking at her like... like... fuck, I can't tell. Headache. Not right.

... wait shit the Boss is murderously angry and just took a step toward the Holmes Whore. (Costume doesn't even look good on the girl, ugh) "Calm, boss, calm. Whatever she thinks of us is nothing to get hot over." Also, pat her, uh. On the... where... let's go with behind the eyes? I guess? Touchy girl is stupidly oblivious and I finally just jolt her with some anxiety, hoping she'll like... remember an appointment or something. Before she gets Boss in trouble by being deaded at her bladed... legs?... anyway, off she goes. And then the Boss twists her head to look at me and I think she's trying to hate me to death but really she's relieved the girl is gone so haha. Grin, shrug. It worked, right? Right.
Then things subside. I consider letting Taylor know it might be smart to move elsewhere 'cause the groups are shifting and some less stable people are now hanging about us and then decide I don't really care and she shouldn't either so I don't. Some people get taken outside and executed, quietly. Simurgh bombs, probably. I mean, I guess they could be political dissidents the Australian government is killing for its own convenience, but whatevs. Not my problem.

Time passes in a haze. I think I fall asleep sometimes, but I'm not sure. Taylor doesn't react, but maybe she doesn't care. Maybe she doesn't notice. So I dunno.

Eventually some smug James Bond wannabe jackass shows up. Asks me to come with him so he can do a psychotic analysis on me. No thanks, I'm good, Missus Holmes already saw my innermost secrets of hugging a squid. This verifies me as Adequately Sane (hahahahahaha) and so James Bond can and should fuck off. "Jus' the Boss needs to be cleared." That. That's all.

James Bond is very British-ly all 'one moment' and 'I see' while adjusting his stupid glasses-over-a-goddamn-domino-mask dealy. Poseur. Loser. Stop tempting me to poke your brain until you giggle. I do not need the temptation right now. Then he gestures for Taylor to come with, and I'm all 'nu-uh you can't leave me behind' and he's all 'uh-huh, I can too leave you behind' but eventually Taylor just rolls me offa her and goes with.

I pout at her where she can't see me. Lame.

Then I rub at my aching forehead. Ugh, now I'm in cool, slightly wet grass. Instead of on a warm, blood-slick sheet. This shouldn't be disappointing, but it is anyway. I want my goddamn blood-soaked sheet and the not-actually-that-warm body inside of it, dammit.

I try to 'listen in' to Taylor's whatever, but I'm all discombobulated and drifting and she's basically calm so I can't stay all alert and worried or anything. There's... an odd moment, a shift in her everything, feels less jagged and lemony and goddammit emotions don't taste stop that. I'm not sure what to make of the change, and it lingers, which... feels kinda nice, actually. James Bond wannabe isn't as calm as he's acting, but he's not worried in a way that has me thinking he'll have Taylor quietly taken out back and shot. Well. I think they've been having capes do the actual executions, quiet capes, but whatever. Keeps... aggravating Taylor? Startling her? Anyway, James Bond keeps making her kinda mad. Just a little. There's... a moment where Taylor gets all sad and upset and I'm wondering if I should get involved but then it passes and I dunno. Tired.

I still edge closer regardless.
Thankfully, Taylor, when she comes back out -wearing the sheet more like a robe now, human- seems to take my changed position in stride, no suspicion or whatever. Wave and smile, Cherie, welcome her back. I clap one arm onto her shoulders, all friendly-like... and lean. Oh god I feel sick. I dunno what to make of Taylor's response. She didn't like me doing it, but then she gets all sad and stuff and I don't know what the fuck but she actually moves to help support me without being too obvious about it so I guess it's all good???

We make our way outside, and oh thank god. They removed the goddamn fucking asshole stupid suicide collars of utter bullshit. Safe. I'm safe. Christ, I didn't realize how tense I was. Thank you, anonymous PRT trooper. I will remember your signature forever and if I ever see you again you will get a night with a lucky lass and/or lad, on me. Once we're outside, I take a breath of air not reeking of human sweat and other unpleasantness, and comment, "Well, that should've sucked, and somehow it didn't." Taylor goes broody on me, no goddamn clue why, fffff. Scowl! Imma scowl at you, girl. "We did the stupid thing and we're not dead. Live a little, come on." Nope, she goes straight to brooding. So broody. Broody Mcbroodington -shit! Okay that bit of murderous hatred was brief-lived.

... still thinking I shouldn't poke at her for a bit.

ohmygod stop brooding. Cherie interrupt! "I really do need more sleep, you know. I wasn't exaggerating when I said we got up early, and then we did this whole thing and I just feel... ugh. Need a nap. Not like we're going back to BB until they're done with the big bird." No lie, I'm... ugh. Headache. Tired. Brain feels off. Tasting emotions and bullshit like that.

"Pride?" Taylor asks. Uh. Monster asks. I should probably... not... blurt her civilian name out while we're here.

"Yeah, Boss?" Keep it simple. Especially because I have no idea why she's suddenly all curious and whatever.

"Were you able to sense the Simurgh's emotions at all? Or an, um, emotional signature from it?" Oh. That.

"Nope." I wish. I'd be soooo outta here, getting my own country... she swears under her breath. Oh. Actually, in retrospect, there was kinda a pattern... "I think I might've been able to tell who the song was hitting, though, and how hard." Maybe. Not sure. Didn't pay a ton of attention to it, it was in the background, but like I could feel people aligning, overall, some faster than others. I think
capes were more variable, though. Not entirely sure.

She looks at me all skeptical, feeling skeptical-yet-hopeful. Uh. Why? "Really."

I answer with, "Really." Seriously, I'm pretty sure. Mostly sure. But why does she feel hope? Oh, whatever. I need a nap. "Seriously Boss, I need rest. Can we just find a comfy corner and let me just... close my eyes for a few minutes?" I can immediately tell she's okay with that, if a bit grudging. Awesome. So we go over near a wall, and I lay against her. I cover my eyes against the city lights -it might be night but it's not dark- and comment, "I did not sign up for this shit." Fuckin' Simurgh.

"Yes you did," is Taylor's petty response and I just ignore that. I signed up for murdering people for awesomeness. I did not sign up for search and rescue in Endbringer attacks.

Christ.

I drift off for a bit. Then I'm woken up by Taylor getting all twitchy and paranoidly focused on... probably the batch of dudes who are all curious and shit and have been since we got here and I keep having to slap them with fear because they keep working up to talk to us. No thanks bro, I'm sleeping here. "No, they're not fucking planning on slitting our throats. Stop that. Save the paranoia for the hunt. They're just curious why we have such shitty costumes." I think. "Also a couple of them are worried you're seriously hurt and haven't said anything because I keep making them afraid to actually approach us." Taylor doesn't like that. Whatevs, distraction time! "Also one of the guys thinks you're cute, though I'm not sure what he's seeing with all that blood-soaked sheet you're bundled in that makes him think that."

I miiiight be making that up. Especially since I'm not 100% sure it's a dude. Or they might be hot for me. But that's all irrelevant because the real point is that now Taylor is getting all flustered and awkward! She's capable of these kinds of feelings! Hahaha! "So you are interested in boys. I'd wondered, with the 'best girl friend' and all..." That gets an ugly response, which then spirals off into... more brooding. Ugh. Okay, I really need to stop bringing up this Emma girl. Taylor goes all 'my parents are deeeeeead' and I'm Batman, even though I don't know who that is' when I bring her up and the brooding is just tiresome.

Oh, okay, she's... focusing on something else now. Something with a tiny thread of hope and the focus of someone trying to solve a difficult puzzle. I'm just going to leave that alone and not provoke more brooding.

Probably fall asleep while I'm at it.
"Ta-daaaaa!" Wha-

Taylor pulls me to my feet. "We just need to walk through the portal, right?"


"Yeah absolutely it's simple as cheese you just walk through and there you are, I've tossed balls, driven cars, redirected an avalanche this one time at band camp, it's awesome, oh but please don't stop halfway through I don't wanna risk the portal turning off while you're half here half there so come on are ya'll ready to go I sure hope you are 'cause I am!!"

Oh god. That's not even the entire blah, that's just the point at which I tune things out because Taylor is all outraged and horrified. When it becomes obvious the girl isn't going to stop talking, Taylor interrupts. "What was that about turning the portal off with someone halfway through?"

Squirrel-on-crack-girl clams up. Then sheepishly admits to her portal slicing people in half. Oh. Goody. Can we have the hell dimension girl instead, please?

Taylor is super-frustrated and all. Girl's really testing her patience. "I'm testing the portal first."

Awww, that's so sweet of you Tay-Tay. Hmmm. Should I call her that? Eeeeh I'll try out other nicknames first, see how she reacts.

Crack-girl is all mildly depressed and anxious. "Well, don't take too long, you're not the only people waiting for me."

Taylor totes ignores her, marches up to the portal, dragging me along?? Uh okay. Sticks her arm through, then whispers to me, "Hit her with something to startle her." Oh! I can totally do that! Crank up crack-girl's anxiousness and insert a stab of panic -well. Taylor seems reasonably satisfied

why is she sticking her head through the portal
this has gone past sweet into reckless stoppit


I follow her through, staggering a little. Still not entirely awake. Ooooh ice cream headache. Yes, I am missing hell dimension girl, the transition was actually less disorienting with her, less headache-y. Taylor is looking around, being all paranoid ohmygod Taylor. I whisper at her, "Nobody cares, other than yokels who are just being nosy for nosiness' sake. Let's get going, come on." Fuck, that come out more aggressive than I'd intended. Do not feel good. Headache is... scaling back a bit... but I still don't feel good. Also? Fuckin' Oni Lee is talking to wolfmask jackass, let me out, let me out now.

From there it's making our way to the hotel, ditching the blood-soaked sheet on the way because haha no way am I trying to sneak that past the employees... I mean, it'd be funny to have that one guy who saw me with the handprints on my cheeks and mess with him some more, heck he's even in the lobby right now, but that is just asking for trouble.

Taylor escorts me to my room and wanders off, bemused, after I've flopped onto the bed.

---------------------------------------------

Knife held to Taylor's throat.

Bladed tentacle held to my throat.

Blood spray.
I wake up to the realization that I stupidly didn't think about the blood staining the inside of my thighs, among other places. And Taylor didn't fucking notice it when she abandoned me. Goddammit Taylor.

Plus side: it's trivial to go to that one guy (still in the lobby) and claim I'm 'so sorry' and I'm surprised by how heavy my period is and wave off the problems. I make sure to pick out and flush some of the actual chunks of meat and wash my hands thoroughly before I do that -ew ew ew- but the guy is fairly understanding. (Thanks to Cherie Intervention) So that could've gone worse, and didn't. The hotel is just going to write me off as That Ditz With A Horrifying Period. Ha ha, jokes on you, I barely have a period (Not that I'm having it right now) because I don't have enough fat on me ie I'm underfed oh god.

I should eat. I'm not hungry, but I should eat anyway.

I do that, once staff have bundled off my sheets and set up new ones. I don't need them jacking my shit because Brockton Goddamn Bay. (Also I hold off on changing into something not-bloodstained until they're done. Ditz With Horrifying Period! Pay no attention to the girl behind the curtain!)

Food tastes good once I'm actually eating it. No appetite, but I'm enjoying food anyway. I dunno. Whatever. Howzabout that city? People are... overall a bit more depressed than they were before the Simurgh attack was announced. There's exceptions, probably people who view it as some kinda victory for humanity or whatever, but the overall tone is a bit grim. I think there's less, like, crime and bullying and general victimization shit going down overall, which is sort of funny. I guess even the jackasses are too mopey to go fucking with people.

Maybe I should stop being so harsh on Taylor's mopeyness. She's agitated and aggravated -not sure what she's doing right now, not at school or her home, don't have a reference point for this spot, it's not like it's the dog kennel- but she's actually a lot less defeatist than the majority of the city, right now. She's hankering for action, I think, not just being all 'oh woe is I we live in a world where unfair superparahuman doom machines are slowly grinding the Earth to dust under their heels for their own inscrutable purposes waaaah' etc etc.

Right. This is why I put up with her angst. She's Captain Action Angst, instead of Let Me Lay In Bed And Give Up Angst.

... also she sometimes can tell when I try to grind it off and desires to kill me for the crime of being
fuckin' nice to her. That doesn't hurt.

I skip out on paying for this particular meal. -1/5 stars, the food is good but the Nazis sitting in the corner with swastikas on their coats were clearly getting preferential treatment and yeah no. Why do you have a Nazi problem, Brockton Bay? What is wrong with you?

I'm still tired and... blburgh. I kinda wanted to go drop in on Taylor and poke her for ADVENTURES! But nah no way. Not happening right now. I just make my way to the hotel, reveling in the fact that the city being depressed means people aren't trying to prey upon a defenseless pretty girl. (ha!) It's funny to mess with these dummies occasionally, but wow does it get tedious at the rate it happens in Brockton Bay.

This time a girl is handling the lobby. I don't remember this girl. New hire? Okay, do I recognize her signature from anywhere important, like the PRT? She could be a PRT trooper undercover... speaking of, I wonder if Taylor realizes how many PRT troopers live in her neighborhood and are creepsters that have way too much interest in her home. Pedophiles? They haven't gone after Danny-dude and I'm pretty sure they're not stealing things going by the lack of reaction from Taylor and Danny over time, but man do they keep walking by all casual-like or just sitting in their... probably a living room or something... intensely focused. For hours. Hell, Armsmaster apparently lives in her neighborhood! Occasionally. I don't think he spends much time pretending to be a normie. It's so depressing that she won't want to hear about that, though. It'd be sooo funny to mess with him. Like, show up on his doorstep asking for a cup of sugar and then say a whole bunch of mean shit about Armsmaster being the lamest hero that ever did lame like we have no goddamn clue he's Armsmaster.

...

Maybe I should do that anyway, on my own time.

Anyway, no, the lobby girl I don't recognize isn't anybody I've mentally marked as notable in any way. Just a new hire.

Sleep.

Oni Lee leaning over a corpse. The corpse is wearing Jean-Paul's idiot costume.
Oni Lee shifts, and it's my face on his mask.

I wake up with the dim sense I had shitty dreams. Really shitty dreams.

Can't remember them, though.

Whatevs. Dreams are bullshit anyway. Just annoying I'm not sleeping well.

... oh. Taylor is coming this way. And is... angry? Paranoid, too. Sweet, are we going to do something fun now? As opposed to the stupid Simurgh misery thing??

I take a few minutes to do bathroom stuff and fix up some of the worst of my makeup while waiting for her, and start swearing under my breath when I notice she's getting angrier and more paranoid the closer she gets. She's angry at me. What the fuck, why? I did her stupid goddamn thing like she wanted me to even though it was a terrible idea, and she wasn't mad at me during it, so what's her deal now?

I meet her at the door. "Why are you mad at me?" Ugh, I am not awake enough for this bullshit.

Taylor is all business, tightly restrained anger. She doesn't answer me until I've closed the door behind her. "You kept people from freaking out at the stadium, didn't you?"

"What?" is my extremely well-considered and thoroughly intelligent refutation of her FUCKIN’ WHAT.

She makes squinty angry eyes at me. "When I was the monster, wearing the bloodstained sheet, and then as T- not the monster." What was that correction about? We're in private! "-still in a bloodstained sheet. Nobody reacted. That was you, wasn't it?"

Oh my god. No, goddammit no, why are you so goddamn suspicious, Taylor. I rub at my chin like
I'm a thoughtful and intelligent person thinking hard. "You know, that would've been a clever idea, if I had thought of it." Taylor keeps her face still, but she's all offended and... slightly embarrassed? Hmmm. Success? "Back in reality, I'd not gotten enough sleep, strained my power in ways I've never used it before, was carried around by you which is, let me tell you, not a smooth ride at all before you start throwing other people's carcasses next to me, and I was waaaay more concerned someone was going to blow my head off because we'd spent thirty seconds too many around the birdbrain. And anyway, were you even paying attention to other people? Most of the capes had blood staining them, and not many of them had costumes that tastefully obscured the point. Nobody cared." Seriously girl, it was an Endbringer fight.

Oh, this isn't entirely true, now that I think about it. "Well, okay, not nobody, there were like three xenophiles who thought it was hot-" Haha Taylor being grossed out is cute. "-plus there were non-capes who were sure you were some murderbeast, but they thought that about all the capes with bloodstains and no obvious wounds. Basic paranoia." Like you is left unsaid. It's so obvious. "So no, Boss, I didn't do nuthin' without your express permission." Mostly because I just wanted to sleep. (Okay actually I did a few things, but nothing she missed, and she approved, however grudgingly, of the things she caught. So close enough!) Oh, but of course Taylor is being all suspicious and paranoid and even raising an eyebrow at me. Argument coup de grace! "You do realize that even if someone did alter the mood of the place, there were like a hundred capes there, right?"

Taylor does an admirable job of keeping her immediate embarrassment off her face, but then stops trying (cause I'm awesome and she knows it) and looks away like she's realized she's the worst person who ever did live. Ha! I wi-

"I'm sorry."

-iii

n

Uh.

Wait shit. She apologized? B-but why would she apologize she has every reason to suspect me even though she's totes wrong in this case and nobody ever apologizes to me and I??? How do-Apology, What Do?!? Do I...er... uh... how does this work?

Um. Okay, let's go with... "We're cool." Yeah, be cool Cherie. Be totally cool and calm and accept the apology like a boss, you're awesome, wait what's Taylor looking at why am I crying stop
staring at my tears

I turn around so Taylor can't see. Dammit. Be more on the ball, Cherie. You are a master of feelings, it can't be that hard to stay on top of your own. Shit, need an excuse. "One sec', I haven't been to the bathroom in an age." Lies! All lies! I literally just handled all my bathroom stuff before she got here but I have no other escape hatches!

FLEEeeeeee

I wash my face and listen in on Taylor's brooding of broodness. Brood. Batman brood. Oh god why won't the tears stop just stop tears there's nothing to cry about apologies are no big deal. I wash and use a little towel to dry and goddammit I just applied some blush and all and now it's all being wasted, might as well get it all off while I'm in here rather than having a half-assed outcome.

Focusing on that helps. By the time I'm reasonably certain I've gotten all the blush and so on down the drain, the tears have stopped coming and I don't have that glisten-y thing that happens when you're about to cry. I'm good. And Taylor is... still brooding. W-well, good. She deserves to brood after unfairly making me cry by apologizing to me!!!... yeah even I can't shovel this shit.

Cheery (Cherie) Distraction! "So boss, what are we doing tonight? Same thing we do every night, right?" I do the voice, I could do Pinky perfectly before I triggered, though I can't do it quite right nowadays. Not sure if it's puberty or if I just got rusty.

...  

Seriously? "Really? I mean, I wasn't really expecting you to play along, but you've never heard of it?"

...

Yes, she has never even heard of Pinky and the Brain. Oh my god. She is a failure as a human being. You have not lived until you've aspired to be one of two mice trying to conquer the world no matter how many times they fail at it. (Except for that one time Pinky did succeed)

Taylor just flat-out ignores me. "We're going to go on the, uh, 'camping trip' we discussed last night. After I retrieve my costume." Okay sure fine. Why not. No idea why she's bothering with the
code word bullshit, nobody else is around and I'd know if someone was listening in via having bugged the place, come on, what kind of loser does she think- why is she having a depression spiral what the fuck Taylor initiate EMERGENCY HUGS MANEUVER!

Okay this is worth it just for how she freaks the fuck out. I should hug her more often for that alone.

Okay, she's broken out of the spiral now. I didn't even need to use my power! I may yet cut off this bullshit permanently and just have a happyfuntimes friend for life, without brainwashing! That would be amazing. So I pull back, think back to the moment Taylor's depression spiral started, and go to the obvious reassurance: "We can get you a better costume."

Blank stare. "Better?"

Oh god Taylor this is not complicated- she's being depressed again. Don't make me hug you- the fuck is this super-determination, grizzled vet refusing to give in bullshit? What is going on in her skull? Why is she super-determined in response to talking about getting her a better costume??

No, no, fuck this, I don't care. "I'm not even going to ask." Some things Cherie Was Not Meant To Know. "Yeah, a blanket, a bicycle helmet, and an admittedly rad scarf is kind of a shit costume, easily improved upon, and I'm willing to spend some money on you. Just so long as we don't buy it all in one place, it's unlikely anyone will connect you to your costume just because you bought a part from them, even if they see the costume in full in person."

What, moi having practiced disguises? Why would you suggest such a scandalous idea!

... Taylor isn't even surprised or anything. Or impressed. Darn it Taylor, do you have to suck the fun out of everything? She just says 'okay' like a boring person.

------------------------------------------------------------

Taylor is so goddamn boring. Black on black on black. It looks okay, don't get me wrong, primarily because I'm awesome, but still. Even the decision to wear a cape is boring: she's not going for cool factor, she's going for being able to throw shit at people so she can monsterify.

At least I'm able to use that as an in to get her to accept a detachable skirt.Also goddamn black why
would you wear a black skirt are you an emo wannabe is that what you are.

Why does someone who doesn't know what Batman is insist on dressing like the Goddamn Batman? Not even Batgirl, with the purple and all, no, Batman, with the black and the leather and the more black. Only worse, because Batman at least has bits of yellow, his symbol and his belt and all.

I end up lying and claiming Taylor looks perfectly feminine in it, when she tries the ensemble on in my hotel room. She's all anxious about this bullshit (So stop dressing like a man!) and it's way too late to get her something girlier, especially since all she wants is heavy black shit. Like. Why even bother to buy a new set if she's just going to make the same choices that led to this one? It's only got a skirt because I insisted on it! So. Flagrant lies to assuage her dumbass concerns she's insufficiently feminine while choosing to be masculine at every step. Le shock! You are not very feminine if you choose to not be!

Christ.

I was originally going to get myself a Disney Princess sort of dealy going on, get me a proper costume while we're handling Taylor, but Taylor was all 'pink is not camo' and 'black is the new everything' (okay maybe not that one) and otherwise was laaaame so I ended up giving in to her concerns about 'stealth' and her secret desire to loom over people and say 'I'm Batman' in a gravelly growl and just went with black on black on black plus a white mask of a woman's face with starkly red lips. 'cause I'm a goddamn girly ghost in the shadows, okay? Then I had the awesome idea of doing the blindfold thing, taking my bright red scarf and tying it over the mask's eyeholes.

It's fucking awesome, actually. I am surprisingly okay with this direction for my look. Fear me, mortals, and despair.


I don't even bother to touch on that nonsense. Christ, girl.

Taylor also made us buy a bunch of other bullshit like food and drinks and shit. I guess she wants this to be convincing as a camping trip lie thing. I insist we should get a second sleeping bag but Taylor vetoes that as a waste of money, which I don't even know how to answer that given it's all a goddamn waste of money it's not like we're going on a real camping trip, right? We'll be lounging in hotels and all, like fucking duh. And I know she's not trying to subtly signal to me and/or other people that she intends for us to share the one sleeping bag hint hint lesbo signals, so I just. What is
wrong with you, Taylor?

Whatever.

She has me talk to Danny again, tell him about our quote-unquote ‘camping trip’. This is *slightly* harder than convincing him on the sleepover. In fact, I eventually give up and pass the phone off to Taylor because he's all suspicious of who-knows-what I don't know what normal parents think Christ. Let Taylor land the finishing blow on this dumbass conversation. Taylor panics a whole lot over the course of the call, Danny gets mad but I think not at Taylor? I dunno, I'm tuning them out, frowning at my nails. I need to get a file, get them honed properly. Actually, should I go for more of a dagger-nail thing? It'd be pretty awesome to claw somebody's eyeballs out with my bare fingers, right? It'd be *great* with the aesthetic we got going on and all, too. Still need a file for that, though, forgot to buy one... oh well, I can get one later, during the 'camping trip'. No big.

Oh my god Danny is feeling hope for his daughter. He has no goddamn clue. That is the funniest shit all day. Stop looking at me like that Taylor, this is *hilarious*. 'My psychopath daughter's life is looking on the up now that she's friends with a manipulative Master and is plotting a murdertrip! Hope!' I mean wow you cannot make this shit up.

"She's the kind of person I need right now."

What? What's that supposed to mean? Why is Taylor saying that like it's a *bad* thing? She just looks back at me like I'm crazy and yeah she's not going to answer that one if I press is she? Dammit.

Conversation winds down from there, so I don't even get any real hints from her. Taylor turns off my phone, then stares at it. She's all nostalgic and hopeful and weird shit like that, lost in her own thoughts, staring at the phone. I give her a minute, then get impatient, start tapping my foot... calling her name... I actually have to snap my fingers to get her attention. Christ, girl. It's like you're crazy enough to *willingly* spend time around the Simurgh *oh snap*!

With all that dumb stuff handled, it's go time! Time for us to pretend to be camping in the woods and shit!
Best Worst Weeks Ever

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 4.2 and 4.3.

Chapter 9: Best Worst Weeks Ever

We are fucking actually camping in the actual goddamn woods like actual goddamn campers.

And we don't even share the goddamn sleeping bag because Taylor doesn't sleep and won't cuddle because she'd rather be hunting squirrels.

Taaaaayloooorrrrr.

(Okay and also she very reasonably points out she won't fit inside the sleeping bag when monstered up, let alone both of us, but this is a goddamn crime that could've been solved by getting a bigger sleeping bag)

Ugh.

ugh.

So ugh.

Hunting for the Dragonslayers is kind of cool, when I ignore how we're roughing it like cavewomen. Kind of like looking for new girls for Daddy, but it ends in murder instead of sex, and I have to think about things totally differently. Not totally-totally differently, but a lot different, because the isolation we're looking for isn't that of socially cut-off losers who will ideally turn out to be pretty. Deliberate, paranoid isolation. Like Auntie Naomi, but that was novelty value.

Though having to let Taylor know I need a bathroom break on day 2 is just the worst, like I'm a two year old or something.
Embarrassingly, it takes like a solid week before it occurs to me that Taylor never, ever needs a bathroom break. And since she's the squid when I'm asleep, it can't be that she's just holding it in while we're searching and going while I'm snoring. That's a wrinkle of her power she's never hinted at. Given I had to remind her of my own needs, I suspect she doesn't actually think about it anymore. Jealous. So very, very jealous.

More to be jealous about: she doesn't need to bother with ablutions. I'd sort of noticed she somehow managed to avoid being coated in blood and grit and all when getting her murder on, but hey, she turns into the squid and fights that way. Makes sense, yeah? But no, whenever Taylor takes off her mask to eat with me, she always looks like... well, she's no Hollywood starlet, but she's got no acne, no sweat, no stress lines. I, meanwhile, must look like a fright, what with the 18 hour days (Okay, I exaggerate. A little), the utter lack of basic civilization, and of course as exhilarating as riding Taylor as we're zooming along at some nutso pace -faster than the cars on the highway!- it's exhausting too. I sleep with my hair pasted to my head by sweat, curled up into a sleeping bag in part because I'm exhausted and in part to ward off the creeping cold as my sweat evaporates in already-chilly air. By day three the sleeping bag already smells like unwashed socks.

Amazingly, Taylor doesn't seem to notice any of this. If I wasn't, ya know, me, I'd assume she was being polite by not making any mean comments, but I'm me so I know for a fact that she doesn't notice the smell, isn't put off by how hideous I look -I checked my face with a compact. Once. Never again- and so on. It's really fascinating, and I'm torn between wanting to interrogate her and find out why she's so oblivious and being half-afraid that if I call her attention to it she'll prove to be just like everyone else.

Ultimately the main reason I never do get around to asking is that the grueling pace we're maintaining and Taylor's narrow focus on The Mission leaves me little energy to spare on anything resembling small talk.

I mean, seriously. The days blur together. It's like I signed up for boot camp, only instead of Sergeant Meanie yelling in my face I've got Sergeant Spooky silently pushing me harder than I've ever been pushed before. I never imagined I could be this worn down without an actual life-and-death fight involved.

The funny thing is that in the end, we stumble into the Dragonslayers by them flying overhead, not because of our exhaustive searching.

... or do I find that funny because I'm high on exhaustion?

Oh well.
Taylor being Taylor, she circles around the place a bajillion times before deciding she's happy with just dropping me off and investigating even more closely. I'd be offended if I wasn't exhausted. I wait until Taylor has zipped off before closing my eyes. Just need a minute. Seriously, one minute.

...

I jolt to attention when Taylor comes zipping back. Don't let on that you're running on fumes, girl. Show no weakness. "Not sure why you're back Bo-" I pull the scarf down to my neck, get a look at Taylor and ohmygod she's got a Dragonslayer suit she gives the best gifts. "-prezzies!"

Taylor totally ignores me. "You haven't sensed them approaching yet at all?" Jeez Louise, Taylor, have you no faith in me?

"Yes yes, it would've been the first thing you heard if I'd caught their emotional signatures coming. But seriously, prezzies. It's not like you intend to use that suit, yeah?" Like, duh. It has to be a prezzie. It's not even my birthday! As far as Taylor knows. Actually, I'm not even sure what day it is anymore. Everything has blurred together.

Taylor's got a tangle of ambivalence and reluctance going on. "... yeah, it wouldn't be practical for me to wear a suit for a human. And it wouldn't be as much of a boost to me as it would to you. Honestly, if we can get this working, I'm considering just going back to Brockton Bay and considering this a win. But I'd really rather ambush them here, since we've found them successfully. Though depending on what their security is like, I might have already ruined any chance at an ambush with my breaking and entering." Oh. That's a bit more logic-y and a bit less gratitude-y than I was thinking. I mean, I totally did like therapy-type stuff back in the Bay for her, and she felt better, and... that's why people give presents, if there's no holiday to oblige them. Because they have feelings.

Interesting, veeeery interesting.

I assure Taylor we should totally be able to pull off the ambush, especially if we can get the suit working -I can't wait to try this baby out- and then talk her into helping me figure the darn thing out. I mean, what else is she going to do? Go murder some more squirrels out of boredom? (God, why does she even do that?)
Alas and alack, the Dragonslayers are back in my radius before we get that done. Even though we had hours. I wish I'd taken a nap, instead. Would've been a better use of my time... but it would involve admitting to Taylor I'm run ragged... eh. For some godawful reason Taylor rambled at me about the inside of the Dragonslayer's den (geddit?) and, like, whatever girl. Cool, they had a containment foam trap thing. They probably stole it from Dragon, what with her having invented containment foam and all. Cool, they had some kind of... tinkertech generator whatsis. Cool, they were silly people who didn't bother to boobytrap their cellar entrance. Yeah, and? It's not like they had sharks with lasers or something awesome. Booooring.

I'd rather focus on why a suit meant to have a human inside is simultaneously overly spacious and yet has pokey bits that jam uncomfortably into the skin. I want my prezzie, goddammit.

Anyway, the Dragonslayers. "They're tired, the mission dragged on longer than they expected, they're satisfied with how it went, probably happy with the pay? Might not be thinking about the money. They're expecting home to be safe, so they probably don't know you've been and gone. Pretty sure they're talking, radio or something I guess, one of them is distracted and not paying a lot of attention, the other two keep deferring to him or maybe her but the guy feels like a him to me and I'm not usually wrong about this, I mean there was that one time with the hooker who read like a man and wasn't trans-" Also there was you, Taylor, but I'm pretty sure you'd stab me if I lumped you in with a mannish hooker.

Also, Taylor cuts me off. "Focus. I know you're tired, but this is important." Oh shit she noticed. I thought she hadn't. Damn. You're not as smooth as you think you are Cherie, step up your game. Just keep talking Cherie, like nothing happened. Hide the weakness. There is no weakness, move along citizen, these aren't the droids you're looking for. "So he's probably the leader, especially since he's at the point of the wedge, other two are poking fun, relaxing, not sure whether they're trying hard to not think about the mission or if the mission just wasn't a big deal to them, they're all pretty calm, I'm thinking they've got some kind of early warning system because none of them seems concerned about being tailed or anything. Okay, they're spotting the house, they're not concerned, they think the situation is normal so far, I'm thinking they're going in for a landing - okay, leader guy has noticed something, now the others know, probably he told them but they might've noticed, one of them is pulling up and they're tense and circling, leader dude and I wanna say a woman are cautiously approaching presumably the building."

Oh boy, I'm getting dry in the mouth here. Not enough sleep, totally failed to sit down and get myself taken care of while focusing on the suit. I have to pull out a water bottle from Taylor's monster of a backpack and take a sip before I can continue. "The guy circling overhead is nervous, but it's a calm sort of nervous, he's used to trouble and he's not worried he's going to be sniped or something, I'd rate him as a bit overconfident, I'd guess he was new to the cape scene but I know the Dragonslayers aren't so that's not it, leader man is holding still, tense, while the woman is circling around back. They're worried about an ambush from inside, trusting the guy above to
spot any attackers coming at them from outside, oh oh, I think the woman just found that cellar door you mentioned, she's upset, legitimately thought nobody would pay it attention, wait, she's gone down and she's relieved, it's less bad than she was expecting." I glance curiously at Taylor, because... "I thought you said you trashed the place pretty badly?"

Taylor shrugs, and her feelings are a good reflection of that; bored disinterest, very mild confusion. "I didn't trash the basement particularly. I dunno. I really should get going while they're still inside the building, reduce their odds of escaping by flying away."

Wait wait fuckshit! "Bring me closer! I wanna help! Make them panic or something, I can help, maybe capture one of them?" No Taylor, I'm not too tired to Get Shit Done, see how awesome I am, I can do awesome things even after a long, hard day. Be impressed, dammit!

Taylor is clearly not buying it. Fuck. "I thought your range was line of sight."

Oh god why does she have to pick at the little things like this, I wasn't being literal. "No, it's not actually line of sight, that was a simplification. If I can see someone, and it's not through binoculars or something, I can definitely affect them, but I don't need to see people to affect them. I've been blindfolded a lot of the time and still been doing this stuff." Duh, you- you- you dummy. Come on, I'm making you look bad and you are the tireless monster (geddit?) who shouldn't be struggling just because of a pitiful mortal thing like having been super-busy for days on end.

Taylor's oh and the accompanying emotions is oh-so-satisfying. Yes, Tay, you are being stupid. Good girl, good on you for actually recognizing it.

Whu-oh, I don't like what the Dragonslayers are feeling right now. Feels a wee bit too much like they might be plotting to flee any second now. "Okay seriously can we get going before they decide they need to abandon the place or anything?"

I'm giddy with glee when Taylor indicates she wants me to put my blindfold on. Hell yes! She still sees me as a capable, awesome lady of awesomeness. Aaaand then she shushes me when I express my glee vocally, and okay yes yelling my joy to the clouds is probably ill-advised even if I really doubt the Dragonslayers can hear us from here. Hop on, ride over, hop off when Taylor stops, feeling expectant. Mutter to her, "They're still in the building, and they're pretty freaked out now, but calming down. They think the danger has passed." Which is a bit of a relief. Gives us time to do this carefully, come up with a plan-

-aaand there goes Taylor zipping away.
That little shit. She's abandoned me! She didn't bring me along to help, she was trying to trick me into thinking she did! She didn't even ask if this was in range! Which it's not, not by like twenty feet. Up the blindfold goes and I start hurrying carefully through the undergrowth and oh god this is awful. Aaand there's Taylor slamming into one of the Dragonslayers. They're surprised, but not yet afraid, the one in the air is a bit more fearful, but it's a controlled fear, probably because these dudes routinely get into trouble. Taylor's anticipation is growing, she's looking forward to this -did that seriously show up in the last like five seconds or did I fall flat on my face and miss it entirely before now?- though she's being a bit frustrated. Not sure what's actually happening, but given no one is dead that's probably where the frustration comes in.

Pretty lucky she's staying the emotionally damped squid even though I'm quite confident-

"Fuck!" I swear under my breath, momentarily losing my footing. It is too goddamn dark out in these stupid ass woods. Goddamn mother nature and her goddamn natural conditions. Fie on you, I say, fie.

-that they can see her by now. Flyboy has joined the fight, but I'm just barely in range and haha fuck you feel some anxiety spiking. Oh, that's more panic than I was expecting. I wonder why? Taylor's first victim has just gone past 'concerned because parahuman fight' to 'ohshit I'm gonna die', oof, make that 'ohshit I'm dying' and Taylor is coolly satisfied aaand now flyboy has shrugged off the anxiety attack and is powering through me trying to intensify it -possibly because this is the edge of my range, goddammit Taylor why- and Taylor jolts a few feet and... uh oh. That's low-key concern, but it is concern.

Fuckit, I start tearing through the woods, arms held out in front of me to take the brunt of the invisible-in-the-dark branches I keep tearing through. Okay, and Dragonslayer The Third is on approach, this could go bad places, okay let's switch to making flyboy sad but the main of my focus is on making The Third even more sadder as fast as I can, mix in some guilt and some old-fashioned depression. Ha-ha! They don't cope so well with spontaneous sadness -oh, right, Taylor did probably render that first guy a dead man, they might be thinking it's genuine grief instead of Cherie Brand I Can't Believe It's Not Real Grief, that makes sense.

Speaking of Taylor killing people, she just did that to flyboy even though I had him under control. Goddammit Taylor, I want to make my prezzie work! I pull the blindfold back over my eyes now that I'm clearing the edge of the trees, and call out, "Boss! Boss! They're done, you can stop!"

Holy shit she jolts toward me. Stops herself, but fuck. Note to self: do not poke Taylor when she's
got her murderboner on.

Worth it, though, if this gets me my prezzie working!

Aggravatingly, Taylor's just a lost little puppy who doesn't understand what's going on, zero guilt about moving to gut me. Bah. Bah! Fine, I'll answer her obvious questions and gloss right over the whole 'nearly tried to kill your partner who has hugged you and gone to the goddamn Simurgh for you' etc etc rrrgggh. "Crushing guilt, lotta fear, some depression. Hard to even get out of bed, let alone fight a murderersquid that's killed your only-" Huh, his reaction doesn't fit to that. "-no wait, not only, best?" Closer. "Something like that- friends."

Then it's quiet, aside from a woman sobbing. Oh dammit, again? I was reading The Third as a man! Have I just lost my touch, is that it? No, no Cherie, just... she was a mannish woman. That makes sense, with the mercenary work and all.

Also you've had inadequate sleep for way the fuck too long. Miiiight be a factor.

Aaaanyway, Taylor is eyeing mannish The Third, probably trying to figure out how to crack 'er open without, you know, ruining the goods. I have an answer for that! Psychological torture!

... look, I want my prezzie to actually work. And I'm far, far too tired to fake being moral for Taylor's benefit, especially not after she just gutted these people without batting a currently non-existent eyelash. Okay? Okay.

"Just get it over with and kill me."

Admittedly I maybe could've used a softer touch. I didn't need to actually break the woman, just get her convinced it was better for her to come out of her shell than to hide in it. But whatevs. Shrug-time! "Not my decision." Taylor, Taylor, Taylor, this is your op, your biz. You do as you do. (I think I already know what the answer is: it starts with an M and rhymes with... um... shit, what rhymes with 'murder'? Uuugh I need sleep so baaaad)

Aaaand now Taylor is being all weird and Drama-y, like something Big and Important is happening. Girl. Dude. What? What does it matter? I know you're gonna off her, puleez, stop actin' like this is some thing that demands a whole lotta hard thinking.
Seeing as how I've let up on Anonymous Female Dragonslayer's emotions now that she's out of her tin can (*Two prezzi! Yes!*), she starts getting angry, as she is apparently wont to do when faced with two capes who just killed her heterosexual life partners or whatever those doofuses were. "Come on, it's what Dragon wanted you to do, isn't it? I don't know how she found us without our feeds catching it-" Pffft fffffffhahahaha. Oh god. She thinks *Dragon* sent us? Oh man, the only reasons I'm not busting a gut laughing are that Taylor is taking this dead seriously, that I'm too tired for laughter, and also I'm way too gleeful about *two* suits. Hell yes. Two suits. All mine, me alone, just for me, thanks Boss, you're the best girl a girl could ask for.

"I am not an ally of Dragon's." I wince a little at that. Taylor sounds, um, rather vehement. Oh yeah, there's that whole 'Nilbog and Dragon gettin' it on' thing she had, right? Right. I mean, not very likely yeah, but I can totes relate. If I could deny being Daddy's daughter I think I might.

"So, what, you're villains that lucked into our lair?" Then Female Dragonslayer snorts and says "Yeah, right."

Nothin' but *skill*, thank you very much. And some deduction on Taylor's part. So fuck you. We're *awesome*. "Nah, the Boss was looking for you. Wanted you dead because of Bosnian war crimes or something." I think she said Bosnia. Fuck, I don't even know what Bosnia is. It's an African country, right? It sounds like an African country.

...  

Shit, Taylor, why are you mad at me? Have some pride, girl. Fine, can't say I don't do you any favors. Okay, massage emotions and get that... stupid... *goddamn*... errgh I hate doing the drug thing it always gives me a headache to induce it. After a bit of getting sleepy and muzzy (God, I wish I could join her), she mumbles, "Yeah, we've done some awful things, I can see why someone would come after us." I'm sort of surprised when she pulls a face. More awareness than I thought she had. "The thing in Senegal wasn't intentional, if that helps." Senegal is, what, in the Alps or something? God, whatever.

Aaand now Taylor has got existential dread going on. Come on, *why*? I'm helping! Dragonslayer Girl keeps talking, oblivious to how Taylor is reacting. And my annoyance at Taylor. "So you're not assassins hired by Dragon? That actually makes me feel better. We didn't make a mistake with her."

Ha! Success! Taylor's distracted! "Why were you expecting Dragon to hire assassins?" See, Taylor? I'm helping. Praise me goddammit.
Then the woman says, "We know she's an AI."

'kay.

...

Taylor, why are you freaking out so bad? Should I ask her, or?... ugh, I don't get Taylor. Come on, girl, we live in a world of superheroes. Supervillains. A golden idiot who's the most powerful man in the world. Endbringers. Man, Dragon being an AI ranks like- wait. Ooooh. Huh. I wonder if maybe Taylor is freaking so bad because of her weird theory that Dragon is banging Nilbog. Er, was? Sure, was. So monster king man sticking it in a circuit board, then. Yeah, okay, that's pretty appalling mental images, and I would know.

I seriously consider patting Taylor on the head and saying something comforting, but- "Can you tell if she's telling the truth?" Taylor is too fast on the draw. So unfair. She doesn't sleep, she doesn't need a toilet... god. Some people just get all the luck.

Oh, right. Question-answering time. Shrug, put on best Teacher Face. (Which as previously established is, errrr, not so hot. Well actually it's too hot...) "Not precisely, no. She's not lying to fuck with us, if that's what you're thinking. I've got her in a kind of, um, drugged state." I really, really hate doing this, you better goddamn appreciate me. "It's actually kind of tricky so I can't let you distract me too much, but she's in a kind of stream-of-consciousness thing so she probably believes what she's saying. Or she might just be bored and thinking about nonsense. It can be either."

Taylor refocuses on the woman, and I'm pleased to note that she seems to have forgotten she's supposed to be all horrified by my Evil Ways. "What makes you think Dragon is an AI?"

Dragonslayer lady starts monologuing. BORING. "We found the box. Tinker, made AIs. Made Dragon. Feared Dragon. Left a will. Had to be a police officer to open the box. I was one, didn't want to open it. Geoff talked me into it. Said we had a duty. Have to make sure Dragon isn't evil, doesn't turn evil, doesn't throw off her shackles and devour the world. Programs left in the will. Tapped her senses. Saw her code. Couldn't understand it. Went to Teacher."

For some reason this makes Taylor panic.
"Code changed, needed Teacher again."

And that's even worse panic. Ooookay.

"Stole a suit. A test. Geoff wanted to be sure she was an AI, make sure she was shackled. We stole a suit, exploited her programming. It worked. Dragon is an AI. Used other programs to influence her sometimes. Code changed, programs stopped working. Getting worried that soon it will be just Ascalon. Getting worried soon it won't even be Ascalon. Don't wanna just kill her, not fair to her. But. If she changes so far she's immune, and then..."

Taylor mulls all this shit over. Teacher, Teacher, Teacher. Should that mean anything to me? It means something to Taylor. Probably a supervillain, given how Taylor is trying oh-so-hard to be a heroic justice person. Man, what kind of supervillain names themselves 'Teacher'? That's so lame. You couldn't have even named yourself Professor? Have some class, dude and/or lady.

Then there's some jabber about a panic room, but boy oh boy the headache is coming. Fuck. I hate doing the drug thing. Why did I decide to do the drug thing? Oh, right, because Taylor still doesn't properly appreciate my awesomeness.

Fuckit, I stop doing the drug thing. Too hard, and Taylor's wandered off to do who knows what anyway. And I want my goddamn prezzies to work!

I lean down into the woman's face, grinning a grin that's probably a touch homicidal. Or at least unhinged. I need sleep, oi. "So girl, how do you operate the suits anyway?"

...

Fuck, she's still high. Okay, let's try-

"Interface. Suit. Suit."

...

Oh fucking duh. Why else would she be wearing that stupid getup with the sparklers? God, Cherie,
wake up and use your dumb brain to be less dumb.

Stripping the woman is a giant pain in the ass. She's drooling on herself, and it feels like anytime she moves at all it's just to get in my goddamn way. Plus I have to fiddle around to find how you open the thing in the first place, because it's some stupid one piece like on Star Trek, no obvious zippers, no distinction between pants and shirt. Whyyy. So there's a bit of searching before I even find the fiddly bit that unlocks the collar part, at which point I'm... still trying to haul an uncooperative woman out of nearly skintight clothes.

Good thing I have lots of experience with that!

Taylor shows up before I can actually decide whether I want to get into the dumb thing myself and get started on opening my prezzies or not. "Goddammit Pri-"

Nope! You can't ruin my good mood! "The suit's what we were missing!"

"Clarify," she bites out, and there's that pounding desire to hurt and/or kill someone and okay maybe you can ruin my good mood. Asshole.

Fine, explanation time. With. Um. Creative editing. "I was interrogating her as best I could-" Yeah, interrogating. Like, for the mission. Some dumb thing you care about, right? Totally not just about opening my prezzies. "-while you were gone, boss, and I wanted to know how to operate the suit we got, or I guess maybe the one she was wearing now that we have that too, and what I got out of her is the silver thing she's wearing is necessary to activate and operate these suits. Since she's the only one whose thing is intact, I wanted hers before you ruined it too." Then it occurs to me that Taylor might think I'm into this woman. Fuck, how do I deny that without being suspiciously specific? "That's all!"

Great job, Cherie. Fuckin' wonderful. How could she possibly doubt you.

Taylor takes a bit to calm herself down. I appreciate the effort, though the fact that she needs to do so at all over this is like... hilariously hypocritical? "Okay. Okay. That's... not awful, but you could've waited and told me when I got back."

I grin underneath my mask. Ha! I have a good answer to that one. You lose! "You've been more of a 'kill things and ask questions later' sort of girl so far, boss."
Yes! Victory! Even Taylor doesn't try long to pretend I'm not right!

Then she ignores me to focus on the lady I don't find attractive at all and ffff goddammit Taylor now you've got me noticing why do you put these thoughts in my head this was completely pure and about my love of powerful and shiny things until you dirtied the pool of my mind with your erotic thoughts. "Hey, how do you operate the computer in the 'panic room'?"

Yeah, that's futile. The, uh, drug state thing is going... off places. Taylor turns to me for an explanation without explicitly asking anything. Yeah, fair enough. And it will let me stop noticing the woman is naked and cold and goddammit Taylor. I didn't want to think of her that way! You're just going to kill her anyway! It's wasted pleasant feelings! "I said earlier it's kind of a simulation of a drugged-out state? Well, anything that the brain isn't designed to move to on a moment's notice is... also something it's not really designed to move out of on a moment's notice." God, I don't know. I don't even have a high school education here. I just do things with my bullshit power. "Or at least that's my guess. I just know that some mental states are easier to push people into than others, and if they're hard to push them into, they're hard to push them out of. I mean, we've got time..."

"Fix her." God, Taylor, don't get your panties in a twist. (Wait, now I'm imagining her in panties and my brain refuses to process that idea as plausibly real. She seems like a boxers lady. Or maybe that's just my lingering conviction she was a he...)

But okay, fine. Fine. I can... do... well, something kind of like a 'fix'. Not really, but kind of.

I am going to have such a headache after this.

Call it ten minutes later, while Taylor just stares intently at the woman's face, gaze never drifting any lower (Man, and after she got me thinking that way? Foul! Unfair!), and finally I feel comfortable declaring, "Okay, she should be in less of a vegetative state. Ask away."

Okay, seriously, I want to play with my prezzies. The suit is only nearly skintight, and I don't have the kind of meat on my bones this woman has and -fff goddammit Taylor why did you have to put those thoughts in my head they're not going away! No, shut it brain. The point is, I'm skinnier (And a bit shorter, too), so nearly skintight on her is probably a bit roomy on me. Maybe I can shimmy into the silvery suit while still wearing my costume? Maybe that's even the better way of having it actually mostly fit me. Okay, left leg first, that's good, an-

"Pride, is this going to cause long-term harm?"
I startle. I was sure Taylor was done bothering me. Weird. Oh, right, long-term harm. Uh. "Uh, probably? ’s not like I’ve done a study or whatever." Yeah, I'm gonna go with 'probably'. That definitely sounds about right. I'm more of a have fun and then get bored and discard my toys sort of girl, rather than a long-term investment sort.

"... so I might be on a time limit for her remaining functional enough to interrogate." Oh god Taylor, you are so goddamn paranoid.

Fuck this, I'm getting into the suit. This isn't worth my full brainmeats. "Not one that matters, no. She's not going to turn into a vegetable tonight, and she wouldn't if I kept this going for a week straight." Yeah, Horror. Taylor, you so predictable. And naive. You do realize people do this kind of thing to themselves. Deliberately. For that kind of time. Fuckit, let's just... talk around that particular goofiness of hers. "... yyeeaah I've done that before, and, well. They never were quite the same afterward, but they weren't braindead. Just... weird."

Though to be fair Viola was pretty loopy when I found her. I'm... still half-convinced I made her less demented.

Then Taylor crushes her horror under my bootheels and focuses on talking to the lady who I am not attracted to shut up brain goddammit Taylor.

Ignore them!

Ignore them!

Just focus on getting into the silvery suit. Prezzies. You'll get to be strong as a brute, fast as a mover, fly like Superman, and get kickin' laser guns thrown in too. It'll be awesome.

Fffff. No, I can't keep my costume on while I put it on. Definitely not my shoes, and I'm starting to think not any of the rest of it either. Fine, I'm going to go into the Dragonslayer Den, get nekkid, and put the silvery suit on that way. It'll be a good excuse to stop being hyper-aware of this naked woman. And hey, maybe Taylor will try to sneak a peek. That could be hilarious.

(She doesn't try to sneak a peek. Awwww)
The silvery suit goes on surprisingly easy after I'm out of clothes. It's warmer than I was expecting, and also it does some thing where it suctions to better fit me. Holy crap, it's like I'm basically naked. You can see *everything*. Now I'm wondering if Dragon has a fetish. So I head outside, strike a pose, and ask Taylor, "Well Boss, what do you think?"

She ignores me completely, continuing to jabber at the goddamn Dragonslayer.

...

This would bother me more, but she hasn't noticed what a mess I've been. It would be *nice* to fluff my ego some, but it would honestly be a bit surprising if she'd *actually* fallen all over herself in trying to not let on that she thought I was the hottest thing ever.

Okay, so I'm going to test-drive-

"Pride, can you move her into a less pliable but more *coherent* headspace?"


Ten minutes later, it's pretty clear this isn't going to work. So hey, Taylor won't miss me while I fly the coop. Okay, so left leg in, and-

"Pride, can you make her *like* us?"

*I just want to open my prezzies is that too much to ask?!?*

*Ahem*. Let's... not let on how frustrating this is. Cock an eyebrow or something. "Not directly, no. Certainly not *quickly*. We'd need days at the minimum, and probably closer to weeks. Possibly months, I've never tried, uh, reprogramming someone who was *expecting* it." God, I always hate doing the indirect manipulation/reprogramming thing. Don't get me wrong, it's hella fun when I can pull it off, but it's so *tedious*. I'd rather not if I don't have to.

Then Taylor starts getting all grim and internally focused and I don't care anymore. Okay, I'm in the suit, grabbed the helmet, put it on... wait. What about my hair? God, this is going to be such a-
Vwoomp.

-fucking cool suit holy shit it sucked my hair in. Dragon, you may or may not be a creepy fetish-y robo-girl, but you're A-okay in my book! Okay, helmet seals... uh... wait, is there like a button or?...

Yyyeek! That was tingly. Like static shock, but less painful. And then the inside of the faceplate lights up, breaks up into a main screen and a bunch of sub-screens, and there's a good ol' Loading Circle (Though on closer inspection I think this one is a snake biting its tail), and then there's some jabber about system diagnostics and blah blah blah when do we get to the good part? Hopefully before Taylor gets out of her dumb dark mood and tries to ask me for another thing to do. C'mon, c'mon, hurry up.

Bing.

HaHA! Yes! Fuck yes! All systems operational! Okay, so I... wait, how is it... holy shit, is it reading my mind? No, wait, I think it's reading my eyeballs. Okay wow, that's some space-age shit right there, even for a tinker. Coolio. But seriously, where's the rocket button on this- ah. Of course it's the pair of bat/dragon wings. Har har. That's fine, now how do I click with my gaz-

"Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa!"

-UP UP AND AWAY!

Oh god how do I control this.

I panic and flail for a couple of minutes, but over time I get a sense of how to lean to turn right, how to tilt my head to pull up, how to get the damn thing to hover instead of just circling the house -I wouldn't get lost just because I can always find Taylor, but still- and once I'm reasonably comfortable with that. Well. I've always had some words to say to the Prime Minister... that's totally a legitimate way to test a phone call functionality, right?

Oh, and Taylor totally murders the woman not long after I get into the air. Called it.
More importantly, my crank call of the Prime Minister is foiled by him having a secretary who is having none of my shit. Damn. Lame. Still the installed phone totally works. I wonder how. Eh. Probably 'tinker bullshit'.

Okay, so innate weapons. Click into menus, look up basics... got a maser (Is Dragon trying to not get sued by Star Trek?), but it needs repairs. Got a 'plasma lance', which turns out to be a wristcannon that fires yellow bolts of energy or some shit. Punches a hole right through the shed's roof, so that's good. Hopefully it works well against brutes. Got some rockets hidden in the thighs somehow (Seriously where is the space?), but ammo is very limited, where the 'plasma lance' just runs on the internal power, which is itself a 'rift generator' or whatever the fuck this stupid technical manual actually says.

Then I remember to pick up my other prezzie. Definitely gonna want to see if it's got its own cool capabilities.

When I finally land, Taylor's still all business, totally ignoring how thrilled I am. That's fine. She wants to transport shit.

Easy, there's a truck right there, and I am an expert driver.

This is gonna be awesome.
Chapter 10: What Goes Around...

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 4.3, 4.x, and 4.4.

Chapter 10: What Goes Around...

Okay, it turns out I'm not an expert driver when I've been run ragged for like two weeks or a million years, whichever this has been.

Still, it was hurtful of Taylor to threaten to kill me just because I kept nearly clipping shit. Hurtful and mean and waaaa, totally unnecessary.

And hell, she is spick and span, perfectly good to go., 'cause power bullshit, and she was waaay worse in her brief stint behind the wheel.

She's in no position to criticize, is what I'm saying. Especially because I actually would've been cool with getting some more, you know, sleep, while she handled the driving...

At least sleeping in the goddamn truck is an improvement over sleeping with the 'frickin trees. Warmth, how I have missed thee while sleeping these past way the fuck too longs. Ahhhh. And the food we took from the Dragonslayers is nice. Poptarts. Popcorn. Pop as in soda. Some other thing beginning with 'pop'. Much nicer than the drivel we brought with us.

Eventually it turns out we're running late for Taylor's silly cover story to her dad, and she asks me to call him and let him know we'll be there later than expected, Taylor decides to go hide in the bathroom while I handle the call, and listening in on her panic attack is hilarious. Come on, girl, it's not like he's a supervillain who punishes the slightest misstep with superpowered misery AKA he's not Daddy. It's especially funny since she's panicking as the low-emotion bundle of tentacles. Gosh, what did the dude do to you, girl?

Anyway, that conversation isn't terribly interesting.

"Hello?" goes Mr. Hebert.
With a smile to keep my tone light, I open with, "Heya Taylor's dad, it's Cherie. Was just wanting to let you know we lost track of time out here in the glorious woods-" Yuck. Trees. Pine needles getting into everything. The constant stream of dead squirrels because what the fuck Taylor. "-and so we'll be a couple of days or so late."

He makes an ah noise. Um. Hm. You know, I have no idea what that means. Before I can pursue that thread further, he's marshaled himself or whatever. "That's... good, right? It means you were having fun?" Sounds pretty darn uncertain. Uggh this is annoying. We're too far out, I can't tell if he's putting on a brave face, or just honestly confused, or... or... I dunno! Whatever, it's not important.

So anyway. "Oh, definitely." No, not even- okay yes the suit is way cool. But the woods suck. "Taylor is doing a lot better, I'd say."

There's a pause. Gaaaah how do I read this pause? "I see." See what? "So why are you handling the call, anyway?" Uuuuuuh. Um.

Er.

I mean, part of the answer is that the logistics of Taylor using a phone are probably a bit nightmarish - she can manage it, we had our totally awesome and not at all frustrating as all hell phone conversation when we first met... but Taylor isn't wanting her dad in on her superpowered life... I mean, I could just tell him anyway and let her deal with the consequences... but then I'd have to probably change hotels, listen in to the hilarity, and then flee the city forever, going by Taylor's whole... thing with the face-grabbing and the monotone of death and-

"Are you okay?"

Uh wha- oh shit I'm hyperventilating a little. "Nothing! Just been, you know, exercising a lot."

"I see."

Stop saying that you dipshit! I'm not in range to extract your dumbass meaning! God. Okay, so, uh. Why is Taylor's newest best friend who had an abusive boyfriend handling the call instead of the very brave and helpful Taylor who took this vacation in part because the school kicked her out for a couple of weeks or whatever all that is? Uh. "Aaanyway, Taylor's been running herself ragged,
you know? Trying really hard to be nice and accommodating and helpful and all that great stuff, and I wanted to give back a little, yanno?" There, see, makes sense, consistent with the story we've presented.

"I see."

I WILL STAB YOU- calm, Cherie. Calm. He's not trying to get your goat, he's just a dumbass. I mean, Taylor is awkward, and the two of them were hilariously awkward together, so he's probably just a walking talking bundle of awkward doing a poor job of passing itself off as a human being, right? Right. It's all good. Just... uh... well, I was gonna say 'handle him like Taylor', but I'm pretty sure he's not got superpowers or a pressing need to murder people a lot just 'cause. So kind of like Taylor. "Anyway, yeah, that's the status update, anything you wanted me to pass on to Taylor?"

There's a sound I'm pretty sure is papers being shuffled on the other end of the line. "I'll smooth things over with the... ah, the school. And could you let Taylor know I'm here for her, whatever it is she's going through?" Yeah yeah generic supportive parent shit whatevs.

But I keep my tone bright. "Can do." I wait a couple of seconds, half expecting him to say something, but nah, nothing. So with a shrug I say bye and terminate the call.

...

Yeah, this calls for some editorializing. Just a little.

-------------------------------------------------------

Taylor's all relieved when I let her know the ever so slightly edited version of events. I call her Boss, and she gets all frowny at the word, and that's hilarious.

But to business!

The rest of the trip back to Brockton Goddamn Bay, AKA the Bay Of Loons, AKA the Brocktonite B... b... shit, I sort of thought I had something with baloney, but it doesn't work. Damn. Anyway, the trip back to this terrible, crazy city is surprisingly uneventful. Taylor actually does seem to be a bit at peace, no asking me if I'm detecting anything sketchy going on for us to go in
and heroically rescue and/or murder people. Which is good, because I'm not sure I'd want to lie to her in these circumstances and we've passed like three crimes in progress, 99% certain. I'm starting to wonder if the crazy is Americans rather than Brocktonites, given the shit we saw out in the woods...

Anyway.

There's a bit where I'm wondering if Taylor is going to want us to take the truck to her home and drop off the stuff there, but instead she goes asking if I know of any reasonably empty unused warehouses or whatever, which yeah I sort-of-kind-of do inasmuch as I know about decent-sized swathes that people mostly walk around rather than through and so just driving nearby those until we find one that looks like an abandoned warehouse works. (Cracked windows are a pretty big clue) Which is good, because Taylor's dad is still awake and being antsy and sneaking in the tinkertech to Taylor's house would be a wee bit tricky. I'd also be a bit uncomfortable trying to explain to Taylor that her neighborhood has a decent number of PRT employees and Protectorate Heroes living in the area. What with the face-grabbing and terrifying behavior and all when she was oh-so-calmly explaining that secret identities are Serious Business. I think she's still not really picked up on the fact that I bust all that silliness by existing, basically. Which seems a bit unlikely, but I'll take it.

Taylor apparently thought I'd like want to go luxuriate in my hotel room and okay yes kind of a lot yes, but holy shit the Dragonslayer shit is so cool and with all the driving and sleeping and driving and sleeping and calling Taylor's dad and driving and sleeping some more, I haven't really gotten the opportunity to mess around with this stuff. I already know the suit makes me way strong, and I get to fly, and I can pew pew people, but I haven't checked how effective the shots are. Should I expect them to 'explode heads with one pew pew, or will they just inflict massive burns and permanent psychological scarring, or are they way weaker than I'd think and actually just sort of knock people around? I mean, obviously I'm not going to go testing the gun on actual people, not right away anyway, 'cause I don't want to find out the pew pewing is louder or brighter or whatever than expected and call people's attention unexpectedly and so have to explain how the whole 'Dragonslayer suit' thing doesn't actually mean we have anything to do with the Dragonslayers it's a funny coincidence.

How are we going to explain this to the Protectorate? Monster and Pride do some paperwork, kill... oh, maybe I can claim we... no, shit. Where would we have hid the loot if we got it from Leet? Errrr. Fuck, I really want to use these suits, they're so fucking awesome, but having them raises so many questions. Maybe we can claim we recruited a tinker who's, like, really shy? Would they buy that? How plausible is that? Man, I don't even know how fuckin' tinkers work. Ugh. Okay, maybe I'll conserve the suits for, like, field work akin to the Dragonslayer hunt, and just be plain ol' pretty Pride when we're running about Brockton Bay? Uuugh lame. Worth considering, but lame.
Whatever. Toys!

(Also, Taylor is being all waaaah angsty or whatever about who knows what and I don't care she can go be angsty on her way home all she wants)

The first thing that happens is I realize I really need to get the truck inside the warehouse instead of out in the alleyway. That's a bit of a nervewracking time, half-expecting someone to overhear and investigate, and a pretty girl dragging a pile of junk into an abandoned warehouse probably looks like an obvious tinker to victimize before they've made real gear. Plus the fucking gate squeals when I finally get it open. Goddamn.

(Taylor sure is taking her time going home. Weird. What is bothering her that she feels the need to delay going home?...)

Aaaaanyway, from there I'm messing around trying to get the generator set up and this silly computer plugged in - I'm really hoping for a nice, useful user's manual, maybe some videos of the Dragonslayers doing stuff, something to reduce the need for my own manual testing - and what the fuck sort of connection system is this? It's like someone looked at sensible sockets and plugs, went 'I can do worse than that', and did exactly that. Why do the tines go out sideways? Why are there four tines? Why do I have to throw a switch to pop them out, and another switch for anything to actually happen?

Bleh.

Naturally, the point at which I think I've got an idea how to turn the damn computer on is the point at which Taylor has been lingering in front of her house for like a minute aaaaand then what must be Velocity zips by. Which would be sort of weird with the hour, but no biggie, except Taylor starts panicking. Which would, itself, be no biggie, because Taylor is maximum paranoia, except that Velocity and her are reacting in ways that look an awful lot like they're reacting to each other. Which implies Velocity is caping at Taylor. Worse yet, one of the damn Protectorate capes I still haven't identified who's hanging out somewhere several stories up and an alarming number of blocks away also seems to be reacting to the scene, which is baffling because they were just patiently waiting around, doing zip until Velocity went after Taylor. Who the eff would that be?

So what, the Protectorate ambushed Taylor? What?

Ugh. Okay, do I help Taylor or not? Existential Crisis says 'yes'. What's in the 'no' crowd? Is there a 'no' crowd? Okay, yes, I'd probably be making myself an enemy of the Protectorate for stepping
in, but I don't think it's ever been in the cards to not be antagonistic with them. Come on, I'm a subtle Master who can pry open all their secrets basically incidentally (Hi Cavedude! Having fun at home, I see), my range on my manipulation is a couple of blocks or whatever and goes through walls with no real protection against it, and on top of all that I'm Daddy's kid. I basically have 'villain' stamped on my forehead as far as they're concerned. So I'm pretty sure that it was only ever a question of how long it would take for them to cotton onto me and get all upset and maybe quietly commission a government sniper to oops accidentally asplode my head one day.

So that's not really a 'no'.

Also in the 'no' crowd is that Taylor is terrifying, but that has the caveat that I'm not sure I've got better alternatives. I could go, I dunno, try to take over the Empire from the inside, but they're fucking Nazis so no thanks, I got standards yo, or I could go start over in an entirely different city and all... buuut Taylor is actually fun? Frustrating as all hell, but fun. I'm imagining going out to Boston and making the Butcher mine and then just being so goddamned bored that we come back to the Existential Crisis problem and no no no, not happening.

I mean, I could go get some therapy? But how does that go? 'Yeah doc, the world is boring and pointless and I have no idea what to do next because I don't want to do anything next that isn't super-easy and boring.' There's only so many people you can seduce and/or mind control before it becomes rote, and I passed that point a year ago. And say the therapist takes me seriously, doesn't sensibly freak out and run before I twist them into being mine, etc. It's just a little too easy to imagine a fit of pique leading to me just warping their personality, with me refusing to confront whatever issue they happen to bring up that lurks in the deepest and darkest parts of my psyche. What's even the point of a therapist in that kind of circumstance? Especially since I'm not in complete conscious control of my power. It's not been an issue yet, but I've always wondered if I unconsciously manipulate people without even noticing that I'm doing it, given I do know the details aren't under my precise control. That would make a therapist really pointless.

Also there's that whole 'how do I pay for therapy in the long haul' thing. And 'how do I make money legitimately in general, given I have no skills beyond being a parahuman and trying to make money off my abilities is liable to end in the Birdcage or death'.

Okay, forget it. The 'no' crowd is a bunch of bullshit that is theoretically relevant but is actually not, okay?

So having mulled all that over for a few minutes and fiddled around a bit more with some of the junk, still wondering if I should abandon Taylor anyway, logical thinking be damned, I finally sigh to myself and start suiting up to go join the battle. Rescue Taylor. Whatever the hell. I mean, if we're on the Protectorate's shitlist anyway, I guess my worries about using the suit don't even matter anymore. They're free to think whatever the fuck. Hell, maybe it'll somehow convince them to give us a second chance, I dunno.
Okay, so, the Protectorate cape that's flying or in a tall building or whatever is also involved. Do I go after them, or go to rescue Taylor? I'm not sure how much this cape is actually contributing, and I don't think the Protectorate really has anyone with the range to do much of anything at this distance, amplifying those doubts. Plus I have this niggling suspicion Taylor would somehow turn 'defending her from Protectorate assault with proactive thinking' into 'inappropriate assault for no good reason' in her head and get mad at me. Soooo. Yeah, I think I'm going to just go straight to Taylor and ignore this other cape until I have a specific reason to stop ignoring them.

Of course, by the time I've gotten suited up, waited through the bootup checklist, and am in the air, it turns out the cape is doing something to Taylor. Something really unpleasant, going by how Taylor recoils in shock and a bit of horror and a lot of frustration every time they have their little moment of... it's this combination of calm and anticipation and stuff, a peculiar little pattern. Not sure what it is. I don't recognize this particular pattern. Probably power-related, but... uh... I can't think of a BB Protectorate cape whose power lets them reach out and touch at this kind of range. What, do one of these jerks secretly have a power to inflict pain with a thought, kept on the down-low for PR purposes?

It makes a bit more sense once I start seeing the muzzle flashes.

Rrrriight. Miss Militia. I'd thought of her more as an Uzi sort of girl, but I guess she can totally snipe after all. So that little pattern is her preparing to fire?...

feeling

muzzle flash

Yes, it goes just before she pulls the trigger, 99% sure. Oh, neat, I might get a chance to dodge bullets! Sweeeeet.

Okay, and nnooow I'm in range to hit Velocity with... rapidly... mounting... PANIC. Oh, ow, I think he tripped and went rolling or something. Yeah, keep panicking dude. There's monsters all around you! Fear! Fear! Okay, aaaand Velocity is... holed up somewhere, freaking. I'm just going to assume he's curled into the fetal position, sucking on his thumb. Because it's funny. Oh, wait, he's moving again. Panic harder! Damn. He's not as ridiculous as friggin' Uber, but he's managing to hold onto his cool enough to keep his focus. I think he's behaving more like... oh, oh duh. He does real fighting, he's probably got, like, training for keeping himself moving through fear, channeling it productively.
Note to self: driving people to mortal terror who routinely get into fights isn't as safe as I've historically thought. Stick to depression and whatever. Stuff people don't normally have to deal with in a combat situation.

Okay, so, uh, does this suit have some kind of zoom function? Or a search function? Oh, oh, it lets me mark targets and then there's some auto-aim thing. Niiice. Okay, so I gotta find Miss Militia in my field of view... she's at that height... oh, I think that's the roof of that building. Nothing else nearby seems tall enough. Okay, and so... seriously, is there a zoom- aha! Yes, there's a zoom. It's even picture-in-picture! Nice. Okay, mark her as a target... no, the parahuman, not the goddamn roof edge. No, the parahuman, not her gun. The parahuman. Miss Militia. Fuckit, fine, target the gun, and fi- owowow I didn't expect it to move the goddamn suit arm on its own like that! Ow. That stings, jeez.

Okay, and... Miss Militia startled for a moment, but she wasn't all afraid, and she moved away from the roof's edge. PiP zoom indicates the rifle is melted and -and now it's gone. Oh. Right, she can change it about all she wants, can't she? Great. Oh well, whatever, back to Taylor-

-ow. Jesus fuck, my neck stings now. Holy shit lady, how did you orient on me that fast? Fuckit, lock onto -oh hey, it actually locked onto her this time. Fire! And this time I move my arm with the suit's arm, instead of being jerked about, so that's better. Miss Militia dodges again, oh goddammit Velocity noticed me. No, fuck you, feel sad. Your puppy just died, your girlfriend abandoned you forever for your much hotter sister, your parents wish you were never born, your life is nothing but an endless well of awfulness and there's no hope. Yes, better, now he's staying still for the moment instead of coming after me.

Okay, getting there, getting to Taylor -goddamnit stop shooting me! Your stupid pissant rifle doesn't even breach this thing's armor anyway! You're just giving me a headache, stoppit, it's annoying. Christ, I totally thought I was going to get a chance to dodge bullets what is this shit.

(It's funny listening in on Taylor's dad freaking out. Kind of curious why he's so much more invested in these events than other bystanders. Is it because it's right in front of his house? Oh, maybe he's worried Taylor will come back in the middle of the fight. No, wait, surely some other residents would have similar concern, it's not that late in the afternoon. Hmmm. Missing something)

After like four fucking exchanges of this dumbness, I'm finally in range to land and... uhhhh shit that's containment foam. Okay, that explains why Taylor is still here. I'd been wondering, given she wasn't fighting back. Awww yeeaaaah, Taylor's feeling some relief. And a lot of other shit that probably means she's mad at me and all, but that sweet, sweet bit of relief is niiiice. Okay, okay,
containment foam. What did How Stuff Works say, again? There's some thing the PRT does that lets them clear it away and have it not stick to their dude's guns and... er... okay, there was some proprietary chemical and...

... oh, right! Electricity!

Okay, landing, and... options, options... aha! Oh wow, it's even labeled 'cfoam removal', jeez, I didn't have to go recalling some History Channel show at all. Okay, play it over -uhhh what is Miss Militia doing why is she having that confide

DODGE DEFINITELY DODGE

CRACK

... holy shit look at that asphalt, there's a furrow in it. On the plus side, Miss Militia seems to be regretting whatever big gun she pulled out to make that happen. Anyway, play the electrical doohickey in the left palm over the foam- nope never mind godfuck no Miss Militia is still shooting at me why stoppit. I don't think she's even aiming at me anymore, but having these shots cutting furrows nearby is not exactly calming. And it makes it harder for me to figure out how to dodge. And she's not holding completely still, so shooting at her is probably a waste of my time and-

Oh hey, some idiot is coming at me all angry-like. And turning about, it's a regular joe with a regular shotgun. Hahaha oh wow when he fired I didn't even feel it. The pellets pinging off the suit was noisy, I guess, but wow this is funny. Oh, oh, I can use this! Uh, okay do I like hit him with apathy or no wait I have superstrength now I totally backhand the man, and oh jeez that looks like it hurts, with the blood and the flying tooth and all. And sounds like it hurts. And also sounds like it hurts. Okay, so don't be punching Taylor in the shoulder while in the suit. I mean, she'd presumably heal it off anyway, but I'm pretty sure cracking her collarbone would piss her right off.

Aaaand yes Miss Militia is now hesitating to fire with this idiot civilian writhing in pain, clutching at his jaw, moaning in agony a couple feet away from the foam pile. Excellent, Plan: Implicit Hostage is working. (I mean, it wasn't so much a plan as convenient happenstance but shhhh) So time to focus on Taylor.

Okay, so, play the electricity over the foam this time for reals and hahaha it's like I'm doing Force Lightning one handed. I am become Sith Lord, she who fries Jedi with contempt! Anyway, now the foam is... sort of... flowing a little?... At any rate, Taylor-as-squid-thing is managing to sort of wade through it now, the foam mostly slowing her down instead of sticking and stretching and all. I think some of it is even running off outright. Also I'm pretty sure this isn't how electricity is
supposed to work. Man, tinkers are bullshit. Aaand Miss Militia is doing a thing again fuck this shit I only need the left hand for the electric whatsit and the right for shooting, so if I turn... uh... a bit awkwardly... lock on- oh, the previous lock is still there. Awesome. Fire! Fire fire fire back the fuck off! Yes, she's distracted, and Taylor is almost, almost, come on, hurry up and get out yes she's out.

Okay, so. Uh. Jeeeeez Taylor looks maimed. There's legs not moving of their own volition past some point, legs where ouch half of it has been left behind in the foam, ohhh man. Wow, she's surprisingly calm for someone who's been maimed. I'm going to just assume she'll regenerate this off and not think too hard as to why she'd know to not be concerned, assuming she actually knows and isn't just being overconfident. Which. I don't think overconfidence is really in her character... recklessness, sure, but there's a bit of a difference between expecting to come out of undefined danger okay vs blithely assuming you know how your power works with no antecedent.

Okay, I'd sort of imagined Taylor would want to run on foot at this point, but I don't think that's really an option. Okay, stop firing at Miss Militia for a minute, done with the electricity, double check that Velocity is still panicking and -okay seriously dude panic more on approach, less as you flee, yes, good, good pavlovian dog, good- then say, "Okay Boss, all aboard the train," while holding my arms out. There's a stab of are you fucking serious from her, but then she stumbles, there's some resignation, and she awkwardly flops her way over and into my arms. The suit's arms. Both.

Excellent. Take flight, aaaand let's go the opposite way from the warehouse initially, and oh goddammit Miss Militia is still persisting oh wait she's gone all hesitant fuck her I'm flipping the bird- hahaha she saw that. Not that she got offended, but she reacted. Wow. Okay, that's awesome. That was just venting, I didn't expect her to actually see it.

Nice.

Okay, are they following us? Maybe. Looping around... oh, maybe I should keep Taylor in the loop, speaking of loops that loop. Or... maybe I shouldn't? I'm suddenly imagining letting her know I actually kind of knew these people were there and didn't let her know she might be walking into an ambush. I mean, I had a perfectly good reason for that whole sequence of events, but Taylor hasn't proven the most rational figure around. So. Quiet treatment! If she asks later, I can claim I didn't think she'd be able to hear me. It's a plausible answer.

Okay, the Protectorate Pals are doing... something... ergh, they're definitely focused and all, there's some frustration, some anger... can't tell if it's about me or... okay they're not going the direction I was headed when I left. Hmmm. Oh, maybe this is about that scuffle between Lung and all? Oh, uh, Taylor doesn't know I know Lung is Lung. Errr. She likes asking me about stuff, scouting with my power. Do I act like I figured out Lung is Lung or... errr... no, I don't think that's plausible as far as she knows. He's not distinctive like Oni Lee is, and while I know Taylor's idea of how my
power works doesn't perfectly align with reality I'm not sure exactly where it diverges so let's just not take that particular risk. So. If she asks, Lung is a confident dude, little fear, that's all I know. Right. Not sure if I should let her know I know Oni Lee is Oni Lee... ooooh fff I probably shouldn't, she'd probably have this go into her stupid 'civilian identity is safe from cape shenanigans' garbage and get mad at me.

Why does she believe that crap? Why does she have to be so terrifying about that crap? It just makes this harder than it has to be. Dangit.

Okay, still looping, almost to the warehouse... yeah, okay, I'm pretty sure the Protectorate Pals aren't coming our way. In fact, I think Velocity is already there... no, running on past?... oh, okay, he's running on past the big scuffle with Lung and so on but he's going after some... hm. I'm not actually sure who they are. Anyway, another batch of people, some of them definitely parahumans, who are on past the Lung scuffle. And... oh, I think some of the PRT normies are making their way over to Lung and all. Okay then.

And... the fuck is up with Cavedude? He's talking with one of Jean- Jean- fuck, I can't think his name. It makes my heart hitch and my eyes pric and... no. Bitch and her pals. Yes, that helps. Okay. Anyway, one of them is talking with Cavedude, aaaaand... that... ultimately goes nowhere that I can tell. Oh, whatever. This stupid town.

Finally we make it to the warehouse, and to my intense relief no hobos wake up, nobody seems to really notice. Whew.

Okay, prep yourself Cherie. Don't let on to your concerns. Don't let Taylor think you're scared she's maimed for life. You're going to be charming and funny and possibly just a little annoying going by past experience and completely confident that everything is cool, we've escaped and I'm awesome and she should be impressed.

Deep breath.

Okay, land, set Taylor down, and... off the helmet goes.

Oh thank everything.

She's fine. Taylor-the-human is fine.
"Isn't it traditional that when a knight in shining armor rescues a fair maiden the valorous knight would then be awarded a kiss?" See Taylor? Everything's cool, I'm just bothering you for funny. I'm so at ease with the situation I'm perfectly happy to be joking around, there's absolutely nothing to be concerned about.

Taylor just stares at me for a bit. Okay, that's fine. I didn't really expect her to play along, she doesn't usually even if it would be nice if she would once in a while, and the real point is to use levity to alleviate the fear of death and/or permanent maiming for life. Okay, so since she's not giving me anything to work with, I, um, fuck, you know, I really thought she was going to ask me about the Protectora-

"... I'm heterosexual, Cherie."

"...

Pffftahahaha. Yeah, you're stubbornly disinterested in me girl, but pfftahahaha no, there's been... oh jeez there's been so many background minor moments throughout her day, and... I think she's even had a tiny bit of lust aimed at Shadow Stalker In Civilian Mode a few times? It's possible I misread that, but haha no, I don't believe for a second Taylor is heterosexual. Maybe borderline asexual, I guess, possibly. Probably not, but eh. But... no. Don't make me laugh-

-oh, I actually don't manage to hold it in. Burst into laughter, tears in my eyes, slapping one hand against the knee. Which stings a little and makes a clanky noise since I'm still in the suit.

I take a minute to get the laughter under control, and once I notice I'm a bit hysterical it dawns on me this is probably less about funny and more about me being that relieved at it turning out Taylor isn't maimed for life. I cover my mouth after that thought occurs. Don't let Taylor know it's anything other than funny. Don't let her know I was concerned about her. Just... keep it on the down-low.

"I'm not into girls."

Okay, it's a good thing this isn't about the funny of her claiming to be heterosexual because otherwise I think I would have burst into laughter again. Ah, shit, maybe I should have, but it's too late now. Okay, uh, what's appropriate. Uh. Smile? No, smirk. Like... like I know something she
doesn't know. Okay, um, I know for a damn fact she's not been interested in some of the gruff manly men or the prettyboys or any of the boys... except... fuck, let's gloss over the fact that she was hot for Daddy, ew, let's pretend no. It was a murder boner, Cherie, don't be silly! Actually wait that does make sense. Huh. Awesome, I don't even need to turn to denial. Sweet!

Right, so, uh, if I'm being all Smartier Than Thou and all, I need to... right right, she's totes not into men. Pretty sure. Probably. Fuck, let's use it regardless. Deep breath, deliver it like you believe it girl. "But you're not into men either."

"Bullshit." Okay wow that was fast and reflexive. Hmm. I'd think Methinks The Lady Doth Protest Too Much, but she was super-bullied. Maybe questioning her heterosexuality was part of the bullying campaign, such that she's got a reflexive reaction to any insinuation of such for self-defense reasons. Happy thought, that. Can't quite parse what that jealous blip was about. That's annoying. It probably would tell me something interesting and useful if I knew what the hell it was, but she's not giving me anything to work with.

Still, I'm... sort of in awe that she actually believes this. "Oh man. Oh man. You really haven't noticed?" Wait shit self-edit properly Cherie that wasn't part of the plan!

"I am heterosexual and that's that." Yeah, no.

Okay, uh, fuckit, let's just go with every little girl's dream. "Alexandria." Ha! There was some lust there! No big fucking surprise there, it's Alexandria. I mean, Narwhal's got more going on with her physique, but I swear she has some bullshit Stranger power because people think her wandering around half-naked is somehow not sexy. Oh wait right I'm supposed to be, like, winning the argument aren't I? "That! That right there! That's what you like!" Okay so are we done with this have I lorded my braininess over her enough for her to-

"Heterosexual. Boys do it for me, not girls."

-nnope she's still persisting. Agh. Dammit. No, Taylor, that's a pack of lies. "No, no, no, Boss. Uh-uh. I'm not sure what it is that does it for you, but I'm thinking it's just something you find on, uh, 'boys' more commonly." That sounds about plausible for why she thinks she's heterosexual when she's totes not.

"Why are we discussing my sexuality?" Aaaand Taylor is pissed.
Wait. Wait, we're discussing it because you took a damn joke too seriously! Argh, but now I'm all committed because I kept arguing my point and if I admit I was joking she's not going to believe me and... eeerrrrgh. Great, fucked this up. Backpedal without backpedaling time. "Uh. No reason. Boss." Noncommittal and vague and she can interpret it as a fake statement meant as an obvious apology or... fffuck now I can't assume she's that savvy she didn't realize the joke was a joke how do you not realize that. Great. Wonderful.

On the plus side, Taylor's irritation just... goes away, aside a brief moment of being all suspicious and no I didn't do it dammit you brought this whole stupid thing down on us. Jerk.

Then she asks me, "Are they still following us?" which thank goodness. Finally. Jeez, this was supposed to happen like five minutes ago, god. Clearly I need to adjust how I handle things going forward. Not... sure... how, but clearly yes.

Anyway, so... right, don't call Lung Lung, and... yeah. Be vague! "Two or three-" Wait why is Taylor surprised did she not know about... oh. Oh right, It was just Velocity and Miss Militia doing things. I didn't pay attention to anyone else... fair enough. "-of them wanted to follow us but a scrap started way away in town and everybody involved-" No wait Oni Lee is involved and uuuh vague be vague "-no wait, there's one guy who doesn't care- is surprised, I'm thinking it's because of how big a fight it is, so the Protectorate people stopped following us once I dropped below rooftop in the escape. They went to join up with the big bust-up, which by the way is still going on and it's big and the one guy who doesn't give a fuck is the only guy who's not at least a little scared though most everyone is pretending they're totally not scared and some people are probably going to be in the hospital when this is done, maybe the morgue, nobody's really willing to back down. Too much pride at stake or something? The abstract stuff is always hard to read. Anyway, the Protectorate pals made it to the fight a minute back and they've got a grim confidence thing going on, I'm thinking they're not exactly expecting to win but they're confident they won't lose though it might just be a willingness to die 'cause I've been thrown by that a few times. Probably once this is done they'll be too tired, maybe too injured, to actually follow us just yet... but, uh, I think we're nagging at them? They're not going to just ignore us after this, probably."

Whew. That felt way better than dueling with Taylor over her inclinations.

Taylor does this big sigh and is all frustrated but I don't think it's her being mad at me and I can easily imagine any number of other reasons to be frustrated. Like how she totally failed to go back to her dad successfully. So let's just pretend-slash-assume she's not mad at me until proven otherwise.

Then Taylor starts getting all angsty and I waffle for a minute. Don't think I want to level it off, but not sure if I should offer more ordinary comfort. Eeeeh. Yeah, let's be... cautious and just go with a hand on a shoulder. I totally understand you bro. It's all cool.
She gets all glare-y but not nearly as mad as she was earlier. Wait, is she-? "You're *not* getting a kiss." Oh man is she playing along? She's not really that mad, maybe she *is*. Huh. Okay, let's extend the joke then.

Smile, shrug. "Worth a shot." Taylor is... unamused. Eh. Okay, maybe she *wasn't* playing along, but that wasn't so bad. So I guess if I don't *argue* with her she doesn't care too much? Hmmm. Arguing is kind of like... verbal combat? And she takes real combat *really* seriously, waaay more than I do certainly. So maybe arguing with her is like pushing things into being a FIGHT as far as she's concerned? Hmmm. Food for thought.

I take a moment to consider the situation, but I'm pretty sure we're not going to have any violence come our way, going by how that big brawl is going, and... yeah, I should get out of the suit. Let it recharge. Since it... apparently does that... somehow. Tinkers are bullshit.

Oh goddammit Taylor basically immediately starts angisting. Argh. *Why?* It's not like she likes her school life, and okay her relationship with her father isn't like *mine* with Daddy, er, *was* when he was alive, but- uh. Huuuuu. There's some *relief* going on in there? So maybe she's cottoning on to how she's getting freedom?... huh, yeah. There's a mix of anger and frustration and all, but there's also rising hope and relief and it's a complicated morass of uplifting and downer-ing. HMMMMM. That's an improvement! We may yet make a non-angstotron out of you yet, Taylor! Enjoy life, girl! Life *is* enjoyable! Especially when you're not *making* yourself go to some ass school filled with asses being asses to you. Like, duh.

Then while I'm done dragging myself out of the power suit part and considering how I'm going to handle transitioning from undersuit to proper clothes, Taylor comes around the corner, apparently not caring about personal space at all BAD FLASHBACKS TO PAULINE NOPE NOPE shut up brain it's not remotely the same she's just... asking me about the suit and what all I'd gotten done. Yeah, that *is* different from Pauline. Thankfully. These are even easy questions to answer, so long as I conveniently leave out that I was kind of seriously considering maybe abandoning her and running off with all the toys. Which she doesn't even ask anything that requires me to skirt around that, so no biggie.

Then Taylor wants to help me with booting up the computer and fff I don't remember what I was thinking earlier for potentially turning it on. Stupid interruptions. Taylor finds some stupid excuse to angst to herself, which for some reason culminates in her eyeing me like a piece of meat. Well, if she's going to make it so *easy*... I put on a grin and say, "Like what you see?"

Taylor puts on a big show of anger that is... okay yeah, she's kinda mad, but not *as* mad as the teeth-gritting and all would suggest. "Not. Happening."
Sure, whatever. So anyway, this stupid monitor... why couldn't the main computer part have just had a built-in monitor? It's tinker bullshit anyway. Anyway, maybe I, uh... hm...

"Cherie, do you have a passport?" She's all *intense*.

... okay Taylor, that's pretty random, but easy to answer. "Nope."

Taylor eyes me for a second. Okay? "... you don't really need a passport, do you."

Ha! She's *learning*. Awesome. "Just need a piece of paper, flash it, make them feel everything's cool. You don't even need powers to make it work, but they make it hella easier." Seriously, Jean-

"Guillame* has done that kind of shit before. Yeah, that works. Still, yeah, I'm good to go. No idea why Taylor is asking, though.

"... I see."

...

No Cherie, don't zap Taylor with mind-bending horror for the crime of being her father's daughter. If only because her response to mind-bending horror is liable to be 'I stab it to death'. Calm. Don't let on how pissed you are. No no, just... pretend like this *fucking* hunt for this *fucking* power button and all it what's making you mad. It's not like it's untrue!

Hmmmm. Yeah, I don't think there's a button on this thing. Maybe one of the widgets turns it on? A magnet, or a keycard, or something. Lesse...

"What are you doing?" Uh Taylor why is this upsetting you more than me poking fun at you with the hitting on you stuff.

"Trying stuff. Thinking this might be a magnet." Like seriously girl why are you so upset that I'm doing things to help.

Taylor *flinches* ohmygod hahaha. "You don't run magnets over a *computer* unless you want it ruined!"
Taylor. Taaaaylor. Taylor Taylor Taylor. Use your mind, girl. It's... "Tinkertech!" ... which means the rules don't apply. Silly girl.

Taylor’s still being all pissy, probably about to say something mean and angry and then ha! There's a click and the computer turns on! Go me, I'm awesome, perfect timing thank you universe, hahaha. I kinda wanna do a triumphant dance, but I think that might go a wee bit too far in Taylor's book. Bad enough I made her look stupid, why compound it with looking like I'm gloating? Which I would be. But only a little! The real point would be triumph over this stupid computer's stupid design with its stupid lack of buttons.

-----------------------------------------------

A whole bunch of boring stuff goes on with messing around with this computer thing. It's not very interesting, and the only reason I'm not bored out of my skull is because I'm still listening in to the chaos with the Protectorate and Lung and all. I think Oni Lee cracked a joke somewhere in there. A dark joke, if so. I'm having trouble guessing why else people would be simultaneously horrified and choking on probably-actually-laughter-but-definitely-amusement in response to something Oni Lee did. I wouldn't have pegged Oni Lee as the funny sort, so... interesting.

I'd just go take a nap and leave Taylor to this thing, but she's all concerned she'll break the thing somehow, so she's just leaning on me, using my shoulders to prop herself up while she looks around one shoulder. After all that crap about not liking me hitting on her, she's being awfully quick to just ignore my personal space. Again. I'd think this was mixed signals, but hey, power, I totally can tell there isn't any lust going on there. So no, she's just oblivious. What the hell kind of friendships has she had before? Errrr aside that Emma girl. Or, wait, is this the fault of the Emma girl? Wait, but how would it be? Actually... uuuuh you know... I wonder... was this Emma girl interested in Taylor, and turned to bullying because she got tired of -oh god that would fit with how Emma and Shadow Stalker are all weirdly loyal and protective of each other and all. Shadow Stalker is Emma's rebound! And they're bonding over tormenting Taylor, I guess. Very romantic.

...

I really, really want to share this thought with Taylor, but this seems like maybe possibly the worst possible moment to do so. 'Hey Taylor, while you're still recovering from the emotional impact of having been ambushed by the Protectorate with no real warning and all, lemme explain to you how it's entirely possible it's your own damn fault your ex-girlfriend tortured you so bad you triggered.' Great plan! Let's do it! It'll only be suicidally stupid, right? Right.
Yeah, not happening. Some other time.

Hmmm. It's a *telling* possibility, though. Ever since we did the emotional testing wackiness, I'd been sort of assuming Taylor's social wonkiness was her power doing things to her, no mundane explanation necessary. But if she drove this Emma girl into the arms of another girl through sheer DERP, and never guessed it on her own... that would rather imply that pre-trigger Taylor was only marginally more insightful and aware than post-trigger Taylor. Or maybe even *less*, depending on what other changes have been wrought on her. I mean, she doesn't sleep now. That's gotta give ya tons of time for introspect...ion... awwww fuck, I'm talking about *Taylor* here. When we were camping in the woods she was passing my sleep time *murdering squirrels!* If she's been using her extra wakey time for introspection, I will *buy and eat a hat*.

... 

Anyway, we find some silly ones and zeroes thing that looks like it might be Dragon's code I guess, and then I eventually yawn and Taylor just orders me to go to sleep like she's a superior officer or something. But she still gets annoyed when I call her Boss. Pffff. But okay, having realized she's probably actually always been a derp, I'm a little more willing to smile tolerantly at her obliviousness while trying to figure out how to get her to stop *being* so oblivious.

Ultimately I give in with little resistance. I'd rather like to sleep on this whole complicated thought.
Chapter 11: ... Comes Back to Confuse You

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 4.4 and 4.5.

Again, Archive of Our Own doesn't allow for variably-sized text, so an effect has been lost. Not much of one in this case.

Chapter 11: ... Comes Back to Confuse You

When I wake up, it's to Taylor angsting about something. Really? Come on, Taylor.

.... oh hey, she hasn't noticed me waking up, 99% sure. Heh. "Whatcha thinking about that's got you so moody, boss?" Ha! Yes, totally got her.

Taylor takes a good few seconds to compose herself. Surprisingly, she didn't get mad. Huh. That's... really weird. Why not? I scared the piss out of her (Metaphorically), and she normally gets mad about basically anything I do that is even slightly unpleasant on her end. And lots of other things besides. Man, why am I running into these snags all of a sudden? Okay, admittedly I never found her that predictable, but we've hung out for a pretty darn long time, and I thought I was getting a decent sense of how she behaves...

Taylor interrupts my musing. "I'm frustrated because I want to kill Kaiser before we skip town and I don't know how I could find him on short notice."

Oh what is this dumb dumbness. I make a great big show of getting into position to cock a thumb back at myself and, ya know, do that. Cock an eyebrow while I'm at it. You're being ridiculous, Taylor. Of course I can handle this for you.

Then Taylor is being all reluctant and still angsty and uuuugh. "Look, I know you found me, somehow, but I don't want to kill him in his home or the like and anyway you, what, recognized my signature as having been in Toronto when Heartbreaker died? I don't see-"

Wait, what? "Actually, I helped you kill him." Woow Taylor, I thought you figured this out on your own by now. Like... with all the paranoia and all? I helped kill Daddy, so of course I'm an
untrustworthy backstabber and stuff, right? And just... I'm pretty darn sure I've alluded to this. I know I said I hated the man, come on. And I've got city-wide awareness. At minimum you should've figured out I knew and didn't try to stop you.

But it gets better, because Taylor just sort of stares at me, all confused and quizzical, eyes wide as an owl's. She never clued in at all! Holy shit, I can't- this is too funny. She's not stupid, I know she's not, but... jeez, that's just amazing. Eventually I manage to choke out, through the laughter, "S-so, you really -eh-ehe- you really really didn't recognize me at all? Heh." Taylor just makes some vague nuuuu noise. She's still so confused it's amazing. "Pffft. Hehehe. Oh man Boss, really? Boss, it was me. The other girl, the one that was talking? Rather than pretending to be a human scarf?"

Holy shit she just keeps staring how did she not already put this together this is amazing!

Okay, fine, blunter still. Do the voice, Cherie! The dumb teenager Daddy would never attribute cunning to voice! "Like ohmahgawd Daddy." Nailed it! Still perfect at it, you go Cherie, you're awesome.

"Holy shit." Taylor is even more gobsmacked, but sounds like she finally got it. Only took... way too much hinting... and explicitly spelling out... I... wow, this is hilarious. Then she petulantly 'points out', "You left." Yeah, like that matters with me. I'm me. We've established this, Taylor.

This memory is going to be good for a laugh for a loooong time. "I guided him. I was taking him to downtown initially. Felt you, felt your reactions. Took a bit, but I pieced together that you were here for dear old Daddy." Huh. That creeps her out for some reason? Not sure why. "-and you were unhappy when you realized where we were going so I picked a different girl, different part of town, would've found an excuse to pick someone else if you'd been unhappy with how that was going. I could tell you weren't patient, guessed you were worried about missing your opportunity or something like that. I wanted him dead, so I helped make it happen."

Taylor just sort of blinks at me, still clearly confused. Come on, it's all been spelled out- "I thought you said he sensed emotions."

What? I didn't say- oh. I did compare, though, didn't I? Something like... "No, I said he and I have similar-but-different powers." Pretty sure that's what I said. Mostly. Eh, it's not like Taylor has photographic memory. Clearly. "He had control, I have sensing with less precise control."

Aaaand now Taylor's soundscape is shifting all around, lots of stuff clicking in her head I guess? Okay, not sure why this is some big revelation to her, wait, is that some trust I se- uuuh why is horror and revulsion and violent hatred disgust oh god what Taylor why I didn't fucking do
"I wish the man was alive so I could kill him again," Taylor says in a dead monotone, a very slight smile on her face.

Uh.

Uh, that is.

Uh.

Okay, that's.

And then she hugs me???

Like, she turns into the deathblob doing it, but it's definitely intended to be a hug, and I just...

... wait, is she hitting on me? Have I been bang on with this 'murder as intimate act' thing and she's hitting on me all of a sudden after getting all mad last night when I laughed at the idea that she's a strict heterosexual?? That... is not exactly sane thinking, but it's Taylor so aaaaah I can't throw it out as a theory!!!

Or wait no there was... all that horror, too. So she was... not... wait... uuuuh... okay, I revealed I killed Daddy, she got angry and horrified and I thought she was, like, mad at the patricide, like family was that important to her maybe or something? But apparently she was mad at Daddy anew. But. Why? He's dead. What did I say that got her all mad at him again?

Argh I can't untangle this what is Taylor thinking why is she all calm and soothing now. I mean. She's the murderblob, that's part of it, but she's also just... maternal, I guess? All squishily protective and vaguely pleased. So she... okay, so probably not hitting on me? I think? Or. Maybe I'm just misunderstanding something about what she's experiencing. Hell, maybe the murderblob isn't so much resistant to what I do as it's just... weird enough I'm getting inaccurate feedback WHICH HAS ALREADY BEEN FUCKING PROVEN GODDAMMIT I'M AN IDIOT.
So okay back up mentally less power-based thinking and more... words. We talked, I told her I helped her kill Daddy, she got mad and horrified, like, even with the facial expressions and everything, and then she told me she wished Daddy was alive so she could kill him again. And then hugged me. To... be... reassuring?...

... 

Wait, she's wanting to protect me from Daddy? Uuuuuh what. How do you... where do you extract that from? I don't need your damn protection, I got him offed! I handled it myself, if admittedly through you. So... I... I'm still stuck on WHAT IS SHE THINKING GODDAMMIT IT.

Eventually Taylor breaks the hug. And... uh... stares at my clea- no, that's too high. I have a pretty nice neck. And jawline. Wait, she's frowning? Why would she be frowning while ogling- a finger hits water.

Holy shit I'm crying again? WHY AM I CRYING AGAIN?

No, done, out.

I back away, off I go, around behind a wall to get some privacy to think without Taylor right there having me all confused.

More confused.

(Absently, I work on cleaning myself up)

I... have to be missing something. Or misunderstanding something. I can't make sense of what just happened. I think Taylor is... trying to be sweet?... she, uh. She... fuck, if that's her idea of 'sweet', uh. Damn. Uh. Okay, murder as intimate act, right? There was that theory. I've sort of... not dismissed it, but had it as like this background idea of could-be-true-probably-isn't, right? But hey, if it is true, then her wanting to make Daddy double-dead out of... some... kind of concern?... I really don't get that part. Skipping right on past! If that theory is true, then Taylor has basically... uh... jeez. I'm having trouble making a comparison. Poooossibly due to my own skewed experiences.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that if we were most people that would've been a marriage
Okay, Taylor is being all angsty and angry - I really hope that wasn't intended as a marriage proposal. I really really hope she's not stewing in the background, thinking I've totally rejected her coming onto me and finding some dumb excuse to, I dunno, make it about her being unworthy scum incapable of getting a date due to their inherent worthlessness or something superdumb like that. I really hope her anger and angst is about... about... uh... I... I, I can't think of a guess. Why would she be doing this after I left other than feeling rejected?

I...

Okay, new angle. Ignore the whole maybe-murderous-marriage-proposal thing. The. Uh. That... is kind of hard to ignore... no no no. Okay, okay, meta... stuff. I'm thrown because... well, because that was me being shocked and amused Taylor didn't realize I totally maneuvered things intentionally for Daddy's death, and then me basically gloating over my awesomeness (Because I am totally awesome, obviously), and then things went sideways and I still have no idea why. Okay. Not... useful thoughts, but. Uh. But... eeeerrrrr... 

(After I'm done cleaning up, I hem and haw a bit and start pulling on my Pride costume. I don't think we're liable to have me fly around in the Dragonslayer suit)

... reviewing things helps me a little. Like, I'm feeling blindsided because, seriously, double-you-tee-eff Taylor. It's not obvious in retrospect, there wasn't something leading up to it I somehow didn't attach significance to, it really did just come out of NOWHERE. And that's... not sure how to feel about that. Still not sure what the hell Taylor is thinking, what all that was about, but this was, uh, only briefly scary, and I'm pretty sure my fear there was unfounded. Mostly sure. So. Definitely different from all those times I was suddenly legit worried Taylor was going to rip my guts out and make a lei of them. And... also different in that I really truly have no idea what she's thinking.

Ugh, she's still brooding. And I really have no idea if she's going to be all relieved if I go in there and be all 'hey girl I got your memo let's make out' or go back to the angry faces and not-completely-unserious death threats. Or hell, both. So do I... uh... man, I honestly haven't even been thinking of her that way. Mostly. Okay, on and off, but no more than I do with basically anyone. Less, really, 'cause if we're just going by physical attraction? Taylor is pretty darn low on my list. Anyway, point is... if that was a... a... thing. Let's go with that. If that was a thing, would I
even want to?

...

This is a much harder question to answer than it should be.

Uh, maybe? It's not like I actually care about body type much, and it's certainly a novel relationship possibility given I can't just twist her when I get bored. And... we kiiinda actually seem to get along mostly? I mean, honestly, I was never close to anyone in the fam. (Except apparently Jean-Paul why what is this why is the only one I cared about at all the one I killed???) Or anyone outside it. And... there were a whole lotta reasons for that, but one of the bigger ones was just... 'dance puppet, dance' doesn't make a great foundation? I can't remember the last time I really bothered to ask a target what they were interested in. Understanding them didn't really matter when I could cheat. They were toys, not peers.

So... put like that, *could* I even really have a relationship with someone without them being a parahuman whose power protects them from my power?

...

I think that's a tentative 'yes', if only as a test run. If this doesn't work out, whether because that's *not* what's going on with Taylor or, hey, she dies, totes possible, then at least I learned some stuff for round two, right?

...

Wait.

Holy shit, I think I just defined me a long-term goal of my own!

Hahaha holy shit I might be okay!

Okay, so, I still don't really know *what the fuck just happened*, but I can roll with this. I have a plan (Roughly) for how to handle this thing whatever it is, I know loosely what I'll do if things go
sideways with Taylor, I'm out from under the crushing weight of existential dread. I still have issues to work through, like, obviously, but hahaha this is better.

...

So weird.

Okay, Taylor is starting to get antsy rather than just broody and all. I should probably get out there before she comes in here. I think I'm just going to stick with the Pride costume. I have no idea what Taylor is expecting me to feel, and muting my body language and facial expressions neatly sidesteps that whole thing. So yeah. Sticking with the costume, and out I go.

Alright, "So!" Okay, good start- then I hiccup. Dammit. Nope, ignore it! "Something about finding Kaiser, right?" Hiccup again. Okay seriously. I thump myself in the chest, try to get the hiccups under control. I didn't have them earlier what is this garbage?

Fortunately, aside the look she gives me, Taylor seems willing to roll with me glossing over the, uh, emotional whatsit earlier. "Yes. I would, ideally, like for us to be gone within the next forty-eight hours, with Kaiser dead. But he almost never comes out to a fight, certainly not on any predictable schedule, and when he does he's always got bodyguards. I'm not convinced we can find him, and I'm uncertain of my ability to kill him in a straight fight. Though I'm no longer sure whether I should respect the... gentleman's agreement of capes. The PRT apparently doesn't care to extend me that courtesy. My impression is that it cuts both ways."

... huh. Huh! That... I would be perfectly happy to stop worrying that Taylor will any second now realize my existence botches her crazy dumb 'gentlemen's agreement' bullshit and freak out. Cool! "Well, we're not exactly gentle or men, are we?" I joke, but honestly I'm trying to give a better excuse for why I'm cheery in response to what she's saying. JUST A JOKE, TAYLOR, READ NOTHING MAJOR INTO IT. In fact, let's tack on something. "Weelll, you're gentle-

"Yes yes, sexual teasing."

Perfect. Completely dismissing my chirpy words as trivial nonsense and thus totally ignoring my sudden good mood. I am a friggin' social ninja, heck yeah.

...
Wait, this is Taylor. Sneaking social shit by her is like... sneaking past retarded
gradeschoolers. Blind retarded gradeschoolers.

Oh, whatever. Mission accomplished regardless.

Uh. I kinda need an excuse for my downer mood- oh, duh. "Oh fine." I AM TOTALLY JUST
BUMMED OUT BY YOUR DISMISSAL OF MY FUNNINESS, NOTHING TO SEE HERE,
MOVE ALONG. And she takes it hook, line, and sinker. (Wait, why would you want the sinker
taken by a fish? No, don't get distracted) "Finding Kaiser is easy. Ish." Taylor makes a dismissive
gesture or something. Bit hard to tell her intention. I'll just keep going. "Not that you've used me-"

Aaaand suddenly she's mad. Uh?

"Cherie, you have no chance in hell. You have less than no chance in hell if you don't stop being
quote-unquote 'cute' with me."

Uh. Hm. Okay, plan: fake joke might be backfiring. Hrm. Redirect, or play to her expectations?
Though, honestly, it would be legit disappointing to stop with poking her on this topic. She can be
really funny. Like the totes heterosexual thing omg. Ya know what, let's just stay the course.
Though I suppose this suggests she wasn't hitting on me earlier?... or maybe she's mad I didn't
reciprocate when she was expressing interest? Ugh, never mind. Okay, exaggerated slump, aaaand,
go. "But that's half the fun of hanging with you!" Okay, that came out a bit whinier than intend-

"Cherie." That is some cold rage right there. "I know you were raised by a rapist-" Holy shit that is
the worst murderspike yet and it's aimed at me. Uh, shit, do I- "-and your power makes it easy to
casually rape people-" -like try to edge it down carefully or would that set her off worse or- "-and I
know you're not trying to be a rape-y asshole-" -god I'm actually kind of surprised she hasn't
stabbed me already- "-but pressuring me like a date rapist instead of respecting my wishes is, and I
tell you this for your own good, likely to end in your death." That's. Uh. That's the most calm, dead
serious she's ever been in threatening me. P-pretty sure she's not joking.

Then she leans forward and smiles at me, false cheer filling her voice. "So Cherie, what were you
saying before you tried to sneak innuendo past me?"

Looking up at her, abruptly realizing I ended up on the floor at some point, arms around my knees,
I'm back to wondering if I should cut and run. Like. Today. Hell, I'm past the existential crisis stuff
now, right? So it really is an option open to me, not, like, technically available but holy fuck no.
Of course, I need to get through the here and now regardless first. But I am very strongly considering the flee plan. 'cause this? Wee bit terrifying.

I go into a bit of a monologue, still thinking. It should be safe to make it obvious I break her dumb 'gentleman's agreement' nonsense by existing... "I've already let you know that I can detect people, constantly, passively, farther than Brockton Bay's city limits. You maybe didn't realize, but I keep track of it all. Effortlessly. I've got the likely parahumans narrowed down to a pretty small number of people, in part by identifying the Protectorate capes and guessing that most anyone they go after and treat as a serious threat is probably also a parahuman. I can't tell you which is which, but we wouldn't have to dig through the entire city. Just a few dozen people."

Like, yeah, I'd be a bit disappointed to have this whole thing cut short, but hey, it would be cut short if I died too!... still really want to see Taylor grow into being a proper Batman figure. She did the creepy leaning in and smiling thing. She's a natural at this. How much better would she be with refinement? That'd be so cool to see in action. (Hey, maybe that's why Robin puts up with his jerk butt!)

Speaking of, she walks over, crouches next to me, and pats me on the shoulder, still with the rictus grin going. "So you'd know if, say, Empire Eighty-Eight routinely meets for reasons like letting Kaiser make a big hatespeech, and be able to take me straight to the next one." Seriously, I'm not sure she's trying to be disturbing.

"I haven't been in Brockton Bay long enough to have that kind of pattern worked out for-sure." Only... 25% lying? It's really more that I've been more interested in stuff like Cavedude and the Jean pals... fuck I still can't think his name without a hitch. No, focus. Point is I don't really know what E88 as an organization is like. And I don't think E88 has ever pulled together all its capes in one place for a big speech or whatever anyway.

"But the possibility, yes?" Taylor's doing false cheer. Oh. Oh. She's... forcing this. To punish me? Uuuuh. Well, that's what Daddy would be trying to do, but I've spent the last hour unable to make sense of what's going through Taylor's skull. I'm seriously missing something, and it's almost as upsetting as the actual death threat bullshit.

Honestly, I'd rather we do something else... "... yes."

"And really, we just need to look at the men... Actually, never mind that."
Wait, Taylor thinks I can just straight up poll someone's gender with my power? Did she really not pick up on how several of the people we found while looking for Uber and Leet were male/female *couples*? Is... I... cannot parse Taylor's thinking here. Does she really think gender matters that much? Wait, is *that* why she's so upset about me hitting on her? And trying to insist she's heterosexual?

...

Keeping that theory in mind.

Anyway, let's correct that misconception. "Emotional profiles for gender are only trends, anyway. I get it right more often than I get it wrong, but-" Okay, let's use an example and hit her right in her damn assumptions if the recently-generated theory is correct. And hope this doesn't provoke death threats. Or actual death. "I actually thought you were a guy until you called me."

...

Okay, Taylor doesn't *like* hearing that, but she's not pissed. That... tells me *something*, but I'm not sure what. It doesn't bust the theory, because she might just be aware she's not exactly a flower of femininity and *thus* is more defensive about the whole thing *except* for acknowledging she's not really that girlishly attractive and all. Or maybe it's because the theory is a bust and I'm misunderstanding what pissed her off earlier. Not sure. It's a data point, anyway.

...

Okay, you know what, fuckit, let's just keep pushing. The worst thing that can happen is she kills me hahaha that's not a joke why are you laughing.

Casual, conversational. Totally just an idle question with no ulterior motives whatsoever. Please ignore how I was Very Sad and stuff like half a second ago. Girls, our moods just shift about for no reason, right?... it's sad that I believe Taylor might actually believe that. "So. How were you planning on getting a boyfriend, anyway?"

Taylor's sort of thrown, then once she cottons on she's really dismissive. "The usual way." Pffft. Yeah, sure. The *usual* way. Like *that's* the thing you should be saying to the girl you *know* hooks up with people via power shenanigans. But sure, let's ignore that (for now) and just keep up this
Okay, I kinda know what I'm driving at, but I'm not sure how to say this. So... it kinda comes out slow and awkward... "Boss, don't take this the wrong way-" ie the stabbing me to death way "-but you're not, um, traditional. As a girl." It is goddamn weird than I'm the one doing this explanation. I'm not fucking traditional!

Taylor gets all defensive. "I'm a teenager, the acne will pass. And my proportions will smooth out... and hopefully my chest will fill out."

Her idea of traditional girlishness is being physically attractive.

I.

What.

I am offended on behalf of women everywhere, Taylor you stupid fuck.

Let's... gloss over that for now. Because I don't want to touch that with a five hundred foot pole. Not right now. Jeez. "That's... not what I meant. You, um. You don't wear makeup. Or frilly clothes. Or, um, walk the walk? Or, um, the way you hold yourself, the way you feel. You're, er, not inviting."

Taylor gets that cold anger again arghfuckdammit. "Cherie-"

No you stupid fuck I'm not talking about me right now! No no no, don't let the anger through, I am so glad I'm wearing the mask right now. "No no no not to me Boss I, I-" Sell it! Theatrical cringe, visible even through the costume! "-I really really don't mean it that way please don't hurt me!"

Then, uh. Hunch down and shake a little? Like I'm afraid for my life? I mean, compared to earlier I'm not, but I'm not sure Taylor realizes my fear response is more about freezing in place than
about shaking in terror. Aaaand, yes, she buys it. So, keep talking. "I mean you don't, um, you don't send a 'come hither' message."

Taylor is completely mystified. "Why would I."

... 

Aaaahhh shit. She thinks being a girl means being beautiful. And if you're pretty enough, you don't need to send signals. 'If you build it, they will come', and all that. So she's never thought about any of this shit, has she? Goddammit, I'm having to do Teenage Romance As Explained To Idiots, this is fucking stupid.

"Gender roles!" Argh, came out angrier than intended. Uh. Also technically inaccurate, back up slightly, deliver the correction without the venom. "Gender expectations." Better. "I mean, I'm probably not the best person to be talking about this because, uh, I-" Wait bad plan bad plan! "- actually let's not talk about what I've done just take my word that I'm, um, non-traditional, but you're, um." Christ, it just occurred to me how easy it is to plug Taylor into this framework in the male role when looking at, you know, the murder. "Pursued and pursuer, okay? That's a thing, and, um, traditionally girls are the pursued. And you don't fit that." At all. Jeeeeeez, this has layers to it.

Taylor doesn't even say anything. She just sort of looks and sounds unimpressed. I. Really?

Okay, fine. "You're also not taking the role of the pursuer." Response! She doesn't like that, actually cottoning on to my point fucking finally. "So, uh, 'the usual way' isn't anything you're doing. Like, at all." Where 'usual way' means 'non-Vasil weirdos who bother to do talking and shit'. It's actually sort of fascinating to people-watch, because you can see how some people still totally do what I do and just pick a target and get to work on them, while other people do this more complicated negotiation thing, trying to find a middle ground to meet at. It took me a bit to actually think about how other people might approach relationships, actually. I basically assumed everyone was that direct -okay, not as direct as Pauline that shouldn't have fucking worked goddammit- and then realized they didn't have a Vasil power and that was a blue screen of death.

Hence the people-watching.

Also, Taylor's really not happy with what I'm saying. Not... murderously unhappy, but angry enough she's audibly snappish and all. "I don't want a relationship until the world is a better place anyway!" Yeah, sure. Totally not a plausibly defensible excuse. Honest.
And-

What the.

What is Aunt Cordelia doing in my range? I mean, okay, it's not, like, the most implausible thing ever, but it's still pretty damn unlikely. She was... one of the more devoted girls of Daddy's. Frankly, I'm a bit shocked she's not dead. No roaring rampage of revenge that fails horribly because she's just a normal human girl? Bizarre. I'm missing something.

"Cherie?" Oh right, Taylor is here. Whatever, this is seriously weird. Coincidence is on the table of course, but- "Cherie, what are you doing?"

Siiiigh. Okay, fine Taylor, lemme just... narrate... "One of daddy's girls just entered my range." Anyway, where was I? "Coincidence? Wait. Jean-Paul is here, so maybe he offered her a place to stay..." Ya know. Before Oni Lee gutted him. Because I'm a terrible sister. Okay grit teeth and don't let Taylor see the grief. And... actually, that seems unlikely anyway. "No, Little Jean isn't expecting anyone." Wasn't, but-wait, does Taylor know who he is? Have I mentioned that? She's not seeming particularly confused. I must've mentioned it. Right? I know I haven't mentioned planning on killing him, let alone actually doing it, but surely he came up at some point? Uuuuh you know what never mind, keep focusing on Cordelia. "I guess she might've figured out it was him, but that's such a stretch." Mostly because Aunt Cordelia has all the wit of a particularly unimpressive rock. "But her being here for me is even more unlikely..." Nobody should know I'm here! I haven't been on camera, and... hm. Wait, didn't the PRT take photos of me in costume? It's... possible she saw me on their website and recognized me or something?...

Taylor forcibly reminds me of her presence with a (Fairly forcible, ow) poke in the shoulder and a, "Cherie. What are you doing."

Huh. Okay, maybe I haven't mentioned J- argh think it you stupid fucker it's not that hard Jean. Jean. Paul. Anyway, Taylor. She's more mad than confused, feels like. Mad at being left out of the loop? But she is confused... Anyway, salute! Just to, uh, signal respect? Bossiness? Whatever, I think it makes sense. "Aunt Cordelia-" Oh wait she might not realize I don't mean an aunt in the way normies mean an aunt. ",-uh, one of Daddy's girls, she's here and that... makes no sense." Wait, still being too vague, argh, I'm off my game today, why. "Uh, by 'here' I mean she's coming into Brockton Bay." But seriously, what is up with Aunt Cordelia- "Wait a sec', she's not coming in by road." The fuck. Aunt Cordelia would never just... walk. But.. "She's walking. In from the woods?..." This makes no sense!

"Does she have powers?" Uh, what, Taylor? Why do you care? Whatever, fine.
What? Uh, no. Daddy didn't like going for girls with powers. Too much risk, I think. Except for the stupid Narwhal thing. Though he didn't go through with it, admittedly. So 'too much risk' is a fitting theory. Or maybe he was that FUCKING LAZY- calm, calm. Fortunately, Taylor is distracted thinking about whatever she's thinking about, so I don't think she caught me starting to rage about Daddy again.

Oh wow I just completely derailed Teenage Dating 101 with this Aunt Cordelia bullshit. Uh. Should I try to bring the conversation back there? That seemed to be kind of working. Kind of. Though Taylor was getting a bit twitchy, so-

"Think you could find whoever all makes up the biggest concentration of capes in Brockton Bay? Like, capes who are friends with other capes. That's probably the Empire. Easier than checking each person manually, probably faster. The gangs are mostly racist, so it's not particularly likely that, I dunno, Oni Lee and Purity are friends in their civilian identities. Should be reliable." Oh. Right, that whole... Kaiser-killing thing. That I interrupted. I guess Taylor doesn't care about Aunt Cordelia's mystery anymore. That's... weird. You don't care, Taylor? This doesn't sit under your skin, itching at you with its wrongness? She doesn't have a power, so you've dismissed her? Now I'm back to feeling like I'm missing something about Taylor.

Okay, uh. I hadn't considered that particular angle for thinking about the organizational stuff, so it takes me a moment to go over what I know and see if it kind of fits. And also seriously Taylor isn't bothered by Aunt Cordelia being here? It's really weird! It's confusing! It's a bit alarming! Fine, whatever. Talk, Cherie. "Uh, yeah, definitely Boss." SHOW NO WEAKNESS. "I mean, they're at their day jobs right now I think, the ones who have one anyway." 'cause it's... uuh... what time is it? How late did I sleep in, anyway? Oh gosh, I just realized this is the first night I've slept properly in ages. Oh wow, it could be past noon for all I know. "I assume these are day jobs? I mean, a few of them are... probably fighting?" One of them is wolf-mask-guy. Should I mention that? I'm not sure if I should mention that. I'm still not clear where Taylor is drawing this line at. Or if she's still drawing it. "But it's blood sport crap, I think? There's a crowd, all enthused, anyway. But most of the probable capes are moving around with a bunch of people who aren't reacting to them like they're a cape sort of big deal and they're feeling very, um, ordinary? Like your usual office drone loser sort of person sort of feelings, being irritated by coworkers who don't refill the coffee pot or worried their boss will catch them at something they shouldn't be doing at work or whatever all."

Cheating a little, since I've actually got all the ABB capes (All... two of them...) identified, and I know who all is Protectorate, more or less, got the Jean-pals dammit stop choking identified, and I'm just kinda... assuming most of the Obviously Powered People who I don't have a slot for are Empire. Which is probably wrong, but whatevs.

"Cherie, you'd be able to find the Protectorate capes in their civilian guise, wouldn't you?"
Wait what the fuck she does know? WHERE HAS SHE BEEN DRAWING THIS LINE? Also, "Wait, are you talking retaliat-"

"Just answer the question, Cherie."

Seriously, Taylor? Why can't you answer my question? And are you going to just stab me and abandon me in a ditch if I reveal I totally already know all this shit, because I've violated your precious 'gentlemen's agreement' by existing? Fuckit, hedging. It's not actually a lie, and I need to test the waters. "Uh. Sort of?"

Taylor is very noticeably puzzled, and a bit... outraged? "What do you mean sort of?"

Ooookay. She... seems to have been expecting me to have been able to give a clean answer, and is outraged at being denied that? That... seems to suggest she's not asking me to try to get me to incriminate myself and so justify her righteous murderstabbing of me. I'm... going to keep hedging, though... "Well, a lot of them, as far as I can tell, just bunk at the Rig. Like, I think one of them has an actual house?" And I'm not actually entirely sure it is Armsmaster's house, given that whole 'ambush Taylor thing'. I thought it was a bit funny he seemed to live right across from her, but now I'm not so sure. "And it's possible some of them are just PRT agents. I'm not actually totally sure whether those guys patrol or not, I might be mistaking an agent for a cape. So we could maybe run down one of the capes? Maybe?" If we're lucky. "I mean, if you're talking the Wards, they sleep in actual houses, but I don't take you for the child-murdering type." Pretty sure. Mostly sure. I don't really understand her criterion for appropriate killings, but I haven't seen anything suggesting she'd happily throw children into the 'murder because they're bad' pile.

"Oh." Taylor sounds really put out. I sort of stare at her (Still trying to make sense of Aunt Cordelia the background. She's not even hitchhiking!), and after a long pause suddenly gets all vaguely angry and defensive and stuff. "I'm not going to kill Heroes, Cherie. I'm making the world a better place. This isn't about my personal... stuff." 

Pfff. I like how it took her, what, five or ten full seconds to think to claim she totally won't kill heroes? Yeah, very believable defense there. Nooooot. "If you're not going to tell me what you plan on doing, I'm going to fill in as best as I can." See, Taylor? You should've answered my question earlier. Totally brought this on yourself. "I mean, duh." Learned your lesson, Taylor?...

"Could you tell me where all the capes who were in the fight last night are at?" Okay I'm thinking that's a 'no'. Bleh. Fine. Whatever. I am too confused to push this.
Gotta keep being a bit vague, though. "Most of them are on the Rig. Two of them are in the probably-blood-sport place, though neither is in a fight." Anymore. "One of them is... holding court, I think?" It seems logical for Lung to be holding court. Buuuut I need to give a plausible excuse for my guess. "They're surrounded by people who fear and respect them. Mostly fear, honestly." Which, hey, it's Lung. Not surprising. But can't say that. Probably. "Last one is holed up somewhere, their emotions are wonky." Hmmm. I think I might recognize this? "I think they're on drugs. And in pain?" Not so sure about that last one. Difficult to be sure at the best of times, and someone on drugs often has weird pain response inconsistency and the like. They were in the fight last night and are holed up alone though, so it's a fairly reasonable guess. Kinda annoyed I slept through a lot of that fight, actually. I'd have a better idea what they were thinking and why they're alone and all.

Actually, headcount. Okay, aaand... somebody's missing. Oh, and Taylor noticed me reacting. So now I need to explain my reaction. Fiine. "One of the combatants died, I think. I can't find them in the city, anyway." Which could just mean they left the city. I just really doubt it. "I only realized it because they spend a lot of time with the druggie loner, and the druggie loner is feeling very, very alone right now. A lot like you at school, actually." Huh. Given what I know about Taylor's schooltime, that's... interesting, how closely the emotional patterns parallel. Was druggie loner bullied? Or maybe betrayed by someone they thought cared about them? Both? Some other factor is the actual similarity? Hmm.

Taylor... gets sort of annoyed at the comparison? But doesn't acknowledge it explicitly. Okay, whatever. "So we have a cape who's alone, isolated from support, and injured. Probably a villain." Uuuuuh so are you saying you want us to kill them, or?? "Let's table the Kaiser search and check on this individual." So is 'check on' a euphemism for 'determine the murderability of'? "In our civilian guises." She says this last bit all weirdly and gives me a look as best she can. Oh. I guess we aren't checking their murderability? Or maybe Taylor just doesn't want the PRT on our case. Though the way she's saying it really makes me think 'no we are not killing them, shut up'.

I'm down with that, sure. It's a great excuse to dress up Taylor in something that isn't her usual shit taste. Thus, I announce, "I'll get the clothes ready!" and zip off to do exactly that.

Okay, for me, I obviously need to cover my hair. The red streak is cool, but distinctive, and my earliest run as Pride had it on display, and of course if anything is going to be pointed out by the fam and get the PRT recognizing me, it'll be the red streak. So, scarf. Hmm, let's go with sunglasses as well, just because it's really not my style normally. Separate the us that will be checking on this cape from our usual selves and our usual cape selves. Use makeup to suggest different lines, and let's go super pale. I'm pale, but not that pale, and critically if I make up Taylor as really pale too it'll contrast against her usual skin tone pretty strongly. She's the one liable to be recognized about town and it create problems. I mean, I can keep Shadow Stalker away from us easy peasy because I know where she is and I'm awesome bullshit, but Taylor's probably got school peers I've completely forgotten about, or am technically aware of but don't know of some prior history between them and Taylor, or whatever.
Anyway, gonna make us both pale, and I'm going to go for more of a dressing-down thing than my usual. I've been show-offy basically constantly here, I should probably dress in darker colors, clothes that move less.... I've got some of that. Not a ton, but some of it. Jeans? Nope, I don't have jeans- BRAIN PANTS ARE NOT MY BROTHER QUIT HITCHING THEY'RE NOT EVEN PRONOUNCED THE SAME.

G-goddammit. Need to get that under control. Fuck, I have no idea how to go about that. Let's ignore it. That works for now.

Clothes, Taylor, me. Right, anyway, finish up my makeup. Gonna make Taylor stand out in contrast to me, make her pop. Nobody will connect her to spooky, creepy Monster or to quiet, scared Taylor, and yet they'll focus on her over me.

Stealth goal: get Taylor to see her dumbass bizarre mental space is dumbass and bizarre. Without her thinking that's the goal. Make it seem completely natural and logical that I shoved her into the position of being a sexy girl whose clothing choices signal interest, absolutely no attempt to make any kind of point hahaha why would you think that girl?

Of course, I don't think she's going to just sit there and take it, so I need to pick out... let's go with three outfits. One outrageous one (Oooh, an excuse to break out the basically-a-bikini one!), one obviously dubious one, and one that fits my criteria while seeming waaaay more reasonable than the others. I mean, if she wants to put on the dubious one, hey, that works too... well, kinda. I really hope she doesn't, because an outfit really showing off her bod is an outfit showing off how it's not so hot. So I want something that actually occludes her true body shape and makes her seem more shapely than she actually is. Hell, I'd break out heels if I thought she had a chance of going for it, just so she'd do The Walk. Hmmm, though some of my shoes have that heel-y effect going on a bit more subtly... she probably won't notice if I stick to those and just don't offer actual flats. It'll be weak, but it'll put her into the vicinity, and thinking on it, that might be more effective than putting her in actual high heels.

... 

Especially since she probably has no idea how to walk in high heels. It's Taylor. Fucking duh, Cherie. Flailing and falling is not The Sexy Walk. So yeah, definitely going with the slight heel-shoes...

Okay, so that's the plan settled, details are...
... "I grabbed three outfits, I'm thinking we set you up as a sexy lady on the town so the
Protectorate won't connect them to mousy, moody Taylor, I've got some spare makeup so we can
pretty up your face a bit..."

Taylor's horror confuses me, but I ignore it. Clothes! Dress-up! Getting Taylor to Be Sexy without
realizing it, to get her thinking! These are the priorities, not whatever bizarre thing is going on with
Taylor. It's not like there's somebody behind me. This isn't a horror movie, come on. Well. Not
for me, anyway. Heh.

Of course, once we get into the swing of things it becomes clear Taylor was horrified because
there's no really great reflective surfaces in this warehouse. Especially with the iffy lighting. So she
has to strip and try on the outfits while I'm watching. Okay, that's... hm. Dangit, it's not points
for or against the 'proposal' theory. Maybe she's horrified because she thinks I'm going to take the
opportunity to hit on her a lot. Maybe she's horrified because she's... uh... shy? Hell, maybe she is.
So maybe having someone she actually does like seeing her almost naked is this big horror
moment because she likes me.

God, it's ridiculous that I can't just trust my power as to whether she's into me or not. Stupid power
being unreliable about reporting information on her. And Taylor being so weird in some ways I'm
starting to suspect she'd be throwing me on some topics even if her power wasn't running active
interference. She hasn't been lusty at me, but with how rarely it's cropped up and prior established
issues, it's possible it's another weird power interference thing. Maybe she's really into me and I'm
just getting nothing, or super-little, because of her damn power.

Naturally, Taylor rejects the outrageous outfit out of hand. The funny thing is, she doesn't give me
weird looks or act like I'm clearly hoping to get some eyecandy. She just looks at it, recoils, and
tells me no. She's not mad, not even really paying attention to me. Got some other reason for
rejecting it, seems like. Interesting.

She actually tries on the dubious outfit, gets a look at herself via one of the truck's side-mirrors,
and rejects it after awkwardly tugging at the hotpants. This time I get a Look suggesting she's
suspicious of me (And the actual stab of suspicion to go with it, thanks power), but honestly I'm
pretty sure her big issue is that the hotpants are outright uncomfortable for her. Probably because
she's got longer legs than me. Because she's taller. Bah.

Thankfully, she doesn't seem to really question the last outfit. A jacket to frame her breasts just so,
sleeveless sports shirt underneath that I was totally going to claim was so she'd be comfortable
running but she never asked so okay then, and... pants that are relatively adjustable that I actually
picked primarily because I was worried the whole hotpant issue would crop up and be bad.
Then it's time for makeup!... which for some reason she's quietly pleased about how I handle that?

Oh, and I do up her hair. She refuses to have it cut (Like, duh) and also forbids dye. Okay, it would've been nice to have that as an option, but frankly it would've probably taken too long and given her power I'm not sure it wouldn't be a waste of time. Maybe she'd go back to black the instant I looked away from her. And it's really difficult to make dyed hair look natural and I've never worked with black hair before anyway, and I don't want people noticing the fakeness. That's risking raising red flags in people's minds, come on. Still, I give a bit of a pout just to vindicate Taylor's totally incorrect suspicions. Make her feel more in control of the situation, less like she needs to threaten to kill me if I don't play along with what she wants.

I am an artist if I do say so myself, which I do. Taylor looks basically unrecognizable. I doubt her father would realize it was her, so long as she didn't talk.

... no idea why she checks her makeup on the stupid tinkertech computer's monitor.

I especially like the bright red lipstick on the pale face. Very striking, and while it's fake-looking it's the normal sort of fake-looking teens do just because they're trying to dress up, not the sort of fake-looking that looks like people disguising themselves. So it'll grab people's eyes, and from there they'll look at the complete picture, and hopefully go 'hubba hubba'.

... without any help on my part, ideally. I'd very much like to be completely truthful in saying I didn't use my power if she asks when this stuff happens.

It is an act of will to not rub my hands together gleefully. I'm really looking forward to this, and it's a struggle to not show it.

... of course then Taylor ruins it by doing her weird, hesitant thing of looking down, obviously skittish, and just waiting for me to drag her along after grabbing my hand.

I still don't get Taylor.

...

This better not be the running theme of today.
Oh god it totally is going to be isn't it, fuck my life.
Chapter 12: Shameful

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 4.5 and 5.1.

Chapter 12: Shameful

The walk is, in my opinion, a total success. It was amusing seeing Taylor get distracted by herself in the glass, but she seemed mostly happy with what she was seeing. Curious what the little stabs of dissent were, but whatever. Aside from having some moodiness going on like she does about everything goddamn, it was basically positive, and she certainly didn't get on my case about what she was seeing. If she was really bothered by any of what I did with her looks, she'd probably have told me outright, maybe dragged us back and made me change it.

It's even funnier when a dude comes by to try to pick her up. I didn't even use my power for that one, except to dissuade him from being interested in me. Which didn't even take that much work. Anyway, point is, Taylor completely shuts down in the face of a dude hitting on her. Heh, 'the usual way' my ass. It's really kind of interesting, because it's not like she's panicking or horrified or something, so I'm pretty sure this isn't some past trauma thing. She really seems to just be that confused by the entire idea of a man hitting on her.

Heh. Meanwhile when I tease her, she has actual responses. Okay, they've tended to be negative responses, but she doesn't lock up. Hell, even her deliberately ignoring me is a more intelligible reaction than this crap.

Anyway, getting the dude to go away is easy. I don't even have to lean on my power particularly much–he actually was a bit concerned about Taylor, and when I assure him we're totally like a block from home he's mollified. The only tricky part is getting him to disengage instead of insisting on escorting us if it's really so short a distance.

Dude has style. I like the 'tip a hat that isn't actually there' touch.

The only fly in the ointment, kinda, is Taylor thanking me for handling the situation. Um. Not sure how to feel about that, given I deliberately created the situation, ya know, with her clothes and all. And given how Taylor was reacting to me earlier. And her general behavior. I... just sort of gloss
over it. Something to think about. What provoked a thanks there, and not so many other times I've been far more helpful?...

Anyway, the rest of the walk is variations on this idea. Dude approaches, intending to hit on and/or pickpocket us, Taylor doesn't know what the fuck, and I handle the situation. It's really, really hilarious that Taylor never accuses me of engineering this. Because I did. But I thought she'd assume via my power, and she's just... not having it cross her mind at all. It's actually sort of annoying? I was totally looking forward to honestly telling her I wasn't using my power to bait these people out. That would've been a funny moment where I was getting something over her sort-of-innocently. Oh well.

An interesting thing is Taylor's general anxiety creeps up as we walk into danker parts of Brockton Bay on our way to our target. My first thought was she was nervous about us approaching the target, but then I remembered that while I know how close we are, she doesn't. I'm not doing a running monologue, and she hasn't asked for one. So I'm not entirely sure what that's about.

The other neat thing is that after the fifth guy, Taylor starts reflexively looking to me to handle the situation, instead of just completely locking up. Bonus!

Of course, in between guys ten and eleven is a girl, which, consistent with earlier observations, Taylor actually does kinda have a response for. It's this really awkward 'oh, um, no thanks?' thing she says while basically shrinking behind me, which is sort of lame, but it is something, and it's interesting on a number of different levels. The apologetic aspect to it, in particular, is striking. Not sure what it means, but it's striking.

Anyway, in deference to Taylor's inexplicable anxiety, when we're just about on top of Mysterious Target Z's location -it's an abandoned car shop thing- I deliberately pull us to a stop and mutter to Taylor, "They're still in there. I think they might be asleep. Either that or high as fuck. Last chance to back out."

Curious thing: Taylor pulls her hand away, looks at me funny, and walks up to the fence all determined. Does she think I was insinuating cowardice? Or something? It's a very odd contrast with how she's been basically hiding behind me this whole time. I'm a little surprised when she starts climbing the fence -I'd figured we'd go looking for a gap. With this ratty a place, there probably is one, especially since the cape is already inside and I'm fairly confident they're injured, so climbing a fence? Not likely. Cape, admittedly, but I'm reasonably confident they don't have mobility powers...

The new confidence is cool, though. And 's not her faking, either. Wish I knew what was going on, but hey. Anyway, I follow her up the fence, and over the other side, and she... gets this weird spike of... embarrassment? Weird.
Once we're both over, Taylor glances around and give me a questioning look. Uuuh. Oh, maybe she's reacting to the lack of people around? Asking me why nobody is around? It's... not me, anyway, so I shrug at her. Hopefully that's what she was asking with her eyes there. Not actually that confident, given how this morning has gone. And I'm worried about that lack of confidence.

Anyway, we slip in through a door that's off its hinges. Actually, I don't see hinges on it at all. Did someone steal the hinges and leave the door? Weird. I try to not wrinkle my nose at the smell in here. Ugh, it reeks of old drug usage in here. I think I might have my answer as to why someone would steal the hinges but leave the door: because You On Drugs is a retard. I suppose this is a bit more secure of a spot than an abandoned warehouse is, if you just want to be alone for a few hours.

Then Mystery Target Z sobs a bit (Not sure if it's because of pain or if it's any of their bundle of unfun feels driving it. Oh hey, the sobbing means they're not asleep: high as fuck it is), not far off, which for some reason prompts Taylor to look at me and get all inquisitive. What? What are you looking at me for? This is your thing! Bleh. I just sort of shrug at her. I'm pretty sure she's trying to be sneaky, given she's not just talking to me, so she'd probably get mad if I tried to ask her what she's on about. Fortunately, Ambiguous Shrug works just fine. I have no idea what that was about...

Anyway, Taylor puts her hand up in a 'stop' motion, points at my feet, and then points at herself and sort of jerks her head toward Mystery Target Z. Hey, I think I know what this means! 'Stay here Cherie, while I go and check this out'. Okay, coolio.

Then Taylor goes stalking quietly off. Damn. I mean, she's not in high heels, but I'm still a bit impressed how soundless she is when she wants to be. The sort of halfway-to-a-crouch walk she's doing is a bit weird to me, though. What's that about? Lowering her profile? In any event, Taylor is doing that focused thing she does when she's setting up to kill someone. Soooo... I guess Mystery Target Z is gonna die today. Alright then. Not sure why we bothered coming out here. If she's hiding out here alone, she's not getting medical treatment. I kinda suspect she's gonna die on her own regardless.

...

Oh, right. Murder-as-intimacy theory. She... might be doing it because murder just does something for her. Ah. Hm. Welp, better Mystery Target Z than me!

Actually, hold up, she actually brought me along instead of going in on her own after we were near-ish. Hooooly shiiiiit. If this is a murder-as-intimacy thing, that's like... first base on a date! (Wait, was first base kissing or hand-holding? I'm going to assume it's kissing) Haha progress!
Now if only I had any idea what prompted it.

Then... nothing. Taylor gets to Mystery Target Z out of my sight, and Taylor is sort of creeped out while Mystery Target Z notices her and then resolutely ignores her, focused on... crying, I guess. Oh wait, is that grief? Like, I can tell sadness at a glance (Is there an 'at a glance' phrase for hearing?), but usually people don't try to be sad unless it's because they've lost something they care about and miss it and don't want to stop feeling sad because it would mean mentally burying the thing. Or however that goes exactly.

Well, I'm pretty sure I'm fine, and I'd like to get a closer look at Mystery Target Z. Maybe I'm misunderstanding this. Maybe they're very sad because their arm got pulled out of its socket and it was their favorite arm. Capes can be weird, yo. Plus... now I'm really curious how Taylor will react if I intrude on her Private Moment Of Murder. So I pop in behind Taylor, and... "Oh. Grief. Huh." ... yep, Mystery Target Z is looking badly wounded, but I'm pretty confident she's grieving. Probably the missing cape. Whoever that was.

Funny thing is, Taylor twitches, shocked, having apparently not noticed me until I spoke up. Heh. Wasn't even trying to sneak. Then she spins, low-key angry at me, and surprisingly quietly spits out, "Cherie, this is not safe." Hmmm. More points for 'wants a relationship with me'. That's a surprisingly protective sentiment. I was expecting her to get mad at how I'm intruding on her murdermoment. I mean, I suppose this could be a smokescreen and the anger is actually about me bursting into this thing she wants to do alone, but while Taylor did kind of okay at coming up with a story to sell her dad on I've never really gotten the vibe she's good at misdirecting people on her motives. Soooo... probably take it at face value as protective.

Regardless, I wave a hand dismissively. "Yeah yeah Boss." If Mystery Target Z was going to do anything, I'd already know. She's committed to being really sad. Might be a bit of suicidal-ness going on there, actually. Not that suicidal-ness is a feeling, but the way she's focused on her grief I'm kind of suspecting whoever died was so important to her she's considering following them into death. So hey, let's confirm that! And also render Taylor momentarily silent by walking around her, ignoring her moment of silently raging outrage. I mean, I could just close my eyes, but that would be a bit too flagrant that I'm just making Taylor shut up. Having done that, I crouch down in front of Mystery Target Z -who is admittedly not that mysterious at this point, she's a blonde girl in not much clothing, there's blood and I think grease or something all over her, but hey Mystery Target Z is fun to say, even in your own skull- and ask her point-blank, "Heya girl, who died?"

Taylor is surprised when Mystery Target Z says, "Only the love of my life. Just kill me already." Huh. Not sure why Taylor's surprised. Anyway, so Mystery Target Z is indeed a Romeo and Juliet wannabe. Er, a Juliet-wannabe, I guess. Whatever, her favorite is dead and she wants to die too. Pretty sure she's talking non-platonic love here, too. Miiight just be me stereotyping her, though.

Regardless, "Not my call to make. Take it up with the Boss." Though honestly if it were me I'd go
'lolno' just to be funny-spiteful. You wanna die? Nah, lemme go get awesome medical care for you with my Master power. Anyway, I shuffle out of the way mostly so I can inconspicuously get line of sight on Taylor again, but my response confuses Mystery Target Z and she stops hiding her face in her hands and looks at Taylor herself, rendering it a bit redundant on my part. I manage to throw in a 'welcome to our wonderful restaurant' gesture quick enough to make it seem *totally* smooth and natural, though. Totally.

...

Or maybe Taylor and Mystery Target Z just don't notice because they don't care. Bleh.

Mystery Target Z speaks up before Taylor. "I don't know you people at all. The *fuck* are you doing here, civvy girls?" Ha! Civvy girls. Cute. Not sure why she thinks it matters she doesn't know us, but okay.

Taylor gets sort of... not precisely *mad*, but irritated in this really strong-yet-low-key way, though. I think she might be mad at Mystery Target Z swearing at us. At least, I can't think of a better reason for the anger, nor the following instruction. "Hit her with terror. Two seconds."

Okie-dokie!

Oh, that's interesting. I've not seen someone *judder* like that before, not in response to hitting them with as much fear as I can as fast as I can. Is it because of her injuries? She also scoots up against the wall, though I kind of doubt she's all that aware she's doing it. Probably just basic fear response stuff: run away! "Not civvies, then." That's surprisingly coherent. Then she... gets herself under control? Huh. She's made of sterner stuff than I was expecting. "The fuck you want with me, bitches?" Okay, I'll admit I like the spunk she's showing, but I'm gonna have to ding her on the *smarts* quotient.

...

Oh, wait, I concluded she's suicidal a minute ago. This might be a suicide-by-cop thing, where she's trying to piss us off so we'll give her the death she wants. Huh. Okay, stupidity comment temporarily retracted.

Then Taylor sits down. Like. Butt on the floor and everything. In this place. Ewwwww. "Well, that depends on who you are, and what you're willing to do. Among other things." Okay, so
Taylor isn't just getting her murder on. She's... doing... fuck, I dunno. *Something*. Trying to be all authoritative and stuff too. I should do the thing, present myself as her right-hand woman and make it clear she's totally an important person you should listen to and also please ignore me. So I do that, aaand... I *think* Taylor actually *notices* me doing it this time. Hmmm. That could be a problem, if she objects to me doing it for some reason. Not sure why she would, but there was this whole thing this morning...

Mystery Target Z sneers... at her hands? "Can't recognize ol' Squealer without her big machines or her big man, is that it? Of course not, nobody respects a Merchant. Fuck everybody." Awww. Now I can't call her Mystery Target Z anymore. Okay, fine, so *Squealer* is pretty darn bitter. Like, she sounds bitter, obviously, but the well of bitterness runs *deep*, I think way deeper than the stuff she's talking about is liable to explain. Probably *history* there, personal history going way back. 'Big man' is probably the dead dude she's grieving over and currently trying to follow by provoking us. Not sure what 'big machines' is alluding to. Tinkertech, presumably, but that's not very helpful. Especially since I don't see any tinkertech on her. Maybe she'd normally wear a suit like the Dragonslayer suits, but had to abandon hers during the fight last night?

I'm a bit surprised Taylor doesn't make me hit her with terror again, or something. Especially since she's starting to get this pounding background of anger. "Isn't your thing big vehicles?" is, nonetheless, delivered in the mildly curious tone of someone wondering why one house has a bright pink roof in a neighborhood where all the other roofs are a dark blue. Idle curiosity.

I'm starting to wonder if her power has something to do with her managing to act calm when she's not *actually* calm. There's people who can do that who don't have powers, but I already know her power *does* mess with her feelings...

Squealer just keeps provoking Taylor, and this time not even with words. Something... briefly unsettles Taylor for a minute, no idea what, but then she shakes it off, wait like twenty seconds for a real response, and then finally some anger creeps into her actual *voice*. "You people hook kids on drugs. Why? What-"

She doesn't get very far before Squealer just dismisses her entirely. "*They* come to *us*. 's what happens when your life is shit, your parents are shit, your *everything* is shit and you need a way to just get through the day. We just sell to whoever comes to buy. Always have. Been on that side of the fence myself. Fuck you." Okay, I think she's being basically honest -she's got the right level of bitterness and stuff- but I wouldn't be surprised if this is also part of the possibly-real plot to get us to murder her. Actually, maybe she's *assuming* we're gonna kill her and just isn't willing to *bother* in the face of what she thinks is impending doom? That could make sense too. Though... it doesn't *disqualify* the suicide theory...

Taylor, meanwhile, is jarred, disquieted, a bit horrified, lots of confused. She clearly wasn't expecting a response anything like that. In fact, I'm not sure she knows how to respond to this.
I can help! I've got answers! And I can be funny, too. Bounce up and down, hand in the air, wait to be called on like the most excitable teacher's pet ever, wait for Taylor to notice that I'm doing it... thankfully, that happens pretty quickly. I was worried I'd have to get noisy for her to notice, and ruin the joke. When Taylor makes a 'go on' gesture, still befuddled, I grin and announce, "I know this one! Like Rat Park!"

Taylor and Squealer both just sort of stare blankly for a moment. Then Taylor tilts her head, feeling curious. Okay, more of an explanation then. "See, most drug studies with animal testing that are all 'oooh, drugs are evil and super-addictive rat!' involve rats in tiny cages with no room to explore, no other rats to fuck and otherwise have fun with, etc etc. So you had these dudes who made a big place with a zillion rats and tons of toys and basically rat playground equipment, and they set it up so rats could drink tap water or drugged water, and they found that mostly the rats would rather fuck than drink drugged water. So: other drug studies are the equivalent of locking someone into an isolation chamber in prison, and their options are pump iron or do drugs or be BORED. Totally unrealistic!"

Taylor gives me another stare, and after a moment asks, "Why do you know about this?" while Squealer has lost interest in our conversation. Yeah, I'm thinking she's trying to provoke us into killing her.

I say, "My childhood was very, very boring." And terrifying. But let's not focus on that.

Taylor wisely fails to press that particular topic, though she's a bit upset, up to and including allowing a frown onto her face. Nonetheless, she focuses on Squealer again. "Who was the, er, 'love of your life', anyway?" Heh. Her fingers twitch a little when she says 'love of your life'. I'm not sure if she was planning on air-quoting and then decided against it or if she's just unconsciously air-quoting, but either way I'm amused. Taylor doesn't believe in True Love, looks like. Which. Fair.

Squealer is not impressed. "Who do you think, bitch?" I have this suspicion she'd be flipping off Taylor if she wasn't moderately wounded and all.

It's kind of hilarious how much this pisses off Taylor, though she doesn't let it show. There was a split-second where I thought blood was about to spray, but in the end, nope. She just says, "Skidmark," in this 'I would punch you but I'm not sure I could ever stop if I started' tone of voice.

Taylor guessed correctly (Or is just horribly, horribly mean, either-or), because Squealer collapses into new sobbing instead of continuing to give us lip. This is hilarious: Taylor is confused. Gosh, Taylor, you either forced her to confront her loss anew, or you did a fantastic job of communicating
your anger, or hey maybe both. How ~mysterious~ that Squealer would take it poorly. I can't help myself. I pat Taylor on the shoulder, make sympathetic noises, and say, "A woman's feelings are a mystery, ain't they?"

Ha! She... well, she didn't laugh, but there was amusement there! She found it funny! Aaaand then she turns her head in this horror movie fashion, the rest of her body creepily still, and stares at what I'm pretty sure is my jugular. Okay, I think I'd be disturbed if I was anyone else. But I know she was amused and is trying to hide it. So hey, I'm just finding this hilarious. Or... is she playing along? Is that what she's finally doing? Oh my god, that would be amazing.

Then Taylor rolls her eyes and goes back to staring at the top of Squealer's head like she's hoping to drill a hole in it with her laser vision. The laser vision she doesn't have. Come on, Taylor, you're Batman, not Supes. We've been over this. Not quite parsing the feelings she's experiencing, and very carefully not showing to anyone else. Heh. Hesitancy, definitely, a weird little thrill of fear, almost exactly like a scare chord actually, but... I'm having trouble giving context to all this stuff. There's some anger -it's Taylor, of course there's anger- and blah blah blah, but I can't reverse-engineer the thought process. Man, I hadn't realized how much I've been pulling from people's expressions and body language in conjunction with my power to create a complete profile, not until now that I'm with Taylor and it's often just my power I can work with. Huh. Useful to know.

Then Taylor pretty obviously comes to some kind of decision. She's even got a Firm Look on her face and everything. Then she ruins it by sounding weirdly hesitant when she speaks. "We -well, I, I guess- are turning her in. Help me get set up."

I get stuck on the weird delivery there for a minute, like seriously Taylor why are you all wishy-washy hesitant-sounding about your Firm Resolution to Do The Right Thing? Then I catch up with how this is basically the opposite of what I've been expecting -you're not killing Squealer? Seriously? Okay, I guess that makes running her down make less nonsense, but what?- and aarggh she's confusing me. Oh, actually, I'm totally prepared for this with a pen (I totally didn't steal) and sticky notes! (I definitely didn't steal. Would these gorgeous lips lie to you, imaginary listener?) In my purse! Heh, let's be obnoxious, given those dummies attacked her just last night. I write out...

"From: Monster & Pride

Much Love, Protectorate Pals!"

... and show it to Taylor. We can, like, wrap a ribbon around Squealer's head and put this on it, like she's a birthday present! Or, well, we could if I had a ribbon. I'm not that prepared.
Naturally, because Taylor is Taylor, there's a moment of peevish anger, and I'm half-expecting her to make me write a new one, but in the end she just gives me a look, spends a bit being all doubtful and hesitant, and then finally shifts over to being okay with this. Hell yeah! First draft is good draft! (That's like weird in writing circles, isn't it? So that proves I'm awesome) Okay, so, uh. Okay, we don't have a ribbon, so I can't tie it to Squealer's head. And it's a sticky note, not like duct tape or something, so it's not going to stay on if I just slap it on her forehead or something. Uuuuh, maybe her shirt? No, wait, I'm not sure how Squealer is going to be sitting on Taylor during this run. Bleh, I think I need to undermine the joke a bit and just get it under a bra strap so it'll stay even though it won't be super-visible. Actually, maybe that'll be funnier? Taylor delivers a bleeding Squealer to their doorstep, they go all WTF DUDETT, and after scanning her for bombs or whatever the Protectorate Pals do in that kind of situation they find a cutesy little note. Wait, should I have put a little heart on it? Hmmm. No, I think that would've been too over the top, like just obviously mocking. I'm going for 'is she serious I can't tell this is stupid but it's not quite stupid enough to be clearly deliberate', not rubbing it in their faces that I don't really respect them. The putzes. So yeah, note's perfect, for sure.

Oh, and Squealer half-heartedly tries to slap at my hands... uh... oh, no, she is that pissed. Uuuuh. Now that I'm looking closer, that's a LOT of blood pooling in her pants. And on the floor. Oh god, that dark stain around her isn't normal filthiness, that's dried blood. Holy shit.

Damn, we're totally in a horror movie. Squealer is the damsel in distress, hunted by the monster. Taylor is the relentless monster. I'm... uh... hm. Dammit, I don't actually remember my horror movies that well. Did they ever have a hot sidekick for the monster? You'd think that would be standard or something, but nothing is ringing a bell. Oh, forget it.

Anyway, there's this whole thing with a car-sheet-dealy and blah blah blah, and I make sure to let Squealer know she's gonna need to stick tight to Taylor, and also casually threaten to eviscerate her if she starts considering feeling grateful romantic feelings at Taylor. And include a stab of mortal terror. Heh. It's satisfying seeing her pupils dilate, her mouth trying to form words and failing. I mean, obviously I didn't say all that in so many words, because I'm still not sure how Taylor wants to handle our, uh, relationship, but it's pretty obvious Squealer got the memo: hands off my girl, girl. Or Imma cut you. With her, probably, to be perfectly honest.

And then it's waving bye-bye!

Heh, listening in on people reacting is great. There's a lot of confusion, bits and pieces of dawning horror (Because they see the blood Squealer is losing by the liter? Or because Taylor-the-creature-of-the-black-lagoon disturbs them? Really curious), a delightful amount of, well, delight (Kids can be great sometimes. Occasionally. When they aren't creating problems. Which is... almost never...), and it's even more great listening in to the wave of people calling up the PRT, the PRT kinda
panicking, troopers getting ready -oooh, I think they're zipping for an armory! Note to self, make a mental note of that space, it's probably an armory, if we're ever in that area I want to be able to beeline to the shinies. Okay, so in reference to that, this, aaaand... the other thing... yeah, I think I can triangulate it in future. Probably. Hopefully.

Okay, let's be honest, if we're ever in the PRT office in the future it's going to be with alarms blaring. I'll just find it by following the troops.

Anyway, meanwhile over where my meat is walking along, it turns out there is totally a gap in the fence of this property. And... going by the dark trail in the grass, I'm pretty sure this is where Squealer dragged herself through. Ah, hm. I'm being eyeballed by people in the area. They're... hostile? Angry, scared, anxious... oh. Do they think I'm Squealer? That'd be pretty silly, I mean okay yes we're both blonde -wait, if they think I'm Squealer and they recognize 'me' from dragging 'myself' in with a gaping stomach wound, why are they scared? Hmmm. Is Squealer a petty revenge sort? I mean, she was pretty petty...

Anyway, back with Taylor, the hilarity is... well, okay, it's not really any different from thirty seconds ago, but it remains hilarious. Actually surprised there doesn't seem to be any car wrecks-wait is this- oh god the Brocktonite family, are they normal? Oh please don't tell me they're normal, I'd almost forgotten about them. Is that -yes, now that I'm actually paying attention to details, there's some people who are excited, not nervous, amped up on cool factor rather than on a desire to flee the scene. They're... maybe 30% of the people, though, so no the Brocktonite Batnuts aren't normal. Not... as abnormal as I'd been hoping... uuughhh.

Happier thoughts! Focus on... okay, yes, Taylor is making the delivery, the PRT is all tense and angry and they're expecting, like, an explosion, and then Taylor is outta there... and the PRT are going WTF. Heh. I would pay to see their faces. Like. With my own money instead of someone else's, even. Okay, they're... staying a safe distance away from Squealer... okay wait now there's an employee who's all outraged and ignoring everyone else being sensible... and now everyone else is sort of shrugging and going along with it. Oh, I think I vaguely recall this employee. They talk to the capes some, haven't been able to pin down their role because no one really defers to them like an authority usually but they still seem to have access to all the capes... they're not even in Brockton Bay all the time, actually. Sensible, mind, but still notable. Hmm. Some kind of pencil-pusher from another office? Eeeh, whatever, Squealer is being taken in and now that the other PRT plebes are getting a good look at her there's a lot of discomfort, guilt, yadda yadda yadda.

Okay bored now, I'll leave that in the background. I mean maybe Squealer will reveal her ninth-dimensional hellform and things will turn awesome again, but this seems to be turning into the same ol' same ol' of people getting all medically worried over a seriously injured person. Pfff, I see that like fifteen billion times a day. BORED.

Anyway, walking along, trying to figure out where Taylor is headed... is it that park we hung out at
before? No, no, not that one. Oh wait, she's stopped in a spot, no one seems to notice she's there, she's... doing something... I don't think she's waiting for me there, but let's walk that way anyway... okay... and...

...

... yeah, she's zipped off elsewhere. Need to angle myself more rightwardly, but overall same basic direction I was already going. No big. Just need to... drive off this dude who is drunk during working hours. Loser. Get a job! Or at least trigger and justify your angst. Loser. Anyway, once he's pushed away and now convinced I am the demons, I keep walking... and no, the stuff with Squealer hasn't gotten anymore interesting. I think they might've phoned Panacea, but she's not exactly hurrying her way over if so. Kind of curious if they called her over how bad Squealer's injury is or over her being a cape.

Anyway, bored bored bored, Taylor is waiting for me... Cavedude is... okay seriously, what is that? He's really smug for some damn reason. Is he on the phone with someone outside the city? Because his smugness doesn't seem to have anything to do with anything going on, and he's in his cave, so I really doubt he's playing a game or something. Seriously, what? Stop being so punchably smug, smugster. WHY YOU SO SMUG, SMUGSTER. Bleh. Maybe I should pay closer attention to him in the future, if he's going to be weird like this. Seriously, what is that? Why is he so smug? Ah, and now he's transitioning to something more business-like and... yeah, someone else has come in... he's talking to them... they're both being professional and boring... bleh. What did I miss, seriously?

Oh, whatever, I'm almost to Taylor. Grin up! Cheer activated! Heh. Okay, aaand... here... we... go! "That was fantastic." Annoyingly, Taylor just gets all confused and... vaguely offended? Er? Whatever, clarify before her mind goes stupider places. "The response, girl. People couldn't decide if they were supposed to panic or what. It was hilarious."

HAHA OH MY GOD THERE IT WAS AGAIN I DETECTED YOUR AMUSEMENT WITH MY POWERS OF... powering... power. Whatever, you were amused, I know it! I've gotten it twice! This may yet work!

Then Taylor gets all shifty-eyed while very obviously trying to play it cool and oh my god this is embarrassing how can you be such a cool badass and so sneaky-silent a stalking monster and this derp. I point at my head and make a point of rolling my eyes to call attention to the fact that I'D KNOW IF ANYONE COULD OVERHEAR US COME ON GIVE ME SOME CREDIT. Nonetheless, in the worst casual-secret voice I have EVER heard (And I've had to listen to Guillaume. Guillaume!), she asks, "So do you know what's going on with the package?"

Oh god. The 'package'. Did she get that from a movie? Seriously, the package. Like people won't
find that suspicious as fuck - wait, what are we talking about? What package - wait, is she referring to Squealer? Uuuh, okay quick review. Oh, huh, Squealer like nearly died or something, going by the panic and blah blah blah. But they've got it under control, pretty sure. Okay, bleh, let's... play along with Taylor's idiocy... "There was a bad spot where it looked like it was going to break completely, but it was caught in time, I think. They're fixing it right now." Okay how do I... um... ugh, this is stupid, how do I mention Smugster McCaveDude being the smuggest thing ever? Because that bothers me a lot more than what's going on with Squealer - forget it. Just... forget it. "We can talk about it more later." Okay, we did the thing! Nobody died, amazingly! Somehow! And I am personally still high on life and so on, and I'm sure Taylor is ready for more. So... "So what now, hon?"

Taylor spends a surprising amount of time mulling that over. What, she didn't have a plan already? Wow, she really doesn't do introspection. With her infinite waking time. Jerk. Just smile, Cherie, let her think! It's not like I've got a suggestion of my own right now. Which used to be a reason for existential dread but I HAVE CONQUERED THEE, FATHERFUCKER! In your face, cthuloid horror of my mind! You got nothing! I am freeee! And not like that fake-free I had when I got out from under Daddy's thumb (By making him very dead), but really free!

"We could... just... take a break? Have an actual nigh- er, afternoon on the town?"

FISTPUMP OF JUSTICE- wait what did Taylor just say? Uhhhh, don't let on that the fist-pump was totally unrelated. Seriously, she's suggesting we deliberately do normal human fun-type things? Instead of awesome parahuman things? Why? Is... is she hitting on me? Is this a date? Didn't we just do a date? Aaargh, I can't make sense of her thought process...

Okay, uh, sure. Let's... go dance?

"You know any clubs open at this hour?" I'm having a hard time wrapping my skull around the idea of Taylor being into dance clubs 'n shit, but okay. Dish!

Taylor sort of awkwardly looks to one side and blushes, vaguely ashamed. Uuuuh, has she blushed before? Oh! Shame! Huh, she can feel shame but not guilt? That's... a really weird distinction. She can't feel bad for doing bad things, but she can feel the crushing pressure of other people's opinions- holy fuck no wonder she's a murder 'hero'! She can't be a villain, because that's 'bad' in the sense that cultural norms say the villain label is bad and you should feel bad for earning that label, but she's able to murder for 'heroic' purposes because the screaming of the damned fails to reach her ears and she's... oh god, that's right, Kill Orders are a thing, and heroes heroically murdering villains accidentally-on-purpose also lacks real social backlash and hahahahaha ohmygod I get her now. "mumblemumble," she mumbles as if I can understand Mumble. I speak Disgruntled Grunts, okay? With a bit of nudging, she speaks up in a rush. "I don't actually know."
I cock an eyebrow at her, but okay. Nothing is going to phase me now that I know she's a Heroic Murderess And Why. "Well, it's not like we actually need to go now-"

Blush intensifies, shame intensifies. Uuuuh. "I meant I don't know any clubs. Period."

... 

Okay, we can eat well. "Okay fine, any fancy-pants restaurants?"

"Um. Fugly Bob's makes a pretty mean-"

NO. Rejected on the basis of its name. "Surely you've eaten at fuckin' Red Lobsters or somethin', at least."

Taylor looks down and the shame intensifies. That's a no. What does she eat normally, uh. Hm. I was going to make a peasant food joke but I realize I don't actually know what peasants ate in Ye Olde... Europe. I guess. Whatever! "Okay fine, bars can be pretty fun, please tell me you've gone and gotten your under-age drinking on-" Lightening the mood with a joke. "-at least."

Shame. Fucking. Intensifies. I was joking! "I know a couple of places, never drunk at them though." Uh. Why do you know this if you've never been? Taylor gets all defensive and slightly less shame-y for no fucking obvious reason. "My dad drinks with his friends semi-regularly, you just pick up this sort of thing."

Oh. Oh! Right. Normal family things, right, that is a thing that happens where you actually know your family members well enough to know what they get up to when they aren't around you without bullshit powers mapping the entire city passively. Like if your only family is your dad. Uh, now I feel like I've stepped in it a bit. Stupid jokes constantly backfiring. Just you wait, universe! Someday! Someday I'll make a joke and she will burst into laughter dammit!

I consider clarifying I was joking. No, wait, she got defensive for no reason, this is some kind of standing issue with her -is that ex-friend girlfriend of hers someone who got on her case about that? She hasn't exactly mentioned any other ex-friends, though I suppose they... uh... no, moving to another province -STATE I SAID STATE NO TELEPATHIC AMERICANS CAN FUCKING FAULT ME FOR BEING CANADIAN- doesn't really matter in this day and age as far as breaking friendships... hm. I guess she might've had minor friends she just... stopped talking to... eeeeh I'm
leaning toward friendless. If her ex-girlfriend best friend was just her overall mostest girlfriend-ness, I'd think she'd have clung to them after being burned. Or that she'd at least have included them in the, uh, creepy deadpan backstory dump as an aside if they also turned on her sort of dealy.

Wait, where was I? Shit, Taylor is sort of staring at me and the defensive shame is intensifying QUICK INTERRUPT TIME! "You know anybody who hosts parties regularly, maybe?"

Aaaaaand now she's brooding again. Spike of anger that thankfully doesn't seem to be directed at me, angsty tanksty bullshit of just... ugh, stop being a landmine girl! That was supposed to improve your mood! "One," she says, and stops, taking deep breaths and clearly trying to get herself under control.

Oh of course her ex-girlbestfriend was a party girl what was I thinking STOP MAKING EVERYTHING ABOUT HER, TAYLOR, MOVE ON ALREADY.

I take a moment to very carefully not rub at my forehead in frustration. Just... okay, productive suggestions that won't enter landmines. Plan: Distraction! Version Two! "I'll just look for happening places, okay?"

Taylor is agreeable about this suggestion, but still brooding goddammit.

----------------------------------------------------

First place: there is a coolio party with drugs being passed around, pretty sure. Not interested in the drugs right now, but it's the most obvious party-type place. There's security dudes and one dudette turning people away, but they barely register because I'm Cherie Fucking Vasil, I always have an invite-

-Taylor is pulling on my arm. No wait, she's outright stopping, like she expects this to hold me. Oh god, come on. "Why not?" It's perfect! Okay it's not perfect, but it's there, we've found it, we're done searching! We can go do... whatever it is people of our age do when they don't have superpowers, I guess.

"I want fun, a break. I don't want to risk drama." That's nice Taylor, there will be no drama because I'm CHERIE FUCKING VASIL!!!
I stop though because she's actually, like, serene about this. No weird paranoia shit twigging, no anger, no brooding, just a simple need/goal/thingie. Feels like I'd be kiiinda missing the point of her, ya know, words if I proceeded to create drama and stress by arguing with her. So. Fine. Fine.

"Right then, follow me."

Second place: Taylor is all no because we're under twenty-one and they check IDs here and she's not willing to let me charm or 'charm' my way in. I'm especially annoyed she didn't let me use my completely natural charm here, no joke, it's been a bit since the last time I talked my way into some place without cheating with my power and I had a moment of getting excited at proving how awesome I can be, above and beyond my power... buuut she's got a good point that she would never know the difference between me 'charming' vs charming my way in.

Third place: it's a BDSM party. I kinda knew it was a sex thing on the way over, but I thought it was some other kind of sex thing. The place is actually pretty good about screening things so if you don't know that BDSM is a thing you won't notice anything, but I'm me so I've already seen this and gotten bored of it. I can do better with my mind. Honestly, I mostly guided us here to see Taylor get all uncomfortable and she actually kind of did but there's no evidence she gets what she's looking at. So I don't make any kind of big deal about Taylor not wanting to go there - especially since we're ostensibly trying to Have Fun and if she's uncomfortable she's probably not having fun, yeah?

Fourth place: we're past the bronze medal here. Brockton Bay's daytime party scene is shit to be honest, if this experience is representative. Pretty sure this is an Empire place, I only took us here because I'm getting impatient and wouldn't mind interrupting our 'rest and relaxation' with Taylor becoming outraged at people beating each other up for sport and so murdering them for justice while I'm El Oh Elling in the background at her not seeing the issue with her thought process. Then I kiiinda realized I'd probably made a bit of a mistake and one of the fighters was actually a parahuman who I'd not noticed before as being a parahuman and I wasn't too thrilled with the idea of maybe kicking off a fight with an unknown parahuman who'd managed to go under my radar this whole time so I was super-happy when Taylor noticed how sketchy the place was, asked me some questions, and got all vaguely sick-looking at what I was describing and ultimately was leaning no. Didn't... let on about the parahuman thing. Don't want her knowing I kinda fucked up there.

So fifth place was- well. I'm not actually sure because...
... like a quarter of the way there the shadows pulled together in a fucking creepy way and then I got a closer look and realized they weren't shadows they were like a million fucking bugs. Cape! Uuuuuuuh shit where's the cape, is this another fucking cape who blocks my power please don't be another power-blocking cape I hate you guys. "I can't find whoever is doing this," I mutter in Taylor's direction. Then realize maybe the bugs can hear me? Powers! Powers are bullshit! Less talking, Cherie!

The civvies freak out and conspicuously decide to not help. Um. I wish I could take credit for that and pretend that I'm doing a totes heroic thing to impress Taylor with, but Taylor is blatantly unsurprised by it. She knows what we're dealing with and is... spooked? Unsettled? Jittery! She's metaphorically dancing from one foot to the other expecting things to go horribly wrong any second now. That's. Uh. That's concerning. What, is there another goddamn Lung-tier cape hiding in this goddamn cesspit of a city that I didn't hear about?

A bunch of the bugs form a pillar-thing that looks almost like a woman if I squint and ignore the fact that there's so many bugs they're blotting out the sun. I'm not exaggerating, what the fuck is wrong with this town!

Okay maybe ask a question. "So this is as bad as it looks?" Taylor's feelings are depressing. So. Worse? "Oh. Goody."

I regret asking my question.

"Yo u cant d e fr o m L èc ust, ap - e Th s is Empir é territori - Si d ék i e L ěga ve ; o r b e consumed. The e an d I - a - bu sj ne ss."

Ow ow ow jeeze Louise horde of bugs, you suck to hear talking.

Um, Taylor, signs? Please have advice. Somehow. Um. Okay, tap Taylor on a... limb. Taylor... emotes something like warm reassurance that probably doesn't mean what she thinks it means. Forget it. Just. Smile and nod and make nice with the fucking bugs. Um. They sound kinda feminine? That seems sufficiently unnatural for fucking bugs I'm going to wildly guess our fair bug swarm is trying to present as female. And hope they don't get offended and, like, decide to swarm me. Because I STILL CAN'T FIND THEM!!! "Hi miss, uh, Locust?" That can't be their name, can it? But it sounded like they sort of implied it was their name... "We're very sorry for the misunderstanding-"

"Ther - s m_isund_er_st a nín_g."
Shut up shut up shut up where are you! "-but we're not, um, capes. Just... a couple of girls on the town."

Goddddd I can't find her, so I can't even tell if she's buying it!

Taylor gets all coiled with tension and oh fuck something dangerous must be happening fuck fuck fuck "Yay, a r a r / e r m a r r f z i r f _ o d t _ f t / d m - n o t" / b l i n g / T h e / o t h e r / a m u n s e d / a - m e n / a s / j u m p t a s / a s / d l y / a d j / t e / d / y / o u r / e n / t / o o / m / f i n.

What in the hell did she just say? Oh wait I caught... uh... leave? I'm going to hope she's telling me to leave. Wait shit Taylor is going murder-mad nope nope Imma squeeze your stupid limb and realize too late it's pure luck I didn't cut myself on that don't kick off a fight before I'm gone oh god. Taylor gets a lid on it so, whew, message received.

I still can't find this horrible girl! Aaaand now Taylor is getting downright alarmed by who-knows what.

"Sidekick, I leave. No one is a living."

Oh okay I understood that. Um. Is Taylor going to be fine- she's gotten behind me and gently shoved me. Okay yes I can leave. I am perfectly happy to leave and oh god don't think about how many bugs have crunched underfoot ew ew ew. Thumbs-up Taylor! Because fuck this better you than me!

... okay I'm not sure Taylor is in any danger from a bunch of bugs, but whatever. Fuck this, I'm out!

... okay it's really creepy how the bugs part like a curtain as I walk out. That's just... not right. Creepy, F-ed, what.

Okay, can I find this bug person? Are they a controller or some freaky bug-morph? I haven't found them if they're a controller, but then there wasn't really tone to the goddamn bug-talking so it wasn't giving me anything to work with re: emotions. Hmm. Okay, assume they're a
controller because if they're not they're just immune to me and this is all pointless. Can I infer any limits from what I saw back there? It was all bugs of various sorts, aside a... handful of crabs for some reason... so. Size limit? Bugs don't register to my power so I can't backtrack them that way... uh. Wait, if they're a controller, they'd be sequestered, wouldn't they? Assuming they had the range for that to work. I mean, that's what I'd do if I had some carapace control power with range on it, and she could see us and hear us so if she's a controller she either had the area bugged -heh- or her bugs let her see and hear through them, making being on-site unnecessary. I mean, it's possible one of those civvies was just a really good faker, but a distant controller is way more likely, right?

And the thing is, there's conveniently this one person just... sitting alone, nobody else around them in a sufficiently large area it's got to be, like, a building empty of other people.

HMMMMM.

I WONDER.

Okay, sunglasses off, I want to be able to see their hidey-hole clearly. I make my way there and try not to worry too much about how things are going with Taylor, because it... doesn't seem like it's going great... ignoring that! Okay, I'm basically on top of the girl's (?) location. It's... a shitty apartment complex that's got this whole cavalcade of signs letting people know that trespassers will be fined because this is slated for demolition three years ago yadda yadda. A perfect hiding place aside the hobo competition, I guess. I totally ignore those signs and ignore the dude who starts yelling at me about how I'm a disrespectful teenager and when I get myself killed it will be completely deserved and I think he gets off on a rant about immortal souls and Satan's children but I'm ignoring him. Door: boarded up. Windows: boarded up. Basement windows: boarded up and too small for me to fit through anyway. Other door: boarded up. Other other door: boarde- wait. I lean a bit closer into this door, noticing that the way everything is arranged this particular door isn't visible from the street and even the nearby high-rises are almost completely blocked off by a tree that's all gnarly and overgrown looming in the way to block lines of sight. And the boards are...

... yyyyyep, I manage to pull away one fairly easily. They're nailed in, but... loosely, I guess? They come away way more readily than this sort of thing should, and after I get like three off it turns out the door is locked but that's what hairpins are for! Ah, the eternal problem with invincible fortresses: you need a door for yourself, and other people can use that door too. Unless you're a cape, but hey, modern problems.

I try to make a bit of an effort to sneak in, but it doesn't go so well. Things creak. There's spiders - there's.

Uh.
That. Is a man. Cocooned up and with hundreds or thousands of spiders and other creepy-crawlies feeding on him.

...

After violently ejecting my stomach’s contents as quietly as I can away from the goddamn bugs, I decide to revise my tentative vague plans to maybe, like, threaten this asshole into backing off and then leave them alive, maybe? Into a plan to fucking murder them. That's right, Taylor, Cherie is horning in on your thing!

...

oh god joking doesn't help i still feel horrified and am shaking like a leaf why what the fuck is this horrible shit about fuck this she dies

...

Eventually I find the damn door to the horrible monster's room. I knock, because style is important even when dealing with creatures from your worst nightmares, but there's no response. When I open the door and hurl myself through, I'm half-aware of how the room is filled with some nice shit like carpets and couches and silverware, in contrast with the fucking cocoon rooms that are all spiderwebs and dust and fucking horrible bugs and bodies in cocoons and oh god focus. This space is designed to be lived in. I also notice the table has a fairly sizable roast chicken, which has obviously been sitting there for hours and has had only a small portion of it cut out and presumably eaten.

This latter point takes on grisly new implications when I get to the girl and, in the process of putting my knife against her throat and failing to cut through the neckpiece discover she's skin and bones. Not like the mothering stereotype phrase OTHER PEOPLE’S mothers use to justify cramming piles of food down their kid's gullet, but like. Actual. Factual. Skin and bones. Lady, there's dieting and then there's stupid. I was going to tell her to not move or I'll slit her throat, but while she made a horrified, rasping croak -and I just realized her feelings are flat, disconnected not only from the bugs but even from the feelings she just physically expressed- and her head sort of tilted like 10% toward me, there was no lunging to her feet to run or defend herself. She can't. It's almost enough to make me reconsider my murder plan or feel bad about doing it to her except FUCKING COCOONS LIKE SOME HORROR MOVIE SHIT DADDY SCARRED INTO MY BRAIN WHEN I WAS FIVE GODDAMN YEARS OLD.
I mean okay I'm just increasingly sick to my stomach and horrified and it just keeps getting worse why does it keep getting worse but fuck the guilt I'm pulling a Taylor and Saying No To Guilt.

So instead I get on the couch and pull... whoever this is onto my lap, just to make absolutely sure they can't escape. And also work on pulling apart the neckpiece of their costume so I can cut them. There's very limited flailing, and oh god is this grotesque, but I decide to interrogate her while I'm still figuring out this neck bit. "So, um, whatever your name is-" Locust can't be her name, can it? That's such a lame, terrible name. "-what the fuck is up with the cocoons?" I make a point of blasting her with maximum depression, only it just sort of... slides off her? Or something? She feels it kind of for a second and then it's gone only not gone? What? I keep pushing regardless, which I feel a wee bit more justified doing when I notice there's like a whole bunch of bugs in the area and... some of them are sort turning about aimlessly or something, which maybe is somehow a consequence of the emotion blasting I guess?

There's a very faint flicker of confusion through the flatness and pseudo-depression. Then it's gone. "Undesirable... people. Bugs. Need food."

Okay that makes sense and explains how they resolved the issue of competition from the homeless people WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU LADY.

(The bugs buzz. Herp? What, like herpes? No wait, help? Maybe? What, does she expect people on the street to run to help her?)

"And why are you doing this?"

Thaaaat produces a twinge of... fear? Um. Okay? "Kaiser... orders."

Oh. Wait shit what? Fucking Kaiser ordered this shit? I look closer at her costume, and yes, it's covered in swastikas 'n shit. Holy shit, and Brockton Bay hasn't dropped a nuke on its Nazi problem yet why? Their boss feeds people to bugs! Aaaaah shit and I just realized she probably didn't even mean the homeless earlier, that's just... fuck, fuck this shit, fuck this place, and -what is Taylor doing?

"He'll... make you... example... suffer... Hell..." Yeah yeah whatever lady nobody cares.

Aaaand a gray-white... smoke? Thing? Pours in through a door I ignored earlier, and hovers nearby. Um. I pull my knife closer to the lady-cape's neck to make my point. And then look around
to see if any of the damn bugs have reached me yet and holy shit that carpet of bugs is a lot closer than I'd thought it was. "No, nope, back off with the bugs or I will slice your throat, don't fucking test me here."

The carpet of bugs obligingly backs off to a better distance. Then Taylor tears into the room - "Heya Boss!" I call out, covering up the EVERYTHING HORRIBLE IN MY BRAIN with false cheer-and the smoke-thing... coalesces into a man. A man I can suddenly feel. Not that he has much in the way of feelings, I mean seriously he tells me to let his wife go - the woman in my arms, I guess - and the general state of his feelings is somewhere between 'mild distress over bumping my toe into a wall' and 'I swear I'm forgetting something, this is going to bother me all day'. I'd assume their relationship is in the toilet but then why show up and make the demand at all? Also his wife is UTTERLY FUCKED UP AND HORRIBLE SO HE'S PROBABLY FUCKED UP AND HORRIBLE TOO.

Anyway, head-shaking is a go. "Nah, see, if I do that, you'll just do your fog thingy and kill me." I mean, I assume. I have no idea who this guy is, but he apparently turns into... fog or smoke or something, so. Um. Fuck, I dunno, he'd give me lung cancer in ten years?

Whatever is up with the dude, he's not really giving me anything to work with. "If you swear you will leave us be, I swear you will be free to go." Does he mean it? I can't tell. Is he desperate and sincere, or just making idle chatter over maybe letting me borrow his lawnmower next week? I'm actually starting to maybe be more creeped out by him than by his wife.

So I don't even have to think about my response. "No deal." Um. Wait, okay, so this is an Empire op, and man, fuck Kaiser if he okay-ed this shit. Plan: lie and bait is a go! "I want to hear it from your boss. I've heard good things about his honorability." That's a word, right? Also, lying like crazy, I've heard nothing but awful shit about this guy and only just came up with this plan to pin the man down so we can kill him.

Taylor is having a total freak-out and I just sort of blast her with trust for a second distractedly because shut up I'm busy and I don't want you ruining this goddammit. Smoke-dude's response is dead as ever, and I still am not getting much off of him, it's fucked up. "I have no reason to take you at your word."

Errrgh come on just... call him! Call him call him CALL HIM I WANT BLOOD. Shhhhh Cherie, pretend to be calm. Um, leverage. I don't trust my power to work on this guy, so. Fine, we're 'heroes' right? "Awww, come on. You haven't heard of Monster and Pride? We're good guys. That makes us trustworthy by default!"

Look, mysterious creepy watchers in my head that I'm just imagining because fffftuck this situation, I know that's a terrible line no one would ever fall for-
"If you cross us, our people will ensure your pain is legendary." Out comes the cell phone, too.

-of course it worked I should just start saying every one of my plans is stupid nonsense that couldn't possibly work and then I'll just be invincible won't I?

Fine, whatever, tracing. Taylor, shut up with your confusion, I'm busy, just... trust blast. I'll explain after if she gets on my case. AFTER. IMMA CUT THESE PEOPLE SO HARD.

Blah blah blah the dude is talking to Kaiser and I've got like twenty possibilities, questions back and forth a bit, clarifying, twelve possibilities, five, two, you. TAYLOR MURDER THAT GUY YOU ARE SO ANGRY RIGHT MURDER HIM MURDERMURDERMURDERMURDER COME THE FUCK ON DO IT NOW oh god fine here's another trust blast NOW MURDER THE BASTARD oh god hurry up come on, feel like, like you need to do something, that leads naturally into murder for you right?

And yes she finally goes and attacks him, at which point I finally cut anonymous bug-girl-cape's throat and. Uh. Saw some more, oh ew this is unpleasant but now she's dead and... yes, her bugs are no longer moving in concert. They're, uh, pretty sure they're tearing into each other in fact. He fakes being dead up until I point it out aaaaaand now his head is a messy pile of bone shards and gore so now he's dead. Pretty sure. I mean it's possible he's just in that immune-to-me state, but nothing about him is smokey so I'm leaning toward dead. GOOD.

Hahahaha holy fuck this is an adrenaline high!

also oh god i need to puke again

As such, when Taylor insists I at least go wash up my knife, I do so without complaint. And puke. And gargle and spit and hold up this fucking building has running water too? How did the Empire hide this nonsense? Never mind! Never mind I don't care I'm washing the taste and memory of this horrible place out and then I'm going to pretend everything's fine to Taylor and explain things in a way that maximizes how awesome I sound and everything will actually be fine as a result!

And then we fucking kill Kaiser.

...
Why is Cavedude irritated and disappointed? I mean, he's still being smug, but- he's not reacting to anything I can find. Does he just make constant calls out of state? As a prison warden???

... is he some kind of cape?

God, I don't know, forget it, I need to psych myself up for telling Taylor the mostly-true story of my encounter with, uh. The girl. Whatever her name is.

Right, okay, so it goes something like this...
Chapter 13: Delving Deeper

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3. And then of course transitions into 5.c, somewhat awkwardly.

How I Met Your Monster 13: Delving Deeper

When I get back, Taylor is juuuust freaking out at some random wandering roaches. Uh. Oh, did she think that swarm was, like, a changer? "No no, that's her on the couch." Creepy awful lady of awfulness was a controller, girl! A master, like me, only way more disturbing.

Taylor keeps glancing nervously at the bugs. Okay, I know why *I'm* freaked-out, but why is Taylor so freaked out? What'd I miss? "You *sure*? Actually, no, seriously, explain what just happened. Last I knew, you were fleeing to safety."

Wait, *fleeing to safety*? I mean okay that's kind of *true*, but that's not at all the image I want in Taylor's head. Pride does not flee! She is a fearsome goddess of... uh... stuff. Whatever. Aaaargh why does she keep thinking I'm less-than-awesome? Okay fine whatever shrug it off. I can salvage this! "Well, yeah, *initially*. If only to not blow my cover of Perfectly Ordinary Teenage Girl. Buuuut I... hm." Wait wait I have a plan, stick to the plan, the plan is Lying To Make Myself Sound Better. And also gloss over the *fucking* cocoons. "Okay, background! Conversation has a back and forth, right?" Taylor obligingly nods while making a sarcastic face. "Well, I can generally tell when two people are having a conversation, because there tends to be a clear, uh, action-reaction thing. Like, someone is going to tell a joke, their anticipation is high, they're amused at the joke themselves, and once they've told it, the anticipation levels off and everybody who heard the joke laughs." Let's inject some humor that will probably fall flat, thus becoming a self-demonstrating article. "Assuming it was actually funny." I wait a second to see if Taylor catches the funny. She does not catch the funny. I still win, because now it's self-demonstrating! "Aaaaanyway, so take that principle, okay? And Iiii... didn't know *exactly* what kind of conversation you guys were having after I left, but I could see how the beats of conversation were playing out with you and no one else was in the alleyway."

I mean once I was pretty sure where the girl was *was* paying attention to that stuff but I really don't want to admit she was basically fooling my power and I only found her because of the isolation and whatnot. I'm trying to *impress* Taylor here. It doesn't work: she interjects. "Fog was present."
Stupid invisible-to-my-power jerk. "Yeah, okay, I couldn't sense him when he was, uh, foggy-" Looked more like smoke to me, but I guess he was named Fog for a reason. "-so that's not surprising." Okay having admitted to weakness TIME TO DISTRACT FROM IT. "Not the point! Point is, there was someone who you were having an action-reaction interaction with, and they were... here." Hi creepy dead bug-girl, I'm pointing you out to Taylor! "So I figured they were the bug person, and if they were hiding away like this, I figured they were proooobably fairly..." Uh how do I frame this I wish I had more time to, like, rehearse this-

"Mortal?"

Okay that's a bit more Conan-y than I'd have picked, but sure whatever. "Sure, mortal. That. Well within my means to kill. Just, whammo! Depression and apathy and stuff and then I knife her." You know, aside from her stupid suit of stupidly tough crap. I'd be tempted to steal it if the Dragonslayer suit wasn't so much cooler.

"Speaking of the knife..." Taylor is doing that thing where she looks at me like she wishes she had heat vision and could glare hard enough to trigger it. Why is this bothering her so much? We're capes! She's killed people herself! She is a WALKING BUNDLE OF BLADES!

But okay fine whatever. Open with a joke. "Girl's got to carry protection, ya know?" Hah! She caught the double-entendre! There's hope for her yet! Also more importantly her anger over that is distracting her a bit from everything else. "Not joking. My power is... mostly reliable at protecting me from the unempowered, but your power isn't the only one that interferes with mine." I mean honestly it was only since I got to Brockton Fucking Bay that this was really a problem, and I only grabbed the knife for giggles in the first place, but I'm still trying to pretend this was a well-considered and planned-out thing and not something I checked out on impulse and then changed my plans partway through because oh god the cocoons. "So! Protection." Hahahaha please don't notice the lying.

Taylor gives me a dubious look, feelings matching pretty much perfectly to that, but she moves on so I think I'm in the clear. "So you found... Locust, apparently. And?"

Oh thank god she finally namedropped the horrible and awful girl now I can pretend I knew that the whole time. WAIT THAT WAS HER ACTUAL NAME WHY. That's a terrible name- no, forget it. She's dead I don't even care anymore now we just need to get to Kaiser. So.

Okay, I think I should sit down for this part so I can hide the shaking as we get to the REALLY AWFUL PART I'M ACTIVELY TRYING TO GLOSS OVER. "Took me a bit to find the way in, and I... actually had to, uh, pick the lock-" Taylor naturally gets all judgy and irritable about that, come on, this was basic fucking common sense in my house. "-yeah I figured you wouldn't like that part but ANYWAY I got in, and the place is pretty empty. Like, I poke into a couple of rooms
along the way and they have these huge spiderweb thingies-" Okay now let's sort of acknowledge what it looks like and then act like it's not that or at least that I don't realize it's that and we can move on and get to killing Kaiser which is purely because I am a supportive girlfriend (Maybe???) and not at all because I have a personal desire to see him rot why ever would you suspect that we've long since established I don't care about other people haha why would you even consider that. "-like people are cocooned inside or something." Taylor reacts in a dully horrified way where I can't tell if she's inferred correctly and is just not that surprised by Locust (seriously dumb name still) doing such a thing or if she's horrified by some idea that's way less grotesque. Regardless, time to sell it. "-though it's just Locust in the building so I dunno what that's about-" YEP I AM TOTALLY UNAWARE THOSE MIGHT BE DEAD PEOPLE OF COLOR BECAUSE KAISER IS A PLEASANT PERSON LIKE THAT AS A TOTALLY UNRELATED ASIDE CAN WE GO MURDER HIM NOW? "-and anyway I go to knock at her door and she says something like 'No solicitors' in this robotic tone and she's not really paying attention, and... honestly? I just tried the doorknob. Wasn't even locked. 'course, I knew I was on the right track when bugs came pouring out of the walls-" Time for a theatrical shudder!... mostly because I've noticed Taylor is really bothered by these bugs and pretending they bother me too means she's more likely to empathize and less likely to, you know, think about my story. "-so then I hit her with crushing depression and a side dose of more ordinary apathy." And also the knife but it didn't actually work right away and we're hiding my failings here.

Okay, now the best way to hide my other fuckups is to admit to a totally different fuckup that I don't care nearly as much about. While averting my eyes and otherwise acting like this really bothers me. "I... actually kind of fucked up. Thought it would take her out of the fight entirely. It... I'm not sure why, but she wasn't really affected at all. Like, I could feel she was a little depressed, a little apathetic, but not anywhere near where she should've been. If her bugs had been faster, I might be dead right now." This last statement is technically true but not anything I ever worried about, and in retrospect I am fully justified in not worrying. But see: things sort of went wrong in a way that didn't actually matter due to unforeseen power interactions that have already been established to be a flaw with my powers re: Taylor herself and not any kind of new failing!

... Wait, is this really the best fuckup to pick? Fuck, I dunno, this day is stupid and I just want it to end and also Kaiser to end.

Anyway, time to emphasize the positive! "But it worked out anyway! I got to her, and wow she was just... she's pathetic. She tried to hold me off, and she was struggling just to move. Which is weird, because her and her costume barely weigh anything at all." Wait, would Taylor be able to see my initial cut attempt? Drat, I should just admit that. "I initially thought the costume might be, like, really serious armor, and I... actually tried to cut past the neckpiece initially to no success so it can't be that bad, but she was no burden at all. Weird stuff."

At this point for some damn reason Taylor has turned morbidly curious and goes to Locust and starts fiddling with the helmet while I keep rambling/lying profusely. "So I got her in a grapple
thingie while I'm trying to figure out how to stab her to death and her bugs buzz out something, sounded like a cry for help to me?" Taylor nods, still messing with the helmet. "Oh, so she called for Fog to come then?" Another nod, Taylor isn't really paying attention, I'm fine with that, means less probability of her catching me out on a lie. "Aaah, I was wondering about that. Good to know. Anyway! I spent a bit on that, and then I had the knife to her throat and she was whispering how her-

And *that* is when the helmet comes off to reveal that Locus is not merely some dumb diet-too-much freak, but in fact is just... "Holy fuck." What is *wrong* with her *face*?

Taylor keeps *going* though, revealing that her upper body is even more skeletally thin than I'd thought, and *pale*, and oh god. "What's *wrong* with her?" I ask.

Clinically, idly, *disinterestedly*, Taylor says, "It looks like malnutrition. Possibly a lack of exercise as well, but mostly I'd guess she wasn't eating enough." I find myself glancing at the barely-touched chicken on the table. She had food! She had support from *Kaiser*! Money and food should not have been an issue! She's a goddamn *cape*! Her husband is a goddamn cape! Fuck, and the Fog fellow was supposed to care about her? What the fucking fuck, man, you're worse than Daddy! DADDY! I didn't think that was fucking possible!

I thought she was a little too easy to hold.

Fuck.

And Taylor is stone cold and normally I find that awesome but right now it's actually kind of upsetting, this is fucked-up shit. *Then she goes to look at Fog and says THIS gem: "Continue your story."* Like, no big. We just found out bug-control lady who was feeding people her organization hates for no good reason to her goddamn bugs was actually horrifically malnourished for no good reason such that her life must have been a *living hell*, AIN'T NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT RIGHT? PLEASE CONTINUE YOUR STORY, THAT WAS FAR MORE INTERESTING THAN THIS (totally horrifying) TWIST RIGHT?

Fuuuuuck why is this bothering me.

I don't even want to tell this dumb half-true story anymore, it was kind of fun spinning a half-true lie that made me look good but now I just feel sick all over again and want out of here but *Taylor wants to hear the rest of the story why did I do this to myself*. Fine. Fine... "Um. Where was I-" Wait did I say that out loud I said that out loud shit. Everything is fucked-up, stay on top of yourself Cherie. "Oh. Her superiors. She was telling me about how they'd make an example of the two of us
-I guess she recognized me from when her bugs surrounded us?- if I killed her, the pain would be so bad we'd beg for death, yadda yadda yadda. Um. So then I had the idea."

I try not to react as Taylor manages to get smoke-dude's helmet off, but thankfully it isn't necessary. He's... a little pale, but he really looks like a random working-class joe, one who shaved just earlier this morning and everything. He doesn't look normal exactly, but... forgettable? I'd maybe wonder if he worked night shift or something if I saw him in another context, not knowing who he was.

You know, aside the damage Taylor already did to his skull, but that honestly doesn't bother me much. I mean I guess I'm a little weirded out at Taylor studying him carefully even though she tore out a decent chunk of the top of his head? But I mean I don't think I'd be noticing it if Taylor's total non-reaction to Locust's state wasn't on my mind right this instant. Dead body, she's the one who made it dead, no big deal right? But she didn't seem bothered by Locust so-

"Idea?" Taylor tosses out cavalierly because oh right I'm supposed to still be telling this story.

Really glad Fog was less horrifying. "I got to thinking I could get her to call her boss, and I'd backtrack him the same as I backtracked her." Except that isn't what I did with her at all, but I already claimed I did and made out like it was impressive, sooo... "Boom! Instantly find Kaiser. None of this wasting our time looking at irrelevant losers nonsense. In fact, we could go right now, if you want!" Please want to do it he must die.

Taylor takes another moment to take a look at foggy-dude, gets all weirded out by I-don't-even-know-what, and then turns around and turns innocent doe eyes on me that have to be affected. "I thought you wanted to party, Cherie."

You fucking what. "That was your idea, Boss." I mean okay when she said night on the town I brought up clubs and stuff, so maaaaybe this is kind of my fault? Except she never acted like I'd misunderstood so what the fuck girl.

Taylor sort of gives me this lidded stare that's juuuust off from being bedroom eyes. Um. "I thought you liked... stuff like that."

Um.

Is that innuendo?
'cause that sounds a *lot* like innuendo and she did the thing with the eyes and oh god I just murdered someone and now she's giving me bedroom eyes I'm starting to reconsider the appeal of this relationship.

Actually wait hold up. "You had us go for an 'afternoon on the town' because you thought *I* would enjoy it?" I'm really confused and she's sending me mixed signals only they're not so much 'mixed' in the sense of 'I hate you and would never date you but also can we get together on Friday for a suspiciously date-like proposal' as much as in the sense of 'I am possibly covertly interested in a normal sort of relationship with you and possibly *also* covertly interested in a murder-as-intimacy-based relationship with you' with a side helping of 'also I'm so oblivious this may all be *entirely on accident*'.

I desperately want to ask so many different questions I don't even know where to start and I'm not sure which ones would lead to her threatening me because I'm being 'flirty'.

With tremendous reluctance -and it's real- Taylor nods her head and, apparently recognizing that I just pointed out something *weird* about what she did, drags out the 'yes' and says it like it's a question.

I'M EVEN MORE CONFUSED.

I wait a bit for her to *explain* this bizarre line of thought, and eventually I realize *she* is waiting for *me* to talk and what okay fine. "Why did you do that?"

I have SO MANY OTHER QUESTIONS, but I'm going to start with this safe-seeming one.

Taylor does this song-and-dance routine that makes it real damn obvious she doesn't actually *want* to answer the question but hey that shame thing is actually *helping* me here! She's not willing to back down because she... thinks I'd judge her, I guess? Hah! My opinions matter to her now! "I... *think*... I was trying to make up for... how I... treated you in response to... um." Taylor stops and gives me a not-very-covert glance like she's hoping maybe I've stopped being interested in where this is going in the last two seconds. Then she visibly and *literally* grits her teeth, forcing the words awkwardly out through her clenched teeth. "I went too far when you kept hitting on me."

I. Um. Wait, she actually felt bad about- oh! That's not mixed signals at all! Kinda! She wanted the overt flirty behavior to stop but she didn't actually want to kill our relationship or be mean to me because she totally does like me and possibly wants us to murder things together or possibly just do
what normal teens do when they like each other so having been overly-mean she decided to metaphorically feed the puppy its favorite snack (Even though she has no idea what that is) after having kicked it in its poor innocent face!

She, uh, she does realize that's like totally an abusive relationship right? Hit them and then apologize profusely and- ah. No, she would've actually apologized (Instead of sort of indirectly trying to be nice without ever admitting she'd done anything wrong) and claimed it wouldn't happen again if this were stock abusive stuff. Or never felt bad at all if it was Daddy-style abusive stuff. So never mind, not asking her that question, it would just confuse and possibly enrage her.

So. Uh. Let's go back to that core idea: "You were trying to apologize?"

That is so weird an idea. Has Taylor ever admitted to doing anything wrong before? You know, while murdering people. A lot.

And.

Then.

Taylor goes all shame-y and apparently I said the wrong thing or something I dunno but she's starting to do that self-loathing spiral thing she does sometimes so hey no let's put a stop to that with the power of HUGS! And also monologue without really stopping for breath. "Shhh, shhh. It's okay. You don't need to apologize. I knew -okay, I didn't know exactly what I was getting into, but I knew you were a murderous psychopath willing to kill people who have offended your sense of justice." I mean, broadly. Kind of. I'm trying to be emotionally supportive here! And I don't care that Taylor isn't exactly thrilled by that description, the point is this whole silly business was unnecessary and also horribly traumatizing so can we please never go for an 'afternoon on the town' again unless that's like a metaphor for something?

But okay fine I'll keep talking. "I was prepared for there to be bumps along the way. Bumps are fine." There's like two other layers that's true on, now that I think about it. "Very fine." Oh shit let's move on before Taylor maybe figures out that double-meanings are a thing and decides this is Evil Flirting! "But you've misunderstood me, and frankly, I'm more offended by that than the, erm, incident."

Which is the point Taylor breaks out of the hug and gives me a frazzled and puzzled look, and naturally her feelings are a logical extension of that goddammit how are you this ignorant. "I've been over this. I'm here because you are doing fuckawesome stuff and I want some of that. I'm not here to party. I didn't sign on to- to go to clubs or whatever. " I don't even like clubs that much,
seriously. "I only did that sort of thing back at Daddy-" Taylor has this weird little sliver of horror when I say Daddy, I don't even know why but okay fine whatever I'll reframe it. "My father's to pass the time, fuck's sake!" Okay, less angry, trying to be reassuring right? "This?" Yeah, look at Locust. Look at what goddamnfucking Kaiser has wrought. "This is why I'm hanging with you."

Taylor just sort of looks all doubtfully at me and I'm starting to wonder if she gets it, and finally I go, "What?"

Taylor blows me off. Of course she does. "Never mind. So... you don't want to continue our... adventure."

WHY DOES SHE KEEP DOING THIS INNUENDO THING wait, wait. Is this. Is this revenge? Is she turning the tables on me?... that is a fascinating theory, worth exploring.

Oh right and I need to uh respond before Taylor gets all jittery. "Fuck no!" Oh come to think of it I can maybe check if she's playing along? "You won't let me do any of the really fun stuff anyway." ie I'm sure she would've been appalled if I grabbed a boytoy. And not just because she's got a possessive streak, nosirree, it's totally that 'morals' thing she has, honest!

Response: ambiguous. Taylor doesn't really respond to the, you know, implications, so maybe she's moved into a headspace where this is a game between us and maybe she just legit didn't notice. Instead she focuses on the most important thing. "... and you know where Kaiser is? Right now?"

"Yes!" Wait should I have not let on how much I want to do this I was trying to not let on but now it's maybe too late? Oh never mind I don't think Taylor noticed. Or maybe she attributed it to, uh, my other speech? Yes, okay, that makes sense, let's assume that for the moment.

And she totally goes along from there and YES KAISER IS GONNA DIE FISTPUMP OF JUSTICE!

... which Taylor smiles at?

Oh whatever I don't even care we're KILLING KAISER IT'S GLORIOUS!
Leaving is simple enough, though I make sure Taylor takes my sunglasses to break up connections to ourselves a bit. I also give a whole monologue about stuff, Velocity finding the FUCKING COCOONS and thankfully proving himself a real human being by being just as horrified as I am, etc etc, but honestly I don't care that much and thankfully Taylor doesn't either.

_Cavedude_ has a reaction, I'm almost completely certain. Low-key relief mixed in with more overt frustration. Hm. Okay, I was theorizing he was a PRT mini-Birdcage manager before, and him reacting to this is consistent with that, but that feels like a weird reaction, and he's so off and confusing I really doubt I actually pegged him right the first time. So... he has to be connected to the PRT. He spends time at the actual office, he's clearly hooked into their information network on some level even when he's not at the office, etc.

The obvious second theory is that he's in some crazy villain-made hideyhole and he's actually a spy for some villain. That doesn't quite fit, though. Him having an invisible-to-me boss would explain the weird, confusing readings I get from him, but everyone else down there doesn't do that. Like, there's clearly an internal speaker system or maybe a radio system or something where Cavedude has the conversation sync effect with not-entirely-precisely-controlled groups at a time, and I never really see this presumably-PA-caused thing coming from Nobody At All. If Cavedude has a boss who's invisible to me, they're a secret boss while Cavedude... pretends to be the actual boss of the organization?

That's sort of plausible, especially with powers opening up a lot of weird and dumb avenues, but the simpler scenario is that Cavedude is the boss, and he just has a power that's somehow messing with me. No idea how, but the how isn't that important right now.

Which either makes him some secret Protectorate hero who... runs a mini-Birdcage or something?... or makes him... a villain who's leading a double-life at the PRT?

My gut feeling is that 'Protectorate hero running mini-Birdcage' is way off base. He's never moved with the heroes, or even interacted all that much with the other heroes, and I don't buy for a second he's some Ward child genius criminal mastermind. That shit is the kind of thing utterly terrible capefiction (that Nicholas ate up, goddamn) comes up with, not real life. I don't think the PRT knows he has powers. Either his power is subtle enough he can use it on the job without being noticed, or he's really good at not giving in to the temptation to use it, which might not be much of a temptation depending on what it actually is. Given how secret his Batcave is, I'm inclined to guess subtle, or maybe not subtle itself but something that combines well with being subtle. And if he's not getting the money for his Batcave from the government, and he's a standalone villain, he's got to be getting the money from somewhere... when I haven't 'seen' his cronies going out and
knocking over banks or anything that could justify this kind of money. Like, I'd theorize he's using his power, maybe it seeps into his environment and lets him manipulate it kind of thing, except there's clearly people coming in and digging out more space and doing work that's, at a guess, installing electricity and lights and so on, I'd just glossed over them before because I'd been thinking 'PRT mini-Birdcage, of course they can sneak employees in to do work'.

So he has to have money. He has to have a lot of money. He has to have a lot of money while being an employee at the PRT who, as far as I'm seeing in the interactions, is moderately-respected but not anywhere near important enough to be able to justify this income. The most natural explanation is that his power pulled this off, and if he's not been traced by government capes who hunt these kind of people down and metaphorically put their heads on pikes so new triggers don't think they can get away with gaming the system, this... well, it comes back to the subtle theory. Either his power is so subtle there's nothing suspicious enough even for government thinkers to find, or it's reasonably subtle and his application of it is especially subtle.

A really subtle power that's somehow making it a nightmare to make sense of his reactions, which don't always seem to sync up with anything going on in Brockton Bay.

... Feels like there should be another logical step I can take here, some other inference to be made, but I can't get my head around it any further.

Hm. What is he even doing? He's got a fair amount of staff on retainer, and in retrospect they've had skirmishes with people (I just didn't think much of it at the time because PRT employees), but I've never noticed any obvious revenue stream. No chains of drug dealers who meet up with his people and presumably pass on money to them sort of thing. No knocking over banks.

It's so weird I'd revert back to the 'mini-Birdcage' theory except it can't be right.

So Cavedude is a dude who is... building up a secret underground base while not doing anything that could possibly make him money with said base. He's also not accruing power, and the base itself is fairly small and I'm fairly confident most of the people on his staff are not capes, so it's difficult to imagine he believes he'll be able to take over the United States by threatening to knock the moon out of orbit kind of thing. There's... ya know, I think the only conclusion is he's preparing to do something down the line...

... wait, the Jean-pals were in contact with him, weren't they? Okay, so maybe they were a revenue stream? I haven't noticed them stirring up much trouble, and they certainly haven't been collecting
drug money or doing protection rackets, but they'd managed to piss off Lung enough that he didn't really question me pointing him at my poor dear brother that I HAVE GOT TO STOP FEELING BAD ABOUT GETTING KILLED SHUT UP BRAIN fuck.

Thankfully, Taylor doesn't notice that hiccup.

Right, that tells me... what? He's secretly building up a base, but he's also... now that I think about it, probably *also* secretly running a minor parahuman gang? As... some kind of cats-paw, I guess?

I literally cannot think of what he's doing. Dude is either too subtle for me or he's some special form of nuts.

Why does Brockton Bay have so much *shit* like this, anyway?

I manage a running chatter with Taylor the whole way, but it basically boils down to us working out some semi-plans for future incidents of this sort. Both the, uh, misunderstanding part but also the part where I went running off and confronted a cape I was 'poorly-suited to fighting' (pffff) with Taylor having no idea it was happening at all. These semi-plans are... vague, but hey, talking is good. It's an improvement, I think!

Taylor, *naturally*, finds something to brood about once we're back in the warehouse and I'm working on getting into my suit, but whatever.

Still no interruptions, thankfully.

Once we're both suited-up... Taylor wants to go roof-hopping. In broad daylight. When being seen is what reverts her to a squishy human.
It's like Taylor just turns off her brain periodically.

Seriously, just let me do the bridal carry again. That was great last time, and it'll be way stealthier! Though... Taylor brings up the question of whether the suit has a stealth mode, and it totally does!... but it's not like active camouflage or anything so whatever. Lame.

Conversation from there goes to, for once, Taylor educating me about cape-world. I mean okay there's also her crazy theory about unspoken agreements, but I'm not counting that because like okay there's kind of evidence for it but it's still crazy. In this lesson, student Cherie learns about the Manton effect! The short version: the Manton effect is what prevents most capes from doing horror-show shit to you.

Naturally, Kaiser isn't Manton-limited. Oh, and his power is to turn my flying tin can into razor blades growing right into my skin. It's an iron maiden waiting to happen. Fffuuuuck.

Thankfully, Taylor sensibly points out Kaiser's range isn't very far, so I can just shoot him from a distance. Whew. Good. Because he needs to die.

And then blah blah blah packing up etc.

...

Honestly, super-strength is amazing, I don't care that it's from the suit, it's so fun being able to pick up a box that probably weighs as much as I do and just heft it into the truck. Is this why people whistle while they work? I give it a try, unheard by Taylor, and yeah it adds to the fun factor! Especially when I start getting into a rhythm, timing my steps and my whistling so there's something musical to the whole thing. 'tis fun!

Taylor is even pretty tolerant when I haul her up by the armpits, just enjoying the superstrenth, 'cause uh you know I need to load up the tinkertech computer.

Then comms comes up, and while Taylor pointedly ignores me bringing up my missing phone grrrr, overall it's a pretty nice conversation and I get to show off what I discovered with the Dragonslayer suit having some bullshit phone wackiness going on.
I also get a comment in on how Taylor looks as the creature of the black lagoon, but I think she misunderstood me and I don't want to press my luck too hard.

Though Taylor kind of ruins the rhythm with her weird thing of complaining about the physics of how the suit reads my eye movement. It's tinkertech! Powers are bullshit! Shut up and just be happy it's cool!

So I kinda half-spitefully change her ringtone real quick, though honestly the Imperial March seems like an, uh, okay maybe not a perfect fit to her but pretty darn good fit.

And all that busywork and mild play done, we head out!

-------------------------------------------------------

Turns out Taylor isn't willing to trust me being right about Kaiser being Kaiser and so wants to, like, provoke him into using his power before killing him. I don't like that. He really, really needs to die. I don't argue though because fffffine whatever it shouldn't matter in the end. Though honestly this is a fucking terrible idea and I kind of hate that she's just taking it as a given that she'll be doing the killing. We really should just snipe him, where by 'we' I mean 'I'. I'm sort of regretting trying to rope Taylor into this instead of handling it myself, actually, though I'm not sure how I could've avoided it with how these events have gone down. Still. I'm kind of noticing it's a pattern with her...

Anyway, up into a cloud, stealth mode active when it occurs to me, maintain a running monologue and- hold up. Hahaha ohmygod whatshername is on patrol! Nearby! Okay forget Kaiser for a moment, I've got a prezzie for Taylor!

Taylor, stop with the sinking feeling, stop feeling like this is ominous it's totally a good thing and you'll love it and don't you trust my judgment?... no, no she doesn't. Bleh.

Whatever, tossing her anyway, she'll like it I just know it!

It is really interesting listening in to Taylor's fall, with the calm and then the panic and then the calm again just before she comes to a fairly smooth stop. Sweet! That plan worked perfectly! I mean the worst that could've happened would be Taylor dying and that would kind of suck since I'd need to find someone else to act as a testbed for a relationship not based on blatant mind control and all that, but meeeeh. I can deal! Could've dealt! Whatever!
Oh and okay Taylor is kind of really mad at me but pffft what else is new?

Aaaaand there we go!... uh. Taylor. Taylor, you gonna. You gonna like attack her? She's your bully, I can tell you can hear her talking. surely you recognize her face? Taylor? Hey. Taylor? Come on, Taylor. Taylor! It's the bully-girl, Fury or whatever I was calling her! Shady Stocking! Ugh okay fine let's dial her phone with my bullshit tinkertech...

Aaaand there we go. "Yes! You met the jerk!" Come on surely you've noticed it's her, right? Right?

"Pride. Clarify."

Whoa, I think Shady Stocking just recognized Taylor's voice. I mean, she's all shocked and confused and a wee tiny bit lots of angry and I think she's feeling like something about her world is busted and wrong? It's always a pain to parse that kind of more abstract feeling.

Oh wait right I'm supposed to be 'clarifying'. Um, I don't really have a speech prepared here, so, uh, rambling it is! "One of the jerks who's bullying you! They're a Ward, they're right in front of you, we're leaving town after this. Vengeance!

Sort of like the vengeance I desperately want to enact on Kaiser, but even more personal!

Taylor spends a bit ruminating on that, and I can totally tell when she figures it out.

Because she drops the damn phone!

Come on, it's time for righteous vengeance!

And ugh, Shady Stocking is all suspicious and hostile now. More than her usual, I mean. Taylor, you're letting the opportunity slip away! Soon she might figure out she really is in actual danger and then flee or something! I'm not sure you can follow her if she flees! "Pride, I went over this. This is not how we do things."

Um what oh god is she getting stuck on the stupid- the- the fucking- really? She still really truly thinks that thing is true, and also she didn't have an issue with- come the fuck on Taylor! "You're
trying to kill Kaiser like this!" Seriously! "And they broke those rules first!" Like just fucking last night!

Okay Taylor actually kind of reacts in a way that makes me think she doesn't have a defense against what I said- "The Wards are not the Protectorate or PRT."

Whu- oh god is she doing word games I got enough of that shit out of Guillame to last a lifetime. "Whaddya mean the Protectorate's child soldiers aren't a part of the Protectorate??" Seriously! Taylor! You're being R-I-D-I-C-U-LO-US.

There's the crackly sound of Taylor sighing into the phone. "Pride, they probably don't even know." I- um. Hm. You know, that might actually be true. "They certainly didn't make the decision." ... okay that's true for sure. There's a bit of a pause while the tykes say I-can't-tell-what, and then Taylor says, "I'm Monster."

Which elicits like no reaction except minor confusion. Dammit. Fuck. This is not going at all the way I thought it would. Oh wait Shady Stockings is reacting to that!... with approval? Uuuuuuh approval?? And... those signs I was maybe taking earlier as an indication she felt her world was being flipped upside-down are fading. So. If I'm following this correctly, Shady Stockings was having her mind blown by the idea of Taylor as a cape in general, but learning she was specifically Monster somehow canceled that out. I. I do not get this town, and I don't want to get this town.

More talkiness happens, including Taylor talking. "That was an accident." Oh- hahahahaha oh my god is Shady Stockings approving of Taylor because she killed Leet? Hahahaha holy shit that's amazing. It's, what, important to how she thinks that people of the world all be heinous jerks? Or something?

Then hey wait a second I think I can juuust barely hear Shady Stocking- MY NAME IS NOT PREJUDICE! "PRIDE!"

Hey wait a second- no Taylor don't turn off the phone this is just getting good goddammit you, you total jerk! I mean okay at least she's no longer feeling that murder-anger thing but come on this is great, if not the great I wanted it to be.

So I ring her up again, let her know she's being rude- and she just ends the call.
And nothing rings when I dial her again.

Well. Fine. You do that, I'm still listening in on the important parts anyway.

... okay not really because the entire interaction wraps up almost immediately after, with the kid with the hoverboard, I forget his name, being like friendly and apologetic and sympathetic? I guess? Whatever, bored.

Fuck it, I'm dialing her phone until she answers. She's gotta be, what, being annoyed by the ringtone? Gotta be.

...

Wait, I'd be hearing the annoyance. So. Uh, wait, did she actually turn her phone off, am I wasting my time here- aha! There we go. "Ruuuuude." I am so disappointed in you, Taylor, you could've murdered that completely horrible girl and felt way better afterward.

Like.

With me and Jean-Paul.

...

Fuck, fine, maybe you have a point.

"What. Was. That. About." Oh. Huh, I thought Taylor wasn't mad at me but she sounds pretty mad by phone. Is she faking, or is her power messing with mine more than I'd have expected? Oh wait, she's irritated, I thought she was irritated at something else but she's irritated at me, and... that's interesting, that she's irritated but not actually mad. Hmm.

Um. Okay I've kind of maybe parsed why Taylor would be unhappy with this, and now I'm not sure how to spin it. It's waaaay too late to pretend I wasn't suggesting she kill her tormentor, so. Uh. Um. Er. Ffffine let's go with honesty. "It was supposed to be a present. A surprise gift! You get to kill one of the people who's made your life hell for, um, a long time, you feel better-"
"I'm not going to school ever again anyway." Errrr. Like okay that's kind of a conveniently-timed interruption since the truth is when I went for murderrevenge it actually just made me a wreck crying over spilled milk—which-is-to-say-blood-of-my-blood and I wasn't sure what I was going to say afterward, but I don't see her point.

Like, at all. Actually, honesty is working kind of okay so far! Let's... just go with more honesty! "... so?" Straight to the point.

"So the bullying is done."

Uuuuuuuh. I mean okay that's I guess true? But you weren't exactly over the bullying when you gave me that deadpan backstory dump thing. In fact, there's quite a lot of evidence that you're not remotely over this whole thing. You need catharsis! Plus... "But they've hurt you so much! A-and you're fine with killing terrib-"

"No." Uh what. "My goal is not punishment." It's- what? "I don't kill people because they are bad. I kill people to prevent badness. Nilbog was an apocalypse waiting to happen, though I... overestimated myself there. Heartbreaker was a serial mind controlling rapist showing no sign of stopping or returning these women to their own lives or anything. The Dragonslayers cle-... I thought the Dragonslayers were simple blood money monsters who would never give a damn about the consequences of their actions. If So- if my tormentor is Shadow Stalker?" Oh. That was her name, right. Eh. Shady Stockings is a better name. "She's done. The bullying was personal. They won't take it out on someone else, and even if they were the bullying doesn't justify fucking murder."

So yeah that whole spiel was delivered in an increasingly angry and, uh, angry tone and with rising volume and also she's getting agitated and I think she wants to pace but isn't because... oh. Oh right, she needs a reflective surface to not be the monster-thing so she can be on the phone, so she's presumably staring at, like, a particularly shiny air conditioning unit?

Okay so- "I actually used to keep a journal of every incident of bullying." Uuuuuuh okay? That's weird why would you dwell on this shit when you could be fucking them up? "I thought I'd be able to use it as evidence so the teachers would believe me, catch out the bullies, and make them stop." Taylor's breathing hard, she's getting worked up... okay, so she was hoping to fuck them up with the pen instead of the sword. "They didn't take the journal seriously. They were 'impressed with my dedication', but 'wished I had put so much effort into my schoolwork instead of fantasy'." Another pause while Taylor tries and kinda fails to fight down her anger. I'm seriously confused. "And, you know, a lot of the teachers ignored it happening even when it was right in front of them—" Ouch. "- so eventually I concluded there was no fucking point, the journal served no fucking purpose except to fuel a vague hope that one day the bullies would be punished for what they'd done to me. You
know what I did?"

Okay, if it were me I'd have kept doing the journal to spite the assholes and then, like, emailed it to everyone everywhere and printed hundreds of copies to flood the school with it, but Taylor isn't exactly being subtle with where she's trying to take this so I guess I'll play along. "... you stopped with the journal?"

"And I threw all the notes I'd already made into the furnace." Uuuuuuh you what? "So like I said; I'm not about fucking punishment."

So.

Um.

Either I've badly misread Taylor, or she is waaaaay clueless about herself. Okay, so theory time! I'm probably focusing on righteous vengeance because Kaiser needs to die. So, basic projecting fail, whoopsy, been a bit since I did that I think? So step back and go to my current Taylor-theory. The one where murder is intimate. Uh. Hm. That's really not that hard to spin into explaining her rejecting this kill. Like, if I'd been focusing on my model and not myself I think maybe I'd have predicted this even? Taylor wants privacy, and I threw her at the girl publicly, and also maybe she doesn't want to associate the unpleasant feelings of the bullying with this whole shebang?

So hey I dunno maybe I'm horribly wrong or maybe I'm still totally right and just got caught up in myself.

I think it's time to go with the apologetic route? And the honest route, even! "I thought it would make you feel better." Interesting, that actually takes Taylor aback? Huh.

"I like that you want to help, I really do. But you really should... talk with me. It's better to talk with me and find out what I want than to try to... surprise me with it."


Taylor clearly takes a minute to get it. "That... was a mistake-" Huh. That's pleasant to hear from
Taylor. "-and it's a... little different anyway. If you'd objected when I suggested it, we would've talked, tried to figure out what to do instead. Here? You didn't explain to me what you were trying to do, and threw me into a situation that... could've ended quite badly."

"Oh." Shit, that's actually a really good point. Damn, and here I got all worked up. "Um. Sorry?"

"Yes, an apology is appropriate. And thanks."

Oh god I'm being mildly condescended at over a social thing by Taylor, you've got to be shitting me.

Forget it, let's get her pointed at Kaiser. She's basically there anyway.

Blah blah blah Taylor can't believe that a murdercape is passing for a grocery store person (What, like this is less plausible than you passing for an ordinary high school student?), etc etc, phone connection popping back on its own when Taylor reverts that's actually interesting, yadda yadda and hold up a moment is Taylor asking me to help?

"Okay good this should work. New plan: you land on the roof, panic the shit out of Kaiser, and then fly away when he comes out, probably using his power. And if he's not Kaiser, well, we've just scared a civilian. Not... ideal, but no permanent harm done."

HaHA! Yes! I'm all over it! I mean I'm still not sure what's going through Taylor's skull, but this is an improvement, right? Right.

And something I do impresses Taylor as I fly on down. I think. I'm not sure what else could be impressing her. Now if only I had any idea what it was. So I could replicate it every time, of course.

Regardless, I proceed to do a bunch of really tedious, irritating experimentation to get Kaiser outside.

Whereupon it turns out all these issues are moot because Locust's boss wasn't Kaiser at all. I know smokey dude called this guy, but if Taylor has led me true on this point Kaiser doesn't have, like, speed manipulation. Which is what's happening down there, Taylor going slow-for-the-squid, Not-Kaiser going fast by plebeian standards, and oh fuck are you kidding me why are those capes
heading our way, some of them are flying! I was sure they were in their civvies and could be ignored! Fuck, dammit, fuck! Forget this, I snipe Not-Kaiser's fucking head off -turns out his power doesn't slow down my green death bolts, ha!- swoop down to grab Taylor, and we run because oh shit oh shit oh shit we've got like seven capes trying to follow us and they are mad.

Dammit.
Chapter T.2: Eclipse

Chapter Summary

This counterparts to Monster 5.c.

Note that some formatting has been altered, relative to the Sufficient Velocity version, once again due to Archive of Our Own not allowing variably-sized text. I... actually think this version might be creepier.

Chapter T.2: Eclipse

Goddamnit Cherie, that wasn't Kaiser.

I'm not sure who it was, but you just- you just killed him! For all we know, he's- well- okay, if Cherie's power tracking is right he's got to be an Empire man, so- I mean- but you can't just kill someone you don't even know without even knowing what their crimes are!

... fuck, that isn't actually that different for her than what we've already been doing, is it? She actually blew me off when I tried to explain why I wanted the Dragonslayers dead, she told me she didn't care. We went after someone because I wanted to do it, and... whether they deserved it didn't matter to her.

Fuck.

I shouldn't have this much responsibility for another human being. God, I'd make a terrible parent. I can just imagine wandering through life, training the adorable tyke without even realizing I was doing it until one day they did something completely in line with everything about how I'd raised them and utterly outside what I'd ever intended to be acceptable.

Not that Cherie is a child, but I just... I haven't been thinking about what she's experiencing, I shouldn't be surprised by this outcome. Of course she'd default to killing our target when the situation changed! It's not like I even talked with her about discovering what a mistake it was to kill the Dragonslayers!

I-
A projectile shoots past. Fuck, New Wave is firing on us? I- I guess that's justified. They just saw a man killed, a man they may not have even seen display powers. Murder of a civilian, basically.

We're going to have to leave town as soon as we can. The PRT is already hostile to me for some reason, they'll, they'll probably just assume... I don't even know what they think is going on, but they've got this ugly idea of me and seemingly murdering a civilian is not going to help.

When another projectile goes past, I'm reminded I should be trying to help Cherie, instead of laying in her arms like a lump.

Okay, Glory Girl has a temper. Maybe I can, I dunno, provoke her? Get her off her game, distracted, somehow leverage that into us getting some distance.

I try, and try, and try, and only once even manage to get out her name, and it doesn't end up mattering because she flares her aura and when I'm human my knees are weak and my- I- I feel like I have to get away and I can't because I'm held in a cage of steel known as Cherie Vasil, and when I'm the monster I feel like something is stalking me, something big and hungry, hungering for me, and I need to hide but there's nowhere to hide I'm in the open air all I can do is curl up against the thing I'm up against-

-and then it fades, but the impulse to hide remains. You don't leave the instant a wolf is out of sight, that's how you get eaten. You have to hide some more and wait.

(Or at least that's what I eventually thought was happening. At the time I was just cold and scared even though I'd never been cold or scared as the monster and curling up into myself was just The Thing To Do)

I've only barely started to pull myself together when something hooks on one of my limbs, refusing to yield as Cherie goes shooting past, resulting in me being jarred out onto a random open rooftop. Fortunately, I remain the monster for whatever reason, and I do my best to stab at the thing, but it doesn't work. It's hiding in the roof, stabbing through it periodically, and each time I jab at it I just hit the roof. I'm still not thinking straight, and around the time it crosses my mind that maybe this is Crusader ambushing us what the hell, Glory Girl shows up and- and she fucking-

She fucking calls a truce.
With Crusader.

But- your sister is someone Empire Eighty Eight wants dead! I- what- what is wrong with you I know what this looks like but-

Then Cherie snaps off a shot at one of Crusader's ghosts, and I realize she needs to go. I can't quite form words, the whole situation is insane and I just can't think straight so I'm left with waving my arms frantically at her in hopes she'll realize she needs to back off. He'll be able to stab her right through the suit.

So of course Cherie ignores me and gets speared in the arm for her troubles.

Fuck this whole thing.

Though on the plus side, I guess, the truce doesn't really hold long. Glory Girl comes after me, and I can't do shit, I'm stuck in human form and she's super-strong and super-tough and I'm just manhandled effortlessly by her, but Crusader wants me dead while Glory Girl wants to take me in, arrest me. This is maddening, but at least Glory Girl isn't just snapping my neck and being done with it, she's still got standards. And New Wave shows up, so Crusader can't win this fight, I, I, I'm not looking forward to trying to explain this awful situation but

~~~

what happened i

~~~

what hurts

~~~

can't see right

~~~

colors wrong

~~~

shapes all wrong

~~~

can't connect

~~~
I don't know what just happened but I need to get to safety, flee, before they notice me again, make me human and drag me off in chains. So I dash off, shaky and confused.

Fuck, I, what happened? I can kind of remember... I can... everything was... I tried to move my hand? But it didn't respond right? I think? I couldn't think properly, everything was off. I couldn't see right, there was a. There. I was. Missing... an eye? I was missing an eye, and everything else was there but it didn't make sense? Why was I missing an eye? How did that happen without me knowing? Did- I don't remember- did Crusader stab an eyeball out? That doesn't sound right. Did another cape fuck with my head? Some kind of... illusion? No, no, not an illusion, but... I... There was... pain... around my left eye and...

It takes me a minute to get my mind around the idea, in part because I'm currently the monster and so I can't just touch where I remember the pain being. But.
I think.

I think I was... stabbed right through an eye, through my brain, out the other side of my skull.

I.

No?

I mean, I'm fine, if shaken. I mean okay I regenerate, but a hole right through my head, brain damage? Serious, major brain damage while I was human? Even people with regeneration usually stop if you destroy the head. (That Crawler doesn't is part of why he's so horrible) So. That can't be right. I'd be dead. Right? Dead.

So that can't be right.

I'd be dead.

The situation around me is changing, and I don't really understand what's happening, I can't see most of it because I'm hiding/fleeing, but eventually Cherie drops out of the sky and I haven't seen any of Crusader's ghosts in a while and New Wave is... flying off in the distance?

And then Cherie says, "You were dead!" She sounds raw, like maybe she was crying or screaming just recently.

I was dead.

Cherie says I was dead and I'd already thought in that direction and rejected it but now I'm not dead and she says I was dead.

I died.
I died to fucking Crusader, stabbing me while I was held by goddamn Glory Girl. A C-lister villain and a minor celebrity teen hero killed me, where Nilbog and Dragon and the Dragonslayers didn't. The Dragonslayers weren't even a threat to me, not really.

I died to a C-lister and a newbie teenager.

I died.

And it was to nobodies.

Because being human made me weak and vulnerable, and I was in a cape fight, where you can't afford to be merely human.

...

I have no idea what to do about this. I can't pilot a Dragonslayer suit myself, even though we have the other one.

I.

Is this what people feel when they die in a freak accident? One day, you cross the street, and this time you get run over and die, where every other day you did the exact same thing worked out fine. Only, I guess this is more like you jaywalk a bunch of times and then the one time you use the crosswalk is the time a truck comes barreling in and steamrolls you. The dangerous stuff was safe, the safe thing killed you.

I dunno, maybe I'm just thinking weird because... because I was dead for a bit there. But I'm stuck on how this feels absurd and backwards. Why didn't I die, even temporarily, when fighting Nilbog, but Crusader and Glory Girl could get the job done?

I-

The locker is back and it's opening the door and on the roof and why is the locker back I just fucking died why is the LOCKER BACK
"Oh Monster, I'm so glad to meet you! I'm your biggest fan." The locker is talking to me WHY IS IT TALKING TO ME WHY IS IT SAYING THIS LINE LIKE IT'S SEDUCING ME WHILE IT BLEEDS AND THE BULLIES WHISPER AROUND ITS WORDS AND ALL WHILE I'M HUMAN AND CAN'T ESCAPE IT

And then- and then metal wraps around me, but it's not the locker, it's holding tight but it's not the locker and it's speaking to me but it's different, it's, "Shush baby don't you cry, everything will be fine and there's nothing to fear here, it's just a girl, that's all it is, it's just a girl."

And- it doesn't make the locker go away, or make it any less awful, but. It's true. Sophia and Emma- they're just girls. I've been - I've been seeing the locker every day they looked at me, felt it crawling on my skin every time Sophia shoved me, only it was background, it wasn't anything I saw yet it was there in the back of my head and did I really need to give them that much power over me? Did I really need to give them that satisfaction? They did the locker to me, yet... they couldn't do it to me at will. In fact, I'd stopped using my locker anyway, so they really couldn't do it to me at all.

... BUT I STILL NEED TO GET AWAY FROM THE FUCKING LOCKER!!!

Especially since it's advancing on me. Oh god why is the locker advancing, why, fucking WHY and then- fuck! The locker reaches out with a hand of bloody tampons and breaks my arm! Snap, broken! Why is today just emphasizing my mortality! But the other, nicer cage of steel lets me loose and I flee, and then- Cherie is holding me for some reason. When did that happen? Actually, she's holding me up by my shirt, it's going to tear.

"You are not dying again."

I grit my teeth. "Not dead." I'm fine. The arm stopped being broken. Cherie, meanwhile, is going to ruin my shirt.

Cherie rotates me about for some reason, I don't even know why, and before I can decide on how to bitch her out for the mistreatment of my shirt the fucking locker is back and its tampon arm starts choking me.
Can't breathe! Can't breathe! Can't escape! I need to be the monster so I can tear out of the locker and run! But it's not happening there's no one around to look at me I'm alone with the locker why am I not the monster-

*crunch*

-the locker lets go of me, and it *leers* at me from the ground and no, no fuck this, the-the-the bitches were just girls the locker- it can't be real this is a cape thing it's just a girl I can cut girls.

"Taylor. Please don't tell me you just killed one of my less unpleasant aunts."

Fuck you Cherie. I don't need your shit on top of this whole mess.

It was just a girl. A girl I've now butchered and sent her head careening off... elsewhere. I sort of feel like I should be tying this back to how unhappy I was with Cherie killing that Empire cape, the whole thing of killing someone without knowing their crimes, but while I'm not entirely sure what was *actually* happening I'm fully confident it was Cape Shit that she was doing to me. So I'm pretty sure she tried to kill me. I have no goddamn clue who she is, but she was trying to kill me and I don't care why, it was self-defense.

And weirdly cathartic, actually.

I have no idea why.

Before I can drag my thoughts back to Cherie, she... well, she grabs me, soothingly mutters, "Shhh it's fine we're all fine everything's fine-" which abruptly turns fierce as she switches to- "-let's get out of here right now," and *jarringly* drags me into the air, not bothering to ask me or anything.

...

I'm not sure I can really blame her, given what a disaster we were just in.
So.

I died.

Or came really damn close, at least.

I think this is supposed to force me to reexamine my life? What I'm doing, whether it's worth pursuing?

I dunno, though. I've already looked up cape mortality statistics, and in particular looked up what a more Brute-type package like mine leans toward. (Short version: either your Brute-ness is really good, like Alexandria's, or you die faster than pretty much any other category of cape. By a lot) I was planning around the idea that reaching my 25th birthday would be A Big Deal, if I reached it at all. That was on the idea of doing the normal cape thing -join up with the Protectorate, spend a few years as Ward, probably live through that and then die as an adult cape fairly early on. Or become a villain -not that I'd do that, mind- and act as either someone else's enforcer and eventually end up dead because I'm always out in the field fighting unfamiliar capes or just try to carve out my own little gang with sheer brute force, and eventually get killed in my sleep because people are tired of my shit. Or become a rogue -I don't see how that would work at all with my powers, but hypothetically- and... have a better survival rate, maybe, depending on how valuable my power was perceived, but also feel like I'm not doing jack. What would I even do? I'm not equipped to move heavy stuff in place of heavy machinery, or demolish buildings that need it, or dig mines, or knock down trees. I can destroy some fairly tough stuff, but... how's that supposed to be useful, aside killing awful, awful capes?

Like the Nine.

I'm mostly on autopilot as we go through the process of getting Cherie out of her suit, me out of her costume -though there's that ffffucking moment where she's grinning so much her eyes are practically closed because I have to strip out of my costume in front of her- and so on and so on, though I drag myself out of my thoughts long enough to make sure Cherie's scrape is bandaged properly. Tie it off tight enough she's only half-joking when she complains it might cut off her circulation.
So yeah. I'm supposed to be reexamining my life, and I guess I kind of am, because even though
we were already planning on leaving Brockton Bay because of the... the heat, god, I feel criminal
just thinking it... I'd sort of been thinking vaguely in terms of taking on local-ish gangs? Basically
continue what we've been doing in the Bay instead of seeking out another Nilbog-esque threat just
yet, work our way up. In part because I wasn't sure if Cherie was up for that kind of threat.
Regardless, now I'm feeling like... like if relative no-namers have a real shot at killing me where
Nilbog and Dragon failed, if any kind of 'power level' concept just doesn't really matter to my life, I
really ought to be rolling the dice at big threats. I should be trying to break the Nine, instead of
getting myself killed trying to stop the latest iteration of Boston's gang scene.

So yeah. Life re-examined. Conclusion drawn.

Feels like it should be more dramatic than this. Like if this were a movie, I'd spend a week
ruminating on some beautiful veranda, contemplating my tea, and make a firm resolution to never
run away again.

It just feels like a decision. A decision like any other, no more or less.

I don't know what to make of that.

Regardless.

"We're hunting the Slaughterhouse Nine next," I inform Cherie.

Cherie smiles and laughs like that's no big deal. "Sounds fun, Boss"

I guess she was serious when she said her idea of fun was following me into these pits, and not...
clubbing.

---------------------------------------------------

Our time on the road is... different from when we went after the Dragonslayers. Cherie is insistent
on us using hotels more regularly, and I give in when she points out that my expectations are
probably rooted in the fact that my power cleans me up constantly. She needs regular opportunities
to wash up, or else some day she's going to come down with something awful we could've prevented, and it will be all my fault.

I think she's laying the guilt trip on a bit thick, but I end up not pointing it out when it occurs to me this might be... self-defense from her own life. Maybe that's just what it took to get Heartbreaker to treat her with bare minimum decency: point out that it's a bad plan and also try real damn hard to make him feel like he's a serious heel because anything less rolls right off him.

The whole thing makes me antsy because I keep expecting someone to get curious about what's in our truck, but when I express that concern to Cherie she- well. She laughs in my damn face, so hard she's clutching at her gut and wiping tears from her eyes and it takes several minutes before looking at me stops setting her into new rounds of laughter.

Finally, she gives me a condescending pat on the head, like I'm a vaguely retarded puppy, and remarks, "Taylor, you way overestimate how much energy most people have to spare on curiosity. Even capes aren't as curious as you think. We'll be fine."

And... things do seem to work out.

I'd assume it was Cherie manipulating people, but she spends most of her time at these hotels asleep. Even when I look out a window in the dead of night as the monster, carefully watching people go past our truck, most of them clearly don't spare it a second glance. In fact, usually when we get looked at it's when we're loading or unloading the truck -a couple of girls in a somewhat beat-up pickup truck is mildly attention-grabbing.

Or maybe it's just that we're two girls alone, period.

... I don't think that thought would've crossed my mind prior to Cherie. I'm not sure if that's me being sheltered and her worldly or her being... her and me being sensible.

There's a few times I find myself strongly tempted to call Dad and let him know I'm fine, but... I'm always stopped by realizing I have no idea what to say. On a very basic level, I mean. Not 'say in a way that won't let the PRT get any clues if they're listening in'. Not 'say so quickly the call isn't liable to be traced'. Not... any number of valid concerns I should be keeping in mind, and that do cross my mind as I'm staring at the phone. They're true, but the real issue is just... I don't know what to tell him at all. When I try to imagine a conversation with him, there's just a big void in my skull, a nothing yawning on unendingly.
I'm reminded of how I insisted on Cherie handling the call back when we were hunting the Dragonslayers.

I just have no idea how to talk to my own father outside of... routine, I guess?

The thought brings a half-hearted anger aimed at Emma, but I long since concluded it's my own damn fault anyway, so... it's a pretty bleh anger.

Overall though, hotels work out... surprisingly well.

I just sometimes wish there wasn't always a phone available to taunt me.

It's always a bit of a relief when we sleep in the woods instead.

The news from Brockton Bay is almost comedic. The Protectorate spins events so that Cherie and I are a dastardly duo of sneaky, cunning evil who exploited security holes and Cherie's power to get labeled heroes. When asked what they suspect our intentions were, Armsmaster... says he don't know what goes through the minds of petty villains, in a manner that implies he doesn't want to know. That prevents any further questions on that angle, and maybe it's just hanging with Cherie affecting me, but I can't help but suspect that was the point. Our actual motive is that I wanted to be a hero and Cherie is sort of... following me around like a duckling. That things have gone so wrong isn't because we had some sinister plot to abuse the label.

How would that even work? What kind of plan could that possibly be?

I dunno, maybe there could be an actual evil plot centered around that, but I can't see it, and given there was no sinister motive I kind of doubt the Protectorate can see one either.

More interesting -and a bit disappointing- is the news of a new gang moving in, taking advantage of the power vacuum produced by the Merchants being wiped away and the loss of important capes in the other gangs. Though they're kind of weird for a gang, as when I go digging around online I don't find anything about them selling drugs or engaging in prostitution or knocking over banks or anything. Just... skirmishing with the other gangs sometimes, not even particularly carving out any particular territory as theirs. It's all really weird, and I can only assume that whatever cape
is running the whole thing is a bit fucked in the head. Probably a tinker, given the underslung lasers they occasionally use, apparently.

It's sort of funny to me to learn that the Empire is rumored to have put bounties on Monster and Pride. It's technically threatening, I guess? But mostly it feels like... they're scared? That they're *outsourcing* in an attempt to deal with us. Were Fog and Locust really that important? Or maybe the... other cape?

On a more positive note... it's good seeing Squealer get a new lease on life. Feels nice to have helped make a villain into a hero, instead of into a corpse. Not... as nice as I was hoping it would feel, but nice. I didn't even realize she *could* make aircraft, let alone the blimp haunting Boston's skyline now. It's impressively huge.

... it doesn't help when Cherie gets curious about me being happy to see 'Major Zeppelins' and no fucking way am I letting her find some way to twist this into teasing me so I just. No. I say nothing, I give nothing, and just out-patient her. It's easy. Cherie *isn't* patient, and she's generally pretty tired when we hole up in a hotel anyway.

But I make a point of reveling in it a bit once she's been asleep for a few hours. I *can* do more straightforwardly positive things, sometimes.

The first time we think we've found the Nine, I get excited. *This is it,* I'm thinking, and honestly I'm half-expecting everything to come apart and for us to die horribly, and I try to heavily hint Cherie can just bail, this is my thing not hers, but she rolls her eyes at me and tells me she's not going to repeat the speech she already gave me in the Bay.

It's pretty obvious pretty quickly they're not the Nine, though. Fucked-up, yes, but not Nine-fucked-up. Whoever they are, they're occupying a farmhouse at the edge of town, the kind of farmhouse you can tell was growing crops maybe a decade ago, maybe two decades ago, but is now just a fairly private home for some family. Or *was,* in this case. I find the unlucky family's not-particularly-fresh corpses in the attic, because that's the way I snuck inside. There's... injuries that look to me like they were tortured to death, stuff I very carefully stop speculating about when I see that one of the dead is a girl who was maybe a year older than me before this happened.

I end up listening in for an uncomfortable two hours while Cherie periodically pings me with curiosity and I try to signal back patience, laying nearby the corpses and trying to find a position that doesn't have their faces haunting the edge of my vision. Most of the conversation among the
not-Nine is that of a group of people who are relatively comfortable with each other laughing things up. If you ignored the content, you'd think it was an ordinary six fast friends, talking about their favorite shows.

In their case, they're talking about how 'awesome' it was to see a 'pig's' face explode as they were fleeing a bank with their stolen cash, and other lovely stories.

Honestly, I was pretty sure I was going to kill them all before I started listening in, and it took less than fifteen minutes for me to be completely sure. I needed the other hour and forty-five minutes or so to let them slip their powers, so I could know how to approach this.

The short version is that none of them had any passive protection while asleep, or had sensory powers to forewarn them.

So... I killed them one by one in their sleep, leaving alive the woman who could apparently make herself undetectable to people she'd made skin-to-skin contact with. Not because she was any better than the others -if anything, she might've been the most stomach-churning- but because she'd be no problem at all for Cherie to handle in the suit.

I didn't really interfere with Cherie's power-assisted interrogation. My only contribution was wondering if they'd had any direct contact with the Nine, and I'd honestly figured it was a long shot. No surprise when the woman was actually kind of horrified at the suggestion.

I'd originally intended to try to turn her in, but then out came the rape stories...

I don't think I'd have felt bad about her death even before I triggered.

---------------------------------------------------------------

The second time I think we've found the Nine is... bewildering.

I ended up pushing for a more open assault, wanting to get the victims out before the maybe-Nine did their grisly work, and it... went somewhat poorly. It probably would've gotten me killed if they'd actually been the Nine. As was it was... weird. In most respects they seemed to be essentially normal criminals, kidnapping girls to prostitute them elsewhere, just... with powers, and costumes, and a... a... a lair. An actual Saturday morning cartoon lair, colorful and the walls dominated by
'machines' with no obvious purpose. I have literally no idea what that whole thing was about. It was creepy, though, especially when contrasted with the aggressively mundane cages.

Ultimately the main reason things went as well as they did was that the group was nearly at each other's throats on their own, and then Cherie did her thing with her power until their existing grudges turned into a reason to start fighting each other. The survivors figured out that something was being done to mess with their heads, but by that time Cherie had cut the power, and none of them could generate light.

The only difficulty at that point was figuring out how to kill the guy who insisted he was 'invincible'. I'm not sure what the trick was, but eventually my stabbing made progress through his costume and from there he died very quickly.

It was awkward figuring out how to deliver the unfortunate girls to safety without getting ourselves in trouble... in fact, it was difficult getting it done at all, since the pickup truck wasn't designed to carry fourteen people. We actually ended up having Cherie carry two of the braver ones on ahead in flight while I walked the rest to the truck and most of them ended up awkwardly in the back.

I felt sort of like I should be trying to say something reassuring, but I couldn't think of anything and I didn't want to make things worse so I ended up just... delivering them in silence. I honestly thought I'd spooked them, and maybe I did spook most of them, but there was one girl who, when dropped off, squeezed me into a hug and gave me a heartfelt thanks before heading off to hopefully be brought back to her family.

So.

That was nice?

Kinda feels like it shouldn't feel nice, given it required such an awful thing to happen...

--------------------------------------------------------

And then finally we actually find the Nine.
Chapter 14: Idle Thoughts

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 5.3, sort of. And 5.4 less sort of.

Chapter 14: Idle Thoughts

So hey we've found the Nine.

You'd think Taylor would want to jump in and attack them on principle, but actually she has us back off and follow them, waiting for them to do their next big challenge thing. Her reasoning? They'll split up, and they won't be expecting us. That they'll be split up is a good point - as we follow them, they rarely range more than 50 feet from each other, and we absolutely could not take them all at once - but I'm a wee bit skeptical about the 'not expecting us' part. Like okay yeah they won't be expecting us, but they will be on guard since they'll be provoking everyone into fighting them in one of their games.

It's also a bit more practical than I was expecting from Taylor. Makes me wonder what's going on inside her head, that sometimes she can hold off and wait for a less insane time to do things and sometimes it's just lol imma go after all of Ellisburg by myself.

... actually, I've never asked her about that. Was she alone? I've just sort of assumed...

"So Boss, why did you go after Nilbog in the first place?" I oh-so-casually ask one day as we're following the Nine from close to the edge of my range.

She grunts, not looking up from the tinkertech computer. I 'poke' her with some happiness, just enough she'll notice - and she can't complain since I'm keeping both hands on the driver's wheel exactly like she's insisted I should do - and she glances over and squints at me suspiciously. I don't bother trying to hide rolling my eyes at her. It's called curiosity, girl. Eventually she works through whatever her morass of irritation, anger, nervousness, and longing actually means and decides to actually answer my question. "I-" Words die in her throat and now I'm reading way more nervousness. Oh, now I'm really curious, and I poke her with a stab of fear. She actually jerks in her seat before glaring at me, to which I just shrug and pointedly roll my fingers that are totally still on the steering wheel. Just doing what you told me to do, Boss! She looks away, out into the window and wait isn't this that thing she did when she-
"I think I might've been trying to commit suicide," she says real quiet-like and matter-of-fact.

I almost, almost say ya don't think? But no, she's being all serious about this, that joke is just going to make her madder and probably she'll shut up and I'll never get the rest out of her. So instead I cheerfully declare, "Well then you fucking suck in the best possible way, 'cause he's dead and you're not."

Taylor snorts, blatantly trying not to smile and hahaha fuck yes I'm starting to kind of get her crazy sense of humor. It's nothing like Daddy's, which. Uh.

... shit, why have I been assuming Daddy's sense of humor is baseline? Aw fuck, this is going to take forever to unlearn, isn't it?

But back with Taylor! She's still sounding pretty grim as she continues, but the smile is in her voice and I can hear her tune being a bit more flute-y. "At the time I was just thinking... he's not going to get better. He makes minions, and as far as I was reading they didn't run out, didn't die unless you killed them. I had this idea that the Protectorate had a time bomb ticking down in their midst and they were ignoring it, that some day he'd hit critical mass or a plane flying overhead would tick him off or a natural disaster would break his quarantine or something and everybody nearby would be fucked. I think... I think if I'd not gotten powers, and read up on it? I'd have sent a letter to Armsmaster. But I had my power, I felt the itch to use it-"

I nod along at that, and Taylor gives me an odd look while feeling confused. Uh, okay? Then she goes back to staring out through the side door mirror.

"-and... I dunno. I had this feeling that if I laid it out for them and explained it in a calm and reasonable manner that they'd politely thank me and then shove my papers into a shredder after I'd left." I consider asking if that's something that happened at her school, and then decide I'd rather not encourage her to think about that whole thing. "And I felt like it needed to be done. Like... lancing a wound so you can get the infection out. It's bad now, but the alternative is worse. And if no one else was going to do it, and I maybe could do it..." She sort of trails off, and I think she's maybe getting lost in thought.

Still cheerful-sounding, I 'finish' for her. "So you decided to head in alone on maybe a suicide mission because leaving the situation alone was worse than maybe dying."

She absently nods at that, and I take a moment to keep myself from shuddering. Ew. Who's willing
to die for total strangers? Taylor, apparently. I mean, I guess that's cool if that applies to me too, but given the whole repeated threats on my life and all... plus, capes are weird. Maybe she's willing to do so for strangers and not for people actually close to her.

Still, this is useful. I was totally right about her going in alone, though I'd sort of... previously assumed she just thought she was that awesome. I guess this fits better with... uh... nearly everything else about her...

... actually.

"So was that why you went after dear ol' Daddy, then?" I keep my voice bland and smooth. Like tofu. Except I hate tofu. Uh. Like ice cream! Don't let on that I'm doing something other than making idle conversation because the Nine are being super-boring right now and why not.

Surprisingly, Taylor just kind of absently nods at that, emotions not flickering at all. I'm... not sure what I was expecting, but I was expecting something. I raise an eyebrow skeptically. "You really thought Daddy was a problem the Protectorate was ignoring?"

Taylor's gaze flickers toward me through the reflection, head not turning at all. She's confused again, why? "Yes?"

... oh god she's doing that thing again with the question-confirmation lameness. "Why?" 'cause seriously we were always in hiding, on the run, having to be careful or else Daddy would punish us...

Taylor turns to look at me again, eyes those of an innocent doe or whatever cute fuzzy animal people think looks innocent. "The Protectorate isn't just a bunch of superpowered thugs for justice. They've got trackers, detectives, super-fast searchers. They've got tinkers with remote-controlled drones and people who can put you down from a mile away. If they feel someone really needs to die, and they can get a Kill Order signed off on it, it's just a question of how much of a priority you are. Heartbreaker was a minor problem now, periodically kidnapping lone women here and there. He'd someday have an army of parahumans under his control, but he wasn't assassinating politicians or wrecking farms and factories or otherwise destabilizing the country."

My jaw works for a few minutes after that with nothing coming out. The idea that Daddy was small-time just -I can't. I was so certain we were getting by on our wits and powers, that the Protectorate was hounding us but couldn't get us because Daddy was just that good at this even though he was such sh*t in so many other ways, and yet I can't quite come up with a hole in what Taylor's saying, and the way she said it... she's not trying to convince me this is true. She's
explaining to a very slow toddler why two apples added to two other apples equals four apples. This is *obvious* to her, and she's genuinely mystified that I don't find it obvious too.

*Maybe I'm not as awesome as I think I am, either.*

I seriously don't know how Taylor has the patience for this shit. I'm able to kind of cope because I'm juggling driving and talking to Taylor and tracking the Nine and studying their antics and then I have to collapse into sleep, but Taylor doesn't sleep and doesn't have anything to occupy her except the tinkertech computer and me talking. If I weren't me, I'd assume she's going crazy and just hiding it well. I am me, so I *know* she's... bizarrely fine.

I still don't get Taylor.

It's at least kind of fun operating at the edge of her squeamishness when I'm describing the Nine's behavior, and *interesting*. She doesn't have more than a passing queasiness when I start graphically theorizing about Bonesaw's gruesome surgery on still-aware victims, spiced by the occasional spark of serious let-me-break-something anger, but touching on the much less grotesque process of Shatterbird taunting her victim with false hope before finally killing them slowly actually has her *seething*, so much so she eventually forces me to stop the vehicle by the side of the road and vanishes off into the woods. I'm not entirely sure *what* she kills, but it wasn't a damn squirrel. And even once she feels like coming back, she's still all but vibrating with rage.

I scale back on the details of Shatterbird's activities after that. I'd rather not find out what will snap her control by being blendered after one word too many.

I mean. It's *possible* me delivering all this cheerily is contributing to the problem, but I'm pretty sure Taylor has largely written off my upbeat attitude as A Cherie Thing.

Cheery Cherie, heh. Imagining a goody-two-shoes Ward version of me is funny.

Her anger with Jack Slash is more of a slow burn, a constant background seething that isn't particularly affected by *what* he does. Which is a bit disappointing in an immediate sense, it makes it harder to guess why she's mad at him, but a bit interesting in its own right given no one *else* in the Nine draws that response from her. I'm pretty sure it's not actually *personal*...
She's got mixed feelings about Bonesaw and I seriously consider sharing some stories about what
my siblings were doing when they first got powers, but then I remember her weird hangups about
relationships and sex and decide that has higher odds of ending in a stabinating than if I were to
start fangirling over Shatterbird.

Which.

Look, she's hot, okay? I can overlook a lot if you're hot.

Pretty sure Taylor would look at me like I'd turned into an alien if I shared that thought...

Burn-girl generates a bit of an interesting response, too. Makes me think of some of her emotional
patterns when we're talking about me, actually. Very interesting. We're teammates now, is she
thinking of recruiting the burninator? She did say her goal is to prevent problems. I... kinda thought
that was a bit bullshit at the time, but she seemed to believe it well enough. So maybe she'd be
okay with talking the burny girl into fighting alongside us for great justice if that would get her to
stop murdering innocents?

If so, she doesn't bring it up when we start hashing out actual plans for how to handle the ambush.
She wants me to go talk to the hot girl, she wants me to try to point her at the other Nine, but she
doesn't actually ask me to talk her into turning in a meaningful sense. Just... getting her pissed off
at the other Nine and blowing off her head if she proves intractable.

Hm. On the one hand, if this were Daddy, there'd be layers to the conversation, and if I were
wondering if he wanted me to turn the girl the answer would be 'yes'. (And not just because she's
probably a pretty girl) But this is Taylor, who's already gotten on my case about how she says what
she means and means what she says and all that Dr. Seuss bullshit, so if she's not outright telling
me to give turning the girl a chance she probably doesn't actually want me to do it.

... I could hedge my bets...

... shouldn't even be hard, probably, I'm pretty sure I've got a good handle on how she works at this
point...

... and it would be nice to give Taylor exactly what she wants when she didn't ask for it just to see
the look on her face...
"I can't actually bring myself to approve this, but I can't bring myself to say you shouldn't do it. So... whatever. Just don't lie to me afterward." Finally!

Seriously, she's so mad about Shatterbird reveling in other people's suffering, but the hobo following along and also reveling in people's suffering deserves *waffling*? Fie on you! (Whatever that means) Like okay it's not exactly the ringing endorsement I was going for, but at least she's not going to get on my case about it, probably. So I bat my eyebrows and ask, "A kiss, for luck?" when she's tangled up in switching to her costume because if she's not going to give me what I want I can passively-aggressively annoy her! (And possibly end up getting something else I want -like at this point I'd probably have dragged someone off to somewhere private just because it's been *so long* except I've had no free time and aaaa)

So okay, no (cape) costume -Taylor gets all confused over that. Right. I didn't talk as much about him, did I? "Gornboy is way, *way* too cautious. If he has a proper combat power I will eat a hat. Two hats." Taylor isn't taking me very seriously. "*Twenty hats.*" She pretty clearly doesn't want to react, but I can tell I have impressed upon her the seriousness of my certainty. The funny part is I'm not even joking. Satisfied with that, I make a few last-minute touch-ups to my face. Maximum Innocent Teenage Girl Who Could Not Possibly Hurt A Fly As She Most Certainly Does Not Have Superpowers Nosirree. "So instead of being a scary obvious cape he might try to drive away from, I'm just going to be a girl on the town, who just so happens to make him *feel* things-" This plan *most certainly* does not have anything to do with me missing the touch of human skin or anything like that. No, seriously, gag me, gornboy is not getting any. "-and then I'll slit his throat in the privacy of his gornmobile."

Simple!

... aaaand then Taylor has one of her moments where she's uncomfortable with me being good at what I do. Again. Goddammit, Taylor... "You have *your* talents-" Stabbing things, mostly. And being kind of scary as shit, sometimes even intentionally. "-I have mine." Being awesome at everything, of course.

Anyway blah blah blah I give Taylor one last update on what's going on with the Nine and she heads off and now it's time for the gornmobile!
Knock knock knock. "Excuse me!" Knock knockknockknock. "Excuse me, sir!"

He's trying to ignore me. Normally he'd even be able to do so successfully, but I'm me. I can't
tell exactly when he's looking at me -he's got all his windows tinted so you can't see anything at all-
but I can make a pretty darn good guess of when his attention is sliding my way and try throwing
in some lust. And like come on I'm young and attractive, so unless he's super-gay-

-wait shit what if he is super-gay I didn't come up with a back-up plan for that.

I try not to sweat too hard, and stick out the plan. It's not like he's reacting confusedly to the lust,
just a kind of low-level frustration like he's used to these kinds of thoughts and finds them an
annoying distraction. So he's prooobably not super-gay and I'm fine.

... I still need to stop throwing myself into situations with half-baked plans and hoping they work
out, oh god.

Eventually the combination of knocking, talking, and needling his emotions gets him adequately
annoyed to come over, open the door, and start to angrily demand- except he stops, and there's a
rush of feelings and uh that's like paternal-type love or somethin' all mixed up with regret and
fondness and bitterness and white-hot rage that doesn't seem to be aimed at me in particular.

I stop with the lust-needling. I'm not entirely sure what he's thinking, but I'm a little worried it
would ring untrue in conjunction with his current feelings. He's staring at me like he's a bit lost,
and I have the distinct impression his mind is primarily elsewhere. The man himself is... a dude.
Older, got a bit of a bald spot, I can half-see a tattoo on the back of one of his hands, but can't quite
tell what it's supposed to be. Deep age lines, pale and slightly flabby skin that has me thinking he's
been avoiding the sun for years. He looks like some kid's grandfather who is aging prematurely.

Huh. I'd read him as younger. I was thinking he was twenty-something. I could maybe still work
with lusting him, not exactly hard for middle-aged men to be attracted to teen girls, but from the
way he's reacting I kiiinda suspect he's thinking of... family. Maybe his wife, maybe his daughter,
maybe even a granddaughter if he's older than I think.

So I smile at him and start massaging his emotions so that when it provokes nostalgia and
bitterness and anger I round off the anger and subtly emphasize the nostalgia and just sort of leave
the bitterness alone. "Are you okay, sir?"
There's a surge of bitterness and anger and a pretty dang deep well of sadness and again I round off the anger and this time round off the bitterness and emphasize the sadness and his face goes straight from the beginnings of angry outrage to looking crushed. Not at the edge of tears, dude doesn't strike me as the teary type, but crushed. And sounding surprised -and in fact I can tell he's feeling a bit surprised- to admit it, he says, "No. I... no, I haven't been okay in a long time."

I make sympathetic noises and nod along and say, "We live in hard times don't we?"

"Well, yes. I suppose." Abort, wrong conversational direction, he's starting to get a bit confused and irritated!

I put out a hand on one of his and guess, "Lost someone, I take it?" And hahaha oh my god I got it right that was close. Again, anger, bitterness, sadness, crushing depression, and I edge off the anger and bitterness -a bit less blatantly than before, it's not really necessary- and push the sadness a bit harder.

Now there's tears in his eyes, and he wipes at them with the hand I'm not holding with a bit of an awkward shift because that was the hand he was leaning against the doorway with. I catch a glimpse of a tattoo on that hand too, some kind of bird? "Everyone. I... everyone."

Excellent. I start spinning bullshit. "I lost my grandma to cape bullshit, you know. Need a shoulder to cry on? Everyone can use a shoulder to cry on." Let me in let me in let me in so I can slit your throat out of sight.

There's a spike of suspicion and paranoia and bitterness but I don't let the sadness and depression level off particularly and slowly round the suspicion and paranoia off. Let him think whatever he thinks to explain his experiences. Sit and wait for him to come to a decision, making doe eyes at him like I have no idea what's going on inside him. Just a random good samaritan who has too big a heart and too tiny a brain, don't mind me. Finally, he mutters to himself, "So tired," and proceeds to break hand contact and go lurching his way deeper into his van, door left ajar. He goes and sits down at one of those van dinner table space things, leaning onto the table and rubbing at his forehead with both hands, muttering to himself.

I follow him in, quietly close the door behind me, and slide into the opposite seat from me. The noise prompts him to look up, and he's clearly surprised to see me. I can see the tattoos more clearly now, one of them is a fancy U and the other is a bird, doesn't really mean anything to me. Was this guy like a biker in his youth or something? The tattoos are bugging me. I lean forward and once again do my best to look and sound sympathetic while continuing to massage his emotions, keeping the anger and hostility and whatnot down low while amping up the sadness and
depression and blah blah blah as slowly and subtly as I can. Wait, regret's in there now? Okay, sure, let's slowly amp up the regret too. What's he regretting? "You really lost everyone? That's awful. I don't want to imagine what that would be like." Mostly because I almost don't have to. I mean sure a bunch of the sibs are still alive and so are the aunts, but the only thing that kind of counts is that I'm hanging with Taylor, and she's... not a talker, for one...

Keep massaging those emotions. He's got the waterworks starting up a little again, and he shakily wipes away a tear and then looks at it with some shock. "You... remind me of her so much it hurts... she was so patient with me... even when I did..."

Yyyyyep, reminding him of some girl who was totes important to him. I wonder if I even actually resemble her beyond being female or if it's just that I'm distorting his emotions so badly he'd be reminded of her by a dead fish? I've never really tested this particular range of my powers. Still need to get him more depressed and whatnot, though, while I'm 99% sure I'm right he's got no combat power I've still got my heart pounding from suddenly realizing that hey maybe he's gay and going to realize I'm Mastering him into lusting for the wrong gender and the plan is fucking ruined you fucking retard so I'm not exactly inclined to take chances anyway. I want him so depressed that cutting his throat feels like a mercy instead of something to try to fight off.

It takes way too fucking damn long. So much so I'm thinking he's got a power that does something to his mind, because when I've got him to the point that normal people start begging for an end to their futile and pointless existence, he's just tearily muttering half to me and half to himself about cauldrons and how it's all his fault he lost 'her' and somewhere in there he starts getting really off his rocker with talking about how he regrets trying to change this worthless world's fate, like old man gorn was ever a person of importance pffff, and even once he finally trails off and lays his head in his arms and says, "I just wish it would end," he's more coherent than he has any right to be. Clearly not sane in the first place, but more together than he has any right to be.

So I give up, get the knife out, pull his head up out of his arms and look him sweetly in the eye and open my mouth to say something so I can distract him from getting the knife to his throat and dragging in one quick pull.

And then I start sweating when, looking and feeling betrayed in a weirdly resigned sort of way, he gurgles and gasps and chokes while some weird white shit start flickering nearby. Wait, those aren't shadows, it's white and black. Okay, odd. Flickery and weird and he's got a power and now I'm not so confident it's a non-combat power, so I take the bloody knife and jam it into the base of his skull.

He jolts, stops moving, and the effect -whatever it was- goes away with no fanfare whatsoever. Not even a sound.
Fortunately, the sink on his van works, so I'm able to wash the blood off without too much difficulty, dry it off with a towel, and stick it back into my purse. From there, it's just leaving, careful to block off the view from the doorway to his body without looking like I'm doing that, and then close it. Nobody is really paying attention, but my heart is still pounding from what feels like multiple mistakes that could totally have gotten me killed if I wasn't lucky as a clover. So. Probably-unnecessary caution.

And now it's back to my suit!

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Shatterbird does her thing before I can get the full distance back. Stupid old man taking forever to become properly suicidally depressed. Jerk. Meany-face. Inconvenient.

Fortunately, since I knew it was coming in a general sense I was already pretty careful to keep myself largely away from glass. It's unfortunate she's out of my range right now, otherwise I could've predicted it way more exactly, I'm almost sure, but I still manage to throw myself into a bush and ow ow ow ow but it's not glass shrapnel punching through my eyes or whatever so it's all good! Just little cuts and scrapes, totally ignorable, and not even many because my clothes protected me decently well!

So then I get into the back of the truck (Wincing at how its windows have been blown out), and hide under the tarp and start getting switched, silver undersuit on, into the main suit, start the boot-up sequence-

...

Start the boot-up sequence-

...

Fuck, start the boot-up sequence-

You FATHERFUCKING PIECE OF SHIT, don't you fail on me now! Fuck, the plan needs the suit to kill Hatchet Face!
Okay, no, deep breaths. We have two such suits, I can just hop into the other one and-

...

Its helmet dumps out little shards of glass when I go to grab at it. That's... that's the interface. The bit that lets me control the suit, see out into the wider world, everything.

I make an attempt to boot it up anyway, ignoring how sirens are starting to go off and people are screaming and otherwise panicking, the inconsiderate jerks, but no-go. I can't, like, boot it up and then just take the helmet off and wear a mask or something. It just plain won't work. And mix-and-matching the other helmet to this suit also doesn't work.

Fffffffuuuuckkkkk.

It's okay! It's... great! Everything is... fine. I mean, look on the bright side Cherie, it could have failed in the air and killed you! That would obviously be way worse, no duh, no arguing.

... on impulse, with a wince of dread, I check on the tinkertech computer. Surprisingly, its screen is fine.

Well, that's something, if not remotely the thing I need right now...

So I switch back into my civilian-ish clothes, hop out, and get jogging. And after like two minutes change my mind, brute-force a random dude in the middle of revving his motorcycle into allowing the poor innocent waif who desperately needs to go check on her grandmother to 'borrow' his motorcycle, and speed off into the deeper city.

Burny-girl next.

I am going to totally pretend it was a deliberate decision to show up as a normal person and not
It's kind of amazing how well it worked to just walk up to Mimi and ask her why she's so mad, looking like a complete retard of a big-hearted person who's genuinely somehow oblivious to the screaming and the dying and other such insanity around us. Pay no mind to me subtly twisting everyone to be disinclined to come 'save' me or otherwise interfere. Probably can't dissuade a *cape* that way, but the regular folks are pretty easy to amp up their fear and blah while downplaying their concern for a fellow human being until they give into the obvious plan of fleeing in terror. They don't have a reason to be confident in their ability to actually help, after all.

Mimi is her name, by the way. She apparently hates being called Burnscar. I make sympathetic noises and share my own opinion of how awful it is to get stuck with a nickname you don't like, and Mimi's cigarette burn-marked face jiggles up and down in a fiercely angry motion. She's just so glad I *get* it, she says in a bit of a monotone while her eyes glow with a literal inner fire and I can tell her actual emotional state is almost as flatline-y as Taylor's is when she goes squid.

I think I'm sort of 'supposed' to be scared, some primal lizard part of my brain focusing on the disconnect between her tone and her words and deciding something is Wrong as a result, but I suppose I'm way too used to knowing that what people *are actually experiencing* is often disconnected from what they *present as experiencing*. Mimi's emotional range being connected to how much fire is around her is interesting, but I can't quite find it disconcerting. A bit of talking makes it pretty clear she's still her either way, much more so than, say, *Taylor* is when she goes squid, and it's just that instead of going 'I don't like this person they make me mad I think I'd like to hurt them no wait I'd feel bad if I hurt them' she just has that first bit with the wanting to hurt and then goes and does it, and only *later* looks back and remembers and feels all guilty and other such bullshit.

Like, honestly. I often feel the urge to do shit to people, and then I just go and do it. And if I don't, it's not because I *feel bad*. It's because, hey, doing that will get the Protectorate on my ass in no time flat!

Mimi sort of blinks at me sharing this revelation, and then she gets all squintily suspicious in this amusingly flat and unemotional way it's honestly adorable and flame goes up her arm and I interrupt by saying, "Hey, if another cape team, just hypothetically speaking here, if another cape team was interested in having you aboard, how likely would you be to leave the Nine anyway?"

Her paranoia *spikes* almost as bad as Taylor's does at her worst, her eyes shooting in every direction, and then once she's convinced herself that, I dunno, no Nine are going to show up and try to kill her she leans toward me and I can totally tell she's trying to be intimidating but even though intellectually I know she could probably kill me in a matter of seconds if I provoked her I've been hanging around Taylor for months at this point so it's just sort of adorable. Again. "You're a cape trying to recruit one of the Nine. You're an *idiot.*"
I grin breezily at her. "It's really my boss who is maybe interested in you, I'm just the messenger, hey how do you feel about your coworkers? Jack? Bonesaw? Crawler? Shatterbird-" Ah-hah, I was sorta maybe thinking she didn't get on so great with Shatterbird let's leverage that now that we've gotten the idea of hey maybe skiving out on the Nine in her pretty little head (I mean okay the cigarette burns aren't exactly appealing but if you look past that she's honestly got a decent little face and if I were a tiny bit stupider I'd probably have kissed her when she leaned in to be intimidating), so now it's time to initiate The Plan The Boss Actually Explicitly Discussed With Me I Think I Can Never Tell With Her Oh God.

Her face hardens, she starts trying to say something about how I'm going to burn long and slow for daring to treat the Nine with so little respect, and I just keep talking. "You know, I actually think Shatterbird-" Anger spike, spike it harder. "-is kinda the meanest of the Nine-" Anger spike, resonates with her, push it harder. "-and I was curious what your opinion was, just an informal poll sort of thing, care to share, it'll only take a moment.'"

Her face hardens and this whole thing is kind of interesting because on an absolute scale her anger isn't really all that high but since her emotional range is all kinds of warped with no checks and balances she's already starting to lose interest in me and get fixated on Shatterbird. "That bitch-" Anger spike, push it harder. Burnscar's hands clench, her gaze locks on something in the distance, and suddenly she's stepping right into a nearby fire and WOOSH is gone. Yep, I'm tracking her just fine, trail of teleports right to Shatterbird's current location. Looking for myself... I can't see anything obvious myself, but maybe the light glinted off of Shatterbird just so?

Hahahaha wow what a rush that was surprisingly easy and oh hey my hands are shaking and maybe I was actually not holding up nearly as well as I thought I was.

... now hopefully she saves Taylor, because, uh, I've been a wee bit worried by what I've been overhearing with my power for a while now...

I make a point of paying no mind to the people all about who are mostly just sort of staring at me and I can totally tell from their emotions they're probably thinking something in the vein of 'What the FUCK' and that's fine. It's not like I have a proper civilian identity anyway. No biggie! Plus, I haven't actually done anything parahuman-y in front of them, just talked to a member of the Nine like it ain't no thing.

... Wait, they'll probably take that as evidence, won't they?
Oh well, no big deal. Might need to get Taylor to handle more of our shopping in the future...

And with that I'm back to the motorcycle and get going off in Taylor's direction. Which is also Shatterbird and Burnscar's direction. They're fighting. Shatterbird is all outraged but darkly pleased, I think she was wanting an *excuse* to do something to Burnscar, and Burnscar has a weird flat enjoyment *too* mixed in with the not-actually-that-strong anger that's driven her so impulsively. Interesting. Really curious how Taylor will handle her if the whole 'steal a Nine member' thing pans out. And... Taylor is kind of panicking a little at this point...

... and here we are!

"*What the fuck, Cherie,*" Taylor says oh-so-calmly (It's called sarcasm, look it up) once she breaks free from the chaos and reaches me and I open my eyes so she's not the squid anymore.

Okay, remember to not call her Mimi. Yet. "Burnscar is iiiiiinteresting, boss. I can still generate feelings in her, temporarily, enough to influence her direction, and oh man she gets more impulsive the more fire there is in the area." I mean it's really more accurate to say she doesn't have checks and balances and whatnot but I'd have trouble explaining all this to a normal person and frankly I'm not sure Taylor is physically capable of getting what I'm talking about here except in the most general of terms. Taylor's all impatient for the full story, though, not asking questions and just pushing me to keep talking. "So I managed to talk to her, because she's quite the talker-" Aaaand Taylor spikes anger and outrage and a bit of protective concern which is kinda awesome except I think she's seriously considering stabbing me quick damage control! "-oh come on don't be like that I totally knew what I was doing. So anyway! I got to talking and it turns out her relationship with the Nine is not so good but Shatterbird in *particular* apparently grates on her for whatever reason mass-murdering psychopaths get mad about when they're roomies and so I just... made her mad every time Shatterbird's name got mentioned." I mean, sorta, I only did it once when it was her name but close enough we probably shouldn't linger here too long, right? "And then she had this idea aaaall by herself that she'd go and kill Shatterbird." Not that she *told* me or anything, but she's pretty clearly *trying* so it's not a fucking *guess*. "Two birds with one stone!"

Taylor gives me one of her fish-eyed dead stares that she does when she hates me with every fiber of her being but considers the sin too unimportant to actually berate and/or threaten me over.

I blatantly roll my eyes at her. "You're just jealous of my kickin' rad skills." I'm not even joking there's actually a bit of jealousy in there. For some reason. Not sure what, honestly. "Oh, and I totally killed the gornhobo. I mean, I had to quit with being flirty because I reminded him of a wife or daughter or something of the sort-" Good god man she has a name don't just call her 'her' like her her-ness is the only thing that matters! I *still* don't know if it was a daughter or wife or grandma or what! "-but then it was just a matter of making him feel even more sad and then going in, listening
to him cry about blah blah witch's brew and 'fate of the world' and other crazy hobo nonsense while I made sympathetic noises until he was finally so far gone I could slit his throat without him noticing or, really, caring that much. There was this totally weird flickery effect nearby for a bit, all white and black and stuff, but then I jammed the knife into the base of his skull and that stopped. So yeah he definitely had some kind of power, but I win. No twenty hats of eating for me. What's my prize?” Is it a hug? A hug would totally be nice and help with the temptation to smooch people I shouldn't be smooching.

Taylor pointedly crosses her arms, making it obvious she's not going to give a hug. Dangit. "Cherie, the idea is we'd deal with Hatchet Face using the suit's gun. Neither of us can deal with him on our own."

SPLIT-SECOND DECISION TIME!

Do I

A: Tell Taylor that our shit is broken and I honestly couldn't do what she wanted me to do, possibly giving her a heart attack distraction while we're in the middle of some very dangerous shit or

B: Go with my original plan to pretend this was all totally intentional and there's nothing to worry about because I'm awesome.

B.

Of course it's B.

"No no, boss, you got it all wrong, we've got Burnscar now! I just need a minute to aim her at the guy after Shatterbird is toast -heh- and she'll reduce him to ashes without ever getting into his stupid radius.” Might also get a chance to raise the topic of asking her to join our silly little murder-team, too! But let's not mention that juuust yet I'd like to gauge Taylor's feelings about this first. Oh wait right Crawler is coming this way. Should maybe mention that. "Unless Crawler gets here first, I guess."

"Crawler is coming here? Now?" Oh wow I've not seen Taylor make that expression before. Or felt her panic quite so completely and blindly before. Wait, she didn't want to fight Crawler because she's terrified of him? Huh, that's interesting.
But whatever it's fine he's going slow what with all the capes trying to fight him. "Yeah, I think he noticed Shatterbird and Burnscar are fighting each other and got curious. We got a bit, though, he's not that fast." Though. "Okay admittedly I thought Shatterbird would already be de-" Uh-oh. "Shit."

Fuck, Burnscar is falling out of the sky and if I'm reading through her stupid-ass power correctly she's being distracted by a whole fuckton of pain and Shatterbird is doing that thing she does of being all cruelly delighted that she finished off her latest victim. Ffffuck I got her killed I was looking forward to her being a teammate! Dangit, dammit, fuck, stop fucking reminding me vaguely of Jean-Paul it's fucking different we're not even related and I hadn't actually befriended her or anything shut UP brain!

Fuck, we need to get away before Shatterbird finds us.
Chapter 15: Slaughter

Chapter Summary

This overlaps with Monster 5.4 and 5.5... and goes a bit beyond 5.5.

Chapter 15: Slaughter

"Okay onto the bike let's go!"

Thankfully, Taylor doesn't ask questions or stubbornly insist everything is fine or whatever.

... not so thankfully, it turns out there's not enough people with a clear view on this burning battleground for her to stay not-a-squid while riding behind me. And given what happened when she tried forcing herself into the truck's driver seat, there's no way trying to put her in front is going to end well. So...

"Shit. Okay, um, I guess you can follow behind for the moment."

Okay, need to find a spot to hide from Shatterbird and/or ambush her. With how people have been running all over the place in a panic I kind of have an idea of where we could go even though I've got like an hour maybe of 'mapping' for Chicago but it's really fuzzy and frankly I kinda suspect the Nine have experience with actual tracking and blah so just ducking into an unused warehouse is probably not great for hiding. Eeeerrrr oh wait fucking duh capes! Seek out capes! Ones who civilians are not terrified of so I know they're not a territorial villain who'll cut us as soon as look at us, so we've got more firepower!

Okay not far ahead I'm feeling some kinda safe-ish zone, thinking people are getting medical treatment maybe? Might just be a regular hospital but there's one person people are all paying attention to so hey maybe it's a regular hospital with a cape in it. Whatever, Taylor is following along as I take us to wherever this is. Aaaand then we burst open into crowds of people, swollen with numbers by trying to get away from Shatterbird and Mimi's fights, and so now Taylor is no longer a mincing blender -ha! Double-meaning, I didn't even intend that!- and I have to slow down though uh there's a car on its side too wonder how that happened anyway it's blocking the way so I need to slow down anyway to squeeze the motorcycle through and thankfully Shatterbird is still looping around the fight zone and... is she looking for Mimi? 'cause Mimi has stopped, I mean yeah she's not gone just yet but she's gotta be bleeding out right? Whatever, it's buying us time.
Taylor gets aboard, and I explain that, "Shatterbird killed Burnscar, not sure why that match went that way-" It was a teleporting fire controller against a girl who controls glass! Glass MELTS. Mimi should have owned her sorry ass! "-and now she's hunting for probably you and she is pissed. I thiiink she might be considering a Scream, honestly, which I thought she could only do once-

"She threatened me with more Screams if I didn't toe the line." I'm struck for a moment by the dissonance of Taylor sounding... well, she's all concerned, but she doesn't sound tired. She just had a big fight and nearly died and she's talking like this is a conversation over cereal after just waking up, just over a topic to be concerned about.

Aaaand then the words catch up to me. "-damn. Damn damn damn. Okay, we should get to cover." No wait, Taylor came back from being shot in the head. I'm the merely mortal waif. I should get to cover, I guess." And then we finally get around that goddamn car and past the people trying to stream in or out with only the occasional glance toward either of us. Pretty sure they're looking at Taylor, seeing A Cape, and then seeing me with her and assuming I've gotta be a cape too, and they're wanting none of that shit. Which is convenient since it means I don't have to make them want none of that shit. We don't need interruptions, there's still Nine to kill. Somehow. Frankly I'd be okay with just bailing at this point, I can't detect Mannequin so I'd assume Taylor got to him, and while Mimi being dead isn't exactly what I wanted it's two Nine down. That's a fourth of them! We did good, plenty of people just die when they try to get some of the Nine. And- hey cool. "Oh nice Batmobile. But gold. I love it." Seriously, it's a golden Batmobile but like with... five-pointed stars instead of a bat theme.

And then after a second Taylor gets all upset? "We need to go, this is a hospital."

No shit! It's a hospital with a cape, which is more firepower, which- fuckit. Fine. Whatever. Pretty sure we can get to another cape before Shatterbird finds our trail. "Okay fine Boss."

And then there's -well, there's been this one signature I wasn't paying a lot of attention to, which would be like 75% in one spot and 25% in another only to swap the spots occasionally, and there's a split-second of them being 25% behind Taylor followed by them being 75% behind Taylor, and they're hostile. What the fuck, come on! I can't turn fast enough, wow that is a crappy mask oh wait shit don't let the cycle get off-balance or anything- "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you."

WE ARE HELPING

Actually, let's just say that. And shave off some of her suspicion as I say it. Jerk. "Hey come on,
she's fighting the Nine."

"Sure looks like a fanboy." Okay like I get that I'm the one who actually has her chest pressed up against my back but even with her costume Taylor doesn't draw a particularly masculine figure. Too willowy. And, you know, the hair. Yes it's mostly kind of hidden under the bicycle helmet and all, but dudes that aren't part of the Vasil family tend to not go with the wild mane of hair you can see trying to push itself out from under the confines of a helmet. Though admittedly it's ALL FUCKING BLACK...

Now if only I knew whether Taylor's own outrage and irritation is over that detail too or if she's just laser-focused on The Mission and all. "I'm not here to join the Nine. I'm here to kill the Nine. Most of them, I mean." Awww. Laser-focused on the mission it is. No sense of femininity unless I force it onto her! Jeez.

Maybe the fanboy remark was kind of justified...

But time for solidarity! And continuing to edge off that suspicion. Jeez, this girl is almost as bad as Taylor. Why? "Boss totes means it, you know."

"Very convincing." Ah, sarcasm. The breakfast of champions. Or something. This is really annoying.

And now Taylor is just So Done With This Shit. So okay I'm not sure how we're going to spin the resulting body as self-defense or- "Look, if Ch- Pride wanted to, she could make you trust us and back off without you even realizing it. Can you just accept we're not the bad guys here?"

... 

I do my best to avoid my grin turning rictus and wiggle a hand at the girl. Yeah. Like not only is that hypothetical not even slightly hypothetical hahaha oh god hopefully she doesn't notice, but wasn't Taylor all on my case before about civilian identities and capes and out of costume not being connected to in-costume and so on? Why is she just straight-up telling this girl that the plain-clothes girl in front of her is a parahuman! I mean I don't really care that much myself (And kinda already totally fucked that earlier with Mimi) but Taylor come on pick a stance and stick to it!

Fine, whatever. Not like I'm not used to double-standards anyway.
Fortunately, whoever this girl is she's way less massively paranoid than Taylor. The knife goes into a pocket, she says, "Good enough, I guess," and then she goes 75% elsewhere and then the 25% lingering behind pops off to another elsewhere, and now we're alone. You know, other than the makeshift hospital of screaming and crying and all the people staring at us -mostly Taylor, pretty sure- but close enough to alone.

"Any sign of the Siberian? She anywhere near us?" Oh god dammit Taylor do you have to do a breathy whisper in my ear while clearly feeling NOT ONE IOTA OF INTEREST.

HOW ARE YOU ABLE TO HANDLE CLOTHING YOURSELF AND OTHER BASIC ESSENTIALS YOU STUPID-

It's fine, it's fine, it's- wait. "Huh. I... haven't heard anything suggesting she's running around at all. At any point. Weird." Admittedly I'm not used to doing a psych profile on people I can't directly sense, but I just have difficulty imagining old Sibbie hanging back and not doing anything while her lovely murderfriends are up to their thing-

Wait.

Fuck, we never tested lust. And I got false positives on guilt! Maybe I'm getting false negatives on lust! Maybe Taylor is totally into me, right now, because she's just recently killed someone and murder=intimacy, and my power is just lying to me!

I-

"Shit." Shut up nameless civilian I'm having DEEP THOUGHTS HERE- "Everybody take cover!"

Uh-oh-

Aaaaaand now Taylor is throwing herself at me in the most literal way possible wait no Cherie get your mind out of the gutter for a second she's trying to meatshield for me that's- that's practical and intelligent and yet I still find it more sweet than anything else, it's not like she had to stop and think about it and hold up I should close my eyes so she can be the monster so it's even better protection and also so she doesn't have fucking shrapnel go through her skull and give me another heart attack.
And boom! Stuff *explodes*! Taylor feels all surprised and a little awed. I've got no clue why! LET'S TEST OUT LATEST RELATIONSHIP THEORY!

"Amazing, huh?" I quip at her in my most saucy innuendo-laden tone. Which I'm good at. I've gotten *autistic people* to figure me out without having to do any manipulation. It was a neat challenge and then I got bored of it.

Okay, this is the point where Taylor slaps the taste out of my mouth and rages at me and-

...

...

oh god

I mean, she doesn't *engage* me on it, but she also doesn't have that instant white-hot burning rage of 'how dare you hit on me Cherie even though I'm sending signals suggesting interest!'

Okay, fuckit, let's just test ramping up her lust. Slowly, carefully, not so fast she notices-

"Cherie, point me to Shatterbird."

"*What?*" Did she just- wait focus on the conversation! "No! You are not a good match for her, boss! Not with her taking hosta-" Oh wow. She just *abandoned* her hostages, got huffy and frustrated at how long it's taking to chase us I guess, or... maybe she forgot since she got into the fight with Burnscar? So- "You know what? Never mind, she's an idiot, let's go." Naturally, when I turn about to take us in Shatterbird's *current* direction, Taylor distracts me from my HORRIFYING REVELATIONS by getting all doubt-y and shit and I have to *point out the obvious* that she *moved*. God.

The route to Shatterbird is long enough for me to have thinky thoughts about this new information. Jam Taylor with rising Lust, and she reconsiders her escape and evade plan for a 'kill Shatterbird' plan. Murder as intimacy. No blushing or other physical signs she's getting worked up when I was hitting her with lust. Mixed signals, oblivious to the fact she's sending mixed signals, often seems to not notice innuendo that's *kind of obvious*...
I think a lesser girl would be despairing at how any possibility of a non-professional relationship is doomed, but I'm Cherie Fucking Vasil. And also I've cheated and I know that Taylor has occasionally enjoyed my presence and shit, so the social part is still an option, just... trickier than I'd realized. But mostly I'm Cherie Fucking Vasil and I rise to these kinds of challenges!

Oh right here we are Shatterbird is over there. Come on come on madder don't think just follow you're super-pissed yes, madder, madder, almost, yes.

For extra effect I flip off Shatterbird, and pre-emptively shut down Taylor's sure-to-be-coming concerns. "Come on Boss, trust me here!"

And she does, hahahaha holy shit.

Okay, come on, get to the ambush site, juggle getting all these idiots panicking so they flee from my oncoming mad motorcycle skillz (And also a member of the Nine, whatever), it's really nice getting to put all that motorcycle practice to good use honestly, and keep pumping up Shatterbird's anger so she doesn't stop and think, and there it is, the spot that used to be full of people until Jack and Bonesaw passed through while I was approaching Taylor, the spot where people were flailing in a blind panic and bouncing off walls and so on and yes there it is it's... a very poorly-lit art gallery, apparently? Okay, stop inside (Oops, it's not poorly-lit, people were just that freaked by Jack and Bonesaw coming after them), get to cover, tell Taylor, "You do your thing while I do mine!"

The door slams shut behind me and I bounce around inside a tiny space for a few moments until I realize I'm in some kind of closet.

... heh, irony.

Fortunately, my gut feeling was right: Shatterbird's glass helmet means when she shows up Taylor stays the deadliest squid this side of the Mariana Trench, and since I'm on the case she's shortly too pissed to remember to back off and find better ground. Or, you know, disassemble her helmet. Ha!

... why is she not already dead? What, is she made of glass or something?
Waiting.

Waaaaaiting.

Good god, woman, just die already!

She doesn't seem to be distracted by pain, either. Seriously, is she secretly a Case 53 who's more convincingly normal than most? Maybe she didn't fail to disassemble her helmet due to stupidity, maybe her glass eyes just don't count. We already know security cameras and shit don't revert Taylor, even if someone is right on the other side looking through-

Finally!

I burst out of the closet and flip off Shatterbird's mauled, strangely metallic corpse, and if this were a story I was writing that would totally be a metaphor! A really transparent one. Transparent as glass, you might say! Dohohoho okay enough of that.

"You made her too mad to think, right?" Got it in one, Boss! "Good plan. I... I fucked that up, and you salvaged it. Good job, Cherie."

So okay, under murder-as-intimacy theory, which base is this equivalent to? Wait never mind Taylor is reacting badly to something time for a distraction! "So Jack next, right? We're not far away, and he finally separated from Bonesaw like fifteen minutes ago."

Distraction successful!

I give Taylor a rundown on what's what as we close in on Jack (I gloss over a brief interaction he has with the 75%/25% girl; not important. Though the 25% sticks around...), and when I get to the part about him hiding from capes, she says-
"Huh. Gives me some idea of how so pathetic a man has lasted so long all these years. You'd basically need a fairly impressive sensory power to chase him down as easily as we are."

Interesting that she thinks of the undisputed leader of the Nine as pathetic. More focused on powers than skills- oh. No wonder trying to impress her is so difficult! She's too distracted by my massive, insert-obvious-innuendo-here powers that my accomplishments as a person don't rate!

Wow, Taylor, way to objectify with the best of them.

I leave my own response at, "Like me," in part hoping Taylor will maybe remember to be a bit more awed and appreciative if I remind her how awesome my powers are.

She doesn't say anything, but I think it kinda worked!

Possibly in part having to do with how I'm bustling off to clear dozens of people from the upcoming bloodbath, what with that being an immediately helpful trick of multitasking and all.

Anyway, blah blah blah, evacuating a bunch of people, keeping an ear on all the Nine I know the positions of, also watching out for probable and certain capes -there's a whole kerfuffle around Crawler involving at least a dozen of them- 'cause they might attack Taylor on sight who knows, and listening in on Taylor's interaction with Jack.

She failed to sneak up on him, sounds like. Odd thing is I have the impression he was waiting for her for several seconds before she noticed anything wrong. Feels like I'm missing something important. Jack's faking confidence, he's not precisely panicked but he's taking this way more seriously than anything else I've caught throughout him being in my radius. Taylor is... is she talking to him? That's not the Taylor I know! Hmm, though maybe it's a distraction? He does seem to have noticed her coming somehow. Okay, Jack is... huh. I'm not sure how to read what he just did. It pissed Taylor off something fierce. Come to think, 25% girl is still there, why aren't either of them reacting to her? Hmm. Should I try to do anything to her? Still not sure what Jack is doing, there's not a lot of emotion attached to it. Some amusement, some... caution or something? He's not afraid, but he's not confident. This is like a shaky Plan A for him and he's expecting to have to fall back on a Plan B he likes even less. Oh! I think he's stalling for time! That's part of why I'm having a hard time reading him, every second that passes is a good thing from his perspective but it's not a winning thing, it's just a staving off losing thing!

... wow, he thinks he can't win against Taylor? Am I really reading that right, that the head of the Nine is treating interacting with Taylor as a no-win situation?
... I feel a sudden and profound sympathy for the man.

Oh well, sucks to be him!

Okay then Taylor loses her patience, Jack jumps up way higher than he really ought to be able to given any idiot can tell you his only power is making things cut at a distance, I honestly don't quite follow the action of the next couple of seconds and... hm. Jack's pinned, I think. Taylor's calm, methodical, unworried. Jack isn't worried either, but he's pretty clearly unhappy. Odd. Is he... does he have some tinkertech escape hatch, maybe?

Aaaand Taylor starts tearing into him. No, he's not got an escape. Still weirdly calm. Unhappy, but calm. Why? I start making my way over, closing my eyes once I'm about to turn the corner to them, trying to puzzle this out and -oh! He just stopped doing the constantly-fighting-through-the-pain thing! Oh, duh, Bonesaw. That's what was up with Shatterbird! She must've been modified by Bonesaw, turned off her pain receptors or never had them up in the first place. So... if Jack has been modified by Bonesaw and is weirdly calm about having his vital organs torn apart -those are some ew noises- then...

"Dude's turned off his pain receptors, I think. He's weirdly calm about this, so he can still come back from what you've done, I'm guessing. Probably Bonesaw can fix him."

... and Jack's emotions twinge in a way that tells me he heard that and wishes a thousand sufferings on me. But is still trying to not give away the game. Then I start hearing the squeal of tortured steel. Jeez, what did Bonesaw do with Jack? Is he really filled with steel? Really? And jeez, he's still not panicking. Mad, pretty sure at me, yeah, but not panicking. How thorough is this shit?

"Now he's panicking proper. He still thinks he can be rescued, I suspect, but he's no longer thinking you're failing to actually kill him."

It takes ANOTHER FIVE FUCKING MINUTES for him to actually die!

... huh. I wonder if this has anything to do with Mimi's signal still going. She's not moved, she's just shades of mad, surprisingly nuanced and varied for just 'angry', so maybe Bonesaw did shit to her and she's not actually going to die unless more serious stuff is done to her? That feels a little too
optimistic for me, but hey, it's a possibility.

Meanwhile, back in the world where I'm talking to Taylor- "Aaaand there he goes." -I make sure she knows what's what.

Taylor gets all weirdly navel-gazing contemplative, and I roll my eyes under my eyelids. Dude's dead, awesome! We'll throw a party, I throw the best parties aside that little detail Taylor would probably go apocalyptic if she saw the kinda parties I throw, point is she should be celebrating!... wait, my current psychological theory for her suggests this makes perfect sense. I think normal people would be grossed out by my theory, but I've seen worse.

Anyway, Taylor and I start getting to talki-

"Ya know, Tidal is probably a better choice for containing a plague, or-" 25% girl is suddenly 75% girl talking with no warning!

"How do you keep doing that and why?!!" I hate her power so much! I'd actually almost forgotten her, 25% version of her is so minor I have to fight to not interpret it as a fucking rat. And she's enjoying it! Oh, she's not letting Taylor see it, she's got a nice mask, but she loved hearing me freak out and was disappointed when Taylor took it in stride. She's not fucking oblivious like Taylor is, this is the highlight of her day.

Taylor and GODDAMMIT girl have a conversation I basically ignore because seriously if my hate was a laser the girl would be dead. Dead! Never have I wanted someone more dead -except Daddy, but he barely counts- than I have in this moment!

BECAUSE SHE'S ALSO FUCKING IMMUNE TO ME BEAMING EMOTIONS AT HER, WHY.

So no training her into stopping this shit on us, no wrapping her around my finger ever, got a goddamn teleporting asshole who shrugs off my powers and the swap happens so subtly that even though I can detect both versions of her she still is able to catch me off guard!

Eventually the asshole vanishes on us -not before giving me a scare one last time for its own sake, the bitch- and it's just me and Taylor and 25% of a girl who is apparently invisible but still watching us. She's reacting to what we say and do, she's still here, how the fuck do I let on to Taylor that we're not really fully alone? Aaaah and Taylor is asking questions and I have to answer them and, uh, hey, the Nine are... coming to this mall, looks like. That would be alarming, but since
Taylor promptly decides she wants to fight these people *anyway* it's actually convenient!

"So hey I already let Black Bishop know. You can thank me later."

YeeeeeAAArGGHHHH!!!

And my fucking punch misses her because she does the swap. And she's smirking at me since my fist went right through her and did not a goddamn thing.

So. Much. Hate.

I'm seriously trying to plot out how to *throttle her*, when Taylor says the dumbest dumb that ever dumbed. "Cherie, you don't have to stay if you don't want to. It's entirely possible the Siber-"

"Fuck no Boss I'm staying here with you." Not putting up with- wait. She just felt a warm fuzzy!

"Okay."

SHE FELT MORE WARM FUZZIES.

Since we're waiting anyway, I draw Taylor into some conversation. She's reluctant, but she eventually caves, from which I learn that ULTRABITCH is actually named 'Haunt'. And learn a bunch of irrelevant trivia she apparently already told me, like that Chicago 'led the charge on gender equality in gangs'. Uuuuuh, go Chicago?

Then I get bored, Jack Slash's corpse catches my eye, a thought crosses my mind, and with an impish grin I ask... "So I don't suppose Haunt can get us a working camera so we can get sweet pictures of us posing in front of Jack's corpse? Man, first time I've wished I was male." Hah! Haunt actually likes the sound of that!... though I'm pretty sure she's not moving to do anything with the thought. Jerk.

Taylor is blue-screening at me. "What?"
Okay, whatever, it sets up for a punchline. "So I could piss on his corpse while we took the photo." That's me, Tasteful Cherie Vasil. I say and do things with class. Sometimes. When I feel like it.

Taylor is, of course, disgusted. "Then I'm glad you're not male."

Opportunity strikes! Saucy Grin, go! "Ooooh are you now?"

... Taylor doesn't get it. Do I really need to spell things out vis-a-vis your preferences girl?... oh right, current psychological model suggests YES.

Actually, there's a thought. I didn't think much of it at the time, but the way Shatterbird and Taylor were playing off each other was... odd. "On a related note, what was up with you and Shatterbird there? She was all flattered and offended and it was really confusing listening in 'cause like I was expecting her to be gleefully attacking and reveling in your pain and I just have no idea what to make of that." If I didn't know any better, I'd think Taylor was hitting on Shatterbird and Shatterbird appreciated the implied compliment but hated that it was Taylor making a move on her. My working theory is that Shatterbird was flattered by Taylor doing something particularly impressive/risky/whatever on the basis of feeling like Taylor was taking her seriously but offended 'cause it... I dunno... lacked class? I mean, it's not terribly important, but we're killing time anyway, and hey maybe Taylor will enjoy getting to brag and so we'll grow closer or something!

Taylor stares at me like she just realized God exists and hates her, personally. So, no. The accompanying orchestra of despair is actually kind of hilarious given how she's been so difficult to get anything resembling this kind of response over. What, did she kill a puppy and get horrified at not feeling bad about it? Now I really wanna know. "Dish! It's gotta be interesting if you're reacting like this!" Taylor proceeds to do her best to stare resolutely at a point on the wall just behind me and pretend she can't hear me. What are you, five? "Oh come oooon it's not like we're doing anything anyway." Okay admittedly I'm not really acting like a bastion of maturity here, but whatever. Seriously, what's got her wanting a hole to open up beneath her and swallow her?

Taylor proceeds to try to distract me from the question by asking if there's help nearby, but before I can get started-

"Y-you actually killed him!"

-another fucking person appears out of nowhere. Literally the only good part to this is that Haunt is also startled, which isn't much recompense for her being ULTRABITCH. And doesn't make me feel particularly better at how many people are beating my power today.
"Who are you?" I ask of this nerdlord. Clearly a tinker, gear's decaying right now, I guess the netting was some kind of invisibility effect that even blocked my power from sensing him what the fuck tinkers are BULLSHIT. I'll admit I didn't pay a lot of attention when Taylor was babbling about the booming cape population of Chicago, but this rings no bells at all.

Nerdlord gets all apologetic. "Oh. I'm sorry, I just- Jack Slash is dead. It's- manners, right. I... well, Lou says I'm supposed to introduce myself as Fab?" Oh hell no, you are not fabulous. I don't believe it for a second! You are wearing orange goggles! And overalls! Your boss is shit! "And you girls would be?..."

I glare at him non-plussed. I didn't want your fucking name, I wanted your power. You're a cape! You should already know this! Nobody gives a fuck about your name, it's all about your power!... at least until you've done something sufficiently impressive and not directly based on your power to justify respect for you as a person.

And yes I realize I was just complaining about Taylor objectifying me via my power but we know each other!

"Monster," Taylor proceeds to obligingly provide. I get the impression she's too confused to really be all that offended.

Okay, fine, I'll play along. Partially. "I'm just the boss's anonymous assistant." If you're not going to give me your goddamn powers I'm not even sharing my name, jerk!

Anyway, blah blah blah we talk to this jerk, he wants help finding his boss, we eventually get rid of his wimpy crybaby butt, then Taylor goes back to trying to get me to find helpful capes but now we are out of time, Bonesaw and company are nearly here. So unless Haunt is going to get off her sorry butt and bring somebody to us... and she doesn't even though I know her 25% self is staring right at us, right now. Jerk. Don't think I won't get my revenge! I'll... figure out something...

Aaaanyway. Re-focusing on Taylor! "Alright, 'kay. So what's the plan for dealing with Bonesaw, beyond hoping Black Bishop makes everything better?" 'cause she won't. Pretty damn sure.

"Well, first I was going to try to talk to her. She is a young, impressionable girl." I struggle to not smirk at that. "Maybe Shatterbird was acting as a mother fig-" And that's where my self-control slips. Yeah, Shatterbird. As a mommy. The mental images are so ludicrous I just can't help myself, laughing so hard I eventually realize I've got tears running down my eyes!... and ruining some of
my makeup. Which was admittedly kind of inevitable somewhere in all this, I'd be surprised if none of it has come off already just from sweat and dust and blah, but I'm still reflexively annoyed and have to fight down the urge to stop the tears. I'm not going to be re-applying them anytime soon anyway.

Eventually I'm able to look at Taylor with just some chuckling, and Taylor pretends like nothing happened even though she was totes irritated with me. "Point being, Bonesaw might be resolvable by being kind." Pfiff- "It would deal with the whole thing of her using plagues as a deterrent, and honestly if we can turn her to good use that would be pretty impressive." Oh. Oh. That's... actually a pretty good point. Don't try to cheat past her boobytraps, make her not want to use them. That's... that's downright Cherie thinking right there. What the hell, Taylor. I've gotten so used to you stabbing your problems even when it makes things worse! "I... sort of figured we'd turn her over to the Protectorate and they'd sort her out, but I'm not sure how they handle people with Kill Orders who turn themselves in."

Oh, the memories. "They kill them and say they couldn't risk the possibility of it being a trap."

"Oh." Taylor has a moment of just taking me at my word and then gets weirded out. "How do you know that?" She says in the tone of someone who knows their friend quite well and is convinced they would never be interested in the subject she just learned they know something about.

Which. Yeah, okay. fair. "Daddy wanted to know. He was wondering if he could turn himself in to get close to somebody like Narwhal, and was reeeal disappointed when Guillaume dug up that piece of info. Settled for a non-parahuman bimbo." I think that was the porn star?

Taylor has a whole thing of regret and agitation and then goes back to trying to pretend whatever just happened didn't. With a big put-upon sigh. "Okay, I guess... if that works we'll be watching over Bonesaw ourselves." Delivered in the tone of one talking about going to the gallows. Okay. Admittedly, it's Bonesaw, but I'm not sure why she's so het up over this and not... any number of other things to get worked up over.

Though I'm kinda reminded of how reluctant she was to let me aboard, back when I was a willing recruit. "You were refusing to trust me when all I do is emotional manipulation. Bonesaw can easily one-up me in control. And, you know, body horror." And isn't coming here to try to throw herself at you. Wait, is that the issue? Is she more willing to give Bonesaw a chance than she was willing to give me because she expects Bonesaw to be kicking and screaming the whole way? That's... twisted logic, but if I squint at it I certainly think it feels like Taylor logic.

Hmmm.
Though to Taylor's credit, she reacts like a kid with their hand caught in the cookie jar. She's actually not unaware of what she's doing here! Holy shit, progress! "I don't really have a better answer. I might be able to take her in a fight, but if I do, her backup plagues will just go off, and neither of us can do anything about that. It's basically either hope Black Bishop comes through, try to befriend Bonesaw, or give up and flee, hope somebody else handles the problem." Okay, that's all fair- "I don't run away from situations I helped create."

... 

Yes you do! That is exactly what you do! You killed Daddy and then zipped off to let everyone else deal with the consequences! When one of those consequences showed up on your doorstep, you tried to keep it well beyond arm's length! You killed the Dragonslayers, then fucked off with their stuff and didn't really try to get the law updated on the sitch or anything!

I spend like a full minute struggling to come up with the words for how totally wrong Taylor is, and finally give up. It'd probably just start a fucking fight and we're about to get into life-and-death struggles again so let's just put up a united front, god. "Okay fine whatever. So you don't plan on killing her? What's my role, then?"

Taylor gets very, very awkward, aaaaaalllllmost as awkward as when she was trying to dodge the subject of the Shatterbird thing. "I was thinking you could brainwash her."

I take a moment to stare at her, which is made hard by her staring at her feet like they're the most interesting thing in the world. And I listen in on her feelings. She's telling the totally unabridged truth? Wow. Wow, I can't help smiling. Finally, a chance to cut loose without worrying about Taylor breathing down my neck in completely the wrong way! "Oh Boss, you really know how to please a girl." Taylor has no idea what the fuck, and I do not give a FUCK. Freedom! Endorsed freedom to have fun, even if there's some parameters but they're basically what I'd want to do anyway so whatever! Eventually I realize that reveling in the endorphin rush is maaaybe not the thing to do given Bonesaw is on her way and we still don't have a concrete plan. So; "Okay, in that case, what's the angle here? I need to have an idea of your script before we get started."

"Script?" Taylor continues to have no idea what the fuck. And -wait, why is Haunt's 25% gone? When did that happen? God, I hate her.

Anyway, that's okay, I like talking about this! Nobody in the 'fam really got it, except kinda Jean-Paul a little, and anybody outside the 'fam certainly didn't get it assuming I was willing to let them know at all. "Yeah, your script! I gotta know where you're going with this, how you're presenting yourself, what you're angling for Bonesaw to think of you. Are you going to try to impress her,
play up your accomplishments while I'm encouraging her to feel all 'wow!' in response? Are you
going to take a soft touch, offer acceptance and affection while I make her feel lonely and sad up
until she gets a hug out of you? Are you going to appeal to her curiosity, while I ramp that up
subtly? Play to her ego?" Aaaand then Taylor starts getting freaked out and hostile. "Oh
don't ask me to do this and then get all judgmental about how it works." Seriously. It's bad enough
having you freaked out by what I can do through no fault of my own, do you see me getting on
your case for turning into a murdermonster? Do you see me trying to point you at an enemy and
then getting pissed when I'm not happy with the murder- okay bad example there's the Jean-Paul
thing fuck fuck MOVING ON.

And then Taylor catches me completely off-guard. "I can't control how I feel, Cherie. You should
know that better than anyone." That's... like, okay, there's the whole 'you do realize that sounds
an awful lot like a love confession' thing to it, but it's also astounding progress. She's creeped out,
she knows she's creeped out, but she's holding those feelings at arm's length instead of standing by
them and judging me for them. She's trying to be empathic. Actually TRYING! I- it honestly never
occurred to me that such might ever happen. "Honestly, I was just thinking I'd ask her if she was
willing to repent or not and... yeah."

Aaaaand now we're back to derp-Taylor. "Oh my god. Who taught you how to social, was it
friggin' Behemoth?" Taylor is offended, but in that sort of way people get when they agree what
you're saying is true but still don't want to hear it. So... with my new good mood at Taylor
becoming slowly less awful a potential friend and/or romantic partner, I let it slide and move on.
Plus... "We've got like three minutes, we gotta hurry." That. "Seriously boss, that's a terrible
way to operate. Nobody does anything because you make demands, not unless you've got
the force to back it up, and you just told me you're not going to try to kill Bonesaw if she refuses."

And, amazingly, Taylor gets it! I can tell because she gets that horrified contemplative response
people get when they realize They Dun Fucked Up. So I keep going! "You gotta have an angle for
why she should want to join us, a motive." Put like that, I'm wondering how much thought Taylor
has given to her own motives. She's... not really talked about them, and now that I think about it I
have difficulty buying that she's as aware as I am of her weird-ass psychology. Anyway, grin! Grin
like you mean it, Cherie! "Like how we can be a family for her, two mommies with their
daughter." Taylor is legit unimpressed, but still doesn't strike me down for daring to indirectly sort
of hit on her.

Clearly, I need to hit on her right after she's killed someone more often.

Anyway! "Gotta hurry, clock is ticking." Seriously, we are almost out of time.

Annoyingly, instead of getting right to things, Taylor stops, and gets weirdly contemplative, and-
"You'll handle it." Wait, what? "Whatever you think works best, so long as it isn't convincing
Bonesaw we'll be a new Slaughterhouse Nine or otherwise transparently lie to her." Oh yeah, that's
totes a-

...

She's not letting me even think the joke.

Dick.

Fine, whatever, get back to talking we're almost out of time!

"I'll be nearby, to fight if that proves necessary or practical, and to back you up if she doesn't believe you're working with Monster or something of the sort, but this is your show Cherie."

Wait.

Hold up.

So... not only do I get to brainwash the kid with barely any leash at all... but I get to handle initial recruitment, too? No Taylor glaring at me? No readying to stab me on a moment's notice? Just... do the thing, Cherie?

I don't think she's ever shown me anything resembling this level of trust before, bar maybe sharing her trigger, and that was clearly a herculean effort for her whereas this is... almost casual.

Holy shit, what did I miss?

"Cherie, come on. You said we're nearly out of time, where do I stand out of sight that's nearby, given where Bonesaw is coming from?"

Oh. Uh.
I point out a pillar, and try to get my head back into the game in the like 20 seconds before Bonesaw is going to be in sight.

Okay Cherie, you can do this. The Boss trusts you, suddenly, out of nowhere, what the fuck. No no, focus! What's my spiel? Uh, okay, um.

Fuck, I got nothing.

"Uncle Jack, I got him! I'm calling him Tricksy! Oh, and I let Haunt know you were nominating her, but she just laughed. I'm thinking she's some kinda projector-" That's when Bonesaw spots me. She's instantly suspicious, though it doesn't show on her face at all, looking me up and down in a manner that is *kiiinda* jarring coming from someone as youthful-looking as her, though it helps that she's got a couple gloves soaked with blood and a bizarrely adorable little apron also soaked in blood. And with bits of meat sticking to it, ew.

Focus, Cherie! Uh. Words! "Jack ain't here, kid."

Great, fuckin' wonderful Cherie, you are the *master*.

Though for some reason Taylor seems impressed by me anyway. Oh right! *Learned social from friggin' Behemoth!* It's like being complimented by a *fish* for your astounding and downright magical ability to stand on two legs.

And, interestingly, there was a bit of a spike of loathing when Jack's name came up. Hmmm.

"Don't be silly. Of course he's here. Uncle Jack-" There it is again! It's actually *worse* than when I just said 'Jack'. "-never breaks his word." Huh. *Huh.* She actually believes that. That's... actually useful as a starting point. If Jack was arranging certain 'inviolate truths' to control her, and then one of them is *broken* right off the bat, that's a chink in the armor of her worldview. Whatever the fuck her worldview is.

Heh. Okay, little girl, let's *play*. On *my* ground. "You know, you're right, he *is* here, in the strictest of senses." Leading around to the idea without spelling it out. I don't think she'd believe me if I said outright that he's dead, especially after how damn hard he was to finally put down. So instead of saying something she might read as a lie to rattle her, say something that's true, that jives with what she believes, but *makes more sense in retrospect* once she spots the body. Aaaand her stupid dog-robot things are still advancing in the shadows. Awwww, the little girl thinks she can sneak one
past Cherie Vasil. Wrong! "You're not going to ambush me with your toys, Bonesaw. I know exactly where they are and can turn them off anytime I like." 'Turn off', 'sink into an eternal pit of despair and depression so they can barely imagine a reason to keep on living let alone do anything', same thing. They may be partially mechanical, but they're very much feeling creatures. If fucked-up ones.

Interestingly, she seems to believe me right off the bat. Odd. "Oh fine. Meany. Spoil my fun. Where is Uncle Jack-" Yeah, she's still hating him. "-then? Didya talk him into letting you join?"

I don't even try to control the laughter. Yeah, not in this life, kid. "Actually, I'm here to see if you want to move on to greener pastures." This is not exactly my most subtle moment but frankly Bonesaw is coming across sufficiently genuine that I'm not sure real subtlety would work that well on her. If she's got something close to the psychology of a kid her apparent age, a lot of that stuff would go right over her head. And I am so tired of shit going over Taylor's head, and while Bonesaw doesn't turn into a whirlwind of blades and blood anytime you're not looking at her, that doesn't mean her power hasn't affected the way she thinks.

"Uncle Jack would be sad if I left." And that is a straight-up lie on her part. Not only was there the usual spike of loathing for Jack she's still hiding, but she is going through the phrase by rote. An empty statement, devoid of real feeling, delivered for the benefit of the world around her and not because it's an accurate reflection of what's in her skull.

She honestly thinks Jack wouldn't care at all, I think. Or... would kill her for trying? There wasn't any fear there, but frankly if Bonesaw allowed herself to be afraid of Jack she'd probably undergo a nervous breakdown, so... yeah.

"I can tell every time you say his name there's a little surge of loathing and hatred." Yeah, she's fully aware of it, no surprise or disbelief or anything. "No point in pretending with me. Come on, k-" Oop, she's getting pissed off before I've even said the word. Doesn't like being treated like a child? "-Bonesaw. You can move on."

"You don't know me." She actually means that. Not... sure what to make of her feelings beyond that, there. "You don't know him." Hope mixed with horror and despair and desperation and a bunch of other complicated shit. I'm thinking she wants away from Jack, but is convinced it's impossible to escape and that trying would just make things harder on her? So she kinda wants to believe me but doesn't want to really because she's sure she'll be disappointed and her tiny probably-actually-tinkertech heart would break.

You know what, let's start on the manipulating. Amp up that hope. Get her believing me, simplify things so she just comes with. "His insides are now his outsides. Nothing to know, and don't think I didn't notice that bit of hope."
In the most casually happy 10-year-old tone ever, Bonesaw says, "You know, if you don't back off on the Mastering, you're going to activate my berserk mode, and nobody will be happy." I gape at her for a moment. How the fuck. Goddamn -fucking -tinkers! And fuck all the people who are immune to or partially immune to or otherwise circumventing my power! *I am so tired of this shit!* "So you manipulate emotions and can read them... oooh, you must be one of Nikos!"

Yeah yeah, *whatever*. You figured out the obvious. Go you. Let's... draw attention away from the manipulating, and ease off on it. Don't *stop*, not yet, but go *subtler*. Maybe whatever bullshit sensors she's got can only detect Sufficiently Obvious Manipulation? "Yyyeep. Cherie Vasil, here to do things that supposedly aren't fit for your ears but I'm pretty sure you know more things that would make me blanch than the other way around, right?" Ha ha, I am joking, it is funny.

Odd thing is, she *does* find it legit funny. She's not even faking the squeal of excitement, pretty sure. "Oh, I *like* you. Can we keep her, Jack?" She is *still* spiking the loathing. "She's funny and I haven't gotten to play with too many Masters."

Okay I'm *not* Taylor, I know what the hell she *actually* means by 'play' in this context and fuck that you're not getting your scalpels on me! Wait, is she seriously still on that? Come on, I'm standing nearly on top of his cooled corpse! *You should be able to see it even if you don't have bullshit telescopic sight or whatever!" *Okay seriously, the dude's dead. He is like twenty feet to my left, torn apart. I *meant* it when I said his insides were his outsides. Can you stop dancing around the topic?*

Bonesaw hmphs at me. It's... weirdly fake-sounding. "I can think of two capes who could do *that* and actually destroy the brain casing in this city, and the Protectorate knows better than to call in outsiders. You don't have *either* of the two in here. I'd know." Ah. So I was *right*. She's stuck on the idea that Jack is alive because of her enhancements. *Tha*... raises other questions... would Crawler kill her if she abandoned Jack to die, or something? 'cause really I'd expect her to just surgically install a kill-switch on him and take him out, given how much she hates him.

But hey, I know something she doesn't know. It still rhymes with 'murder'. I still can't fucking think of something that rhymes with murder! "Oh, you have me all figur-" And, glory be, *that is the exact moment* there is a shriek of twisting and tearing metal, the gory sounds of violence done unto flesh, as Taylor *murders* one of Bonesaw's stupid pet things. "*ed out, *dontcha?" *Thank you, Taylor. Bonesaw doesn't let on a single thing, but I know*. She's doubting, really doubting, and me feeding that ember of hope in her still hasn't triggered a 'berserk mode' or whatever, so brainwashing is *not* off the table, just... trickier. Slower.

"Mind games are *our* thing!" That is a surprisingly lame comeback. Bonesaw is losing track of her... script, I guess? It's really striking me now that I'm talking to her how much what she does is
actually kinda an act. Not all of it, there's genuineness in there, but it's mixed in with her... living up to expectations, or something?

Let's get pushy. "You're not one of the Nine, Bonesaw. I mean, for one thing, right now they're more like the Four, but more importantly I've been listening in on you for a while now, and you're just not into this the way the others are. Well, okay, Burnscar wasn't really into it either when nothing was on fire, but you know what I mean. But anyway! The point is that-"

Bonesaw starts giggling. Which is surprising, because she's not amused. Like, at all. Nada. Nothing. Could be just my power fucking failing me again, but it's been pretty on-target with Bonesaw so far. It's so jarring I lose my train of thought, and by the time I recall to go looking for it she gets in her own words. "Oh, you just don't understand the pure experience of art." Fake. Lying. Not... entirely. Art provokes a complicated morass of feelings, some of each even are positive... but the rest of it is a script she doesn't believe in. "Uncle Jack says I'm not so, um, crass-"

Yeah let's just cut off this spiel before she gets back to reinforcing Jack's own brainwashing. It's... really blatant brainwashing, if I'm honest. How long has he had this kid, and why is he so shit at manipulating an underage girl? Also interesting is... "I know you're faking that hesitation." 'Crassness' doesn't seem to bother her. Just a word to throw at me. "The innocent little girl routine is just an act." She doesn't like hearing that, though it doesn't show on her face. "One you never drop out of?" There's a... biting bit of nostalgia there. A longing for days long lost, and I'm pretty sure it means she's remembering a time she didn't need to put up such an act. "One you never drop out of, got it in one."

Bonesaw lets out a huff, and- fuck, she's mad! Legit mad, not faking mad! "This isn't fun anymore," And her goddamn things are on the offense how is she controlling them come on!

I'm already scrambling away and trying to call out to Taylor about the situation, and thankfully Taylor is quick to respond and then-

is that a fucking green basketball that just cracked her on the head

yes it just bounced up, hit the ceiling, and vanished on cracking her in the head again

god, why is there a cape who launches deadly bouncing basketballs of doom?
I try to narrow in on where the fuck it came from while scrambling to the nearest -currently dead-escalator because none of Bonesaw's damn contraptions is on the second floor right now and I doubt they can follow me up readily, but there's... no... okay, yes, there's a really faint emotional signal, and it's basically just a nonstop torrent of barely-readable horror and despair. Some kinda... horrible meatpuppet, I guess? Wait, she mentioned something-or-other about a 'Tricksy', was the violent corpse what she was talking about? Hey! I think I kinda remember Taylor mentioning some dude called Trickshot who had a bouncy power!

Wait okay focus, still trying to get some control over the situation. Bonesaw's dog-spider-steel things... jamming them with apathy and shit... causes them to pause for a moment and then get back to working. Uh. Fear? No, similar result. Anger, lust, jealousy, just cycle through everything... well shit. I was bluffing and didn't know it. Messing with their emotions doesn't influence their behavior particularly much. So why the fuck did Bonesaw give them significant feelings? What purpose does that serve? What, do they get to ignore them when in the middle of something important or something?

Fuck, okay, focus on Bonesaw herself. Gotta be careful or she'll supposedly enter a 'berserk mode'. Hmmmm. Do I try to get her liking Taylor? Maybe a bit of awe would be a good start. Yeah, I think I'll sneak just a tiny bit of awe in there, and a little bit of like... respect or admiration or something, I'm just throwing stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks. I can't really hear what they're saying given my distance and the racket of the damn meat robots so I'm not sure it's working, but while Taylor is freaking the fuck out Bonesaw hasn't gone straight for the kill and doesn't seem inclined to...

... oh. Pretty sure she finally noticed Jack's remains. Oh, hey! Taylor is tearing apart the meatbots! That helps. Okay, let's push that ember of hope and whatnot a bit more on Bonesaw, try to edge down her sorrow and blah, carefully trying to get her not to see this as a tragedy but as an opportunity. Well, less tragic and more of an opportunity, I guess. Aaaand I've got line of sight! Bonesaw is... sitting right amid the gore and is crying. Wait, really? 'cause yeah she does read sad and all, but at a level where I'd expect maybe sniffing. Is she... oh my god she's faking! Of course she's faking, she's a biotinker who modifies herself! Those are crocodile tears that... happen to be smoking like acid now that I'm looking closer, yikes. Hahaha holy shit she's not actually stonewalling me as bad as I thought she was! In fact, now that I'm paying closer attention to the details of her soundscape, there's a complicated mess threading itself through things -regrets I work on subtly easing off, fear I work on subtly easing off, pride I end up leaving alone because I have no idea what it's pride in, surprisingly minor anger I actually squelch entirely it's such a tiny ember and she doesn't notice ha ha fuck you I'm Cherie Fucking Vasil, that weird combination I don't really understand I usually only get off of kids who are freaking out because they've lost their parents which after some careful thought I decide to magnify in hopes that it means she'll latch onto a replacement parental figure, jealousy of all things as a loud thrumming I end up leaving alone because my theories could go either way as to whether it's good to exaggerate or bad to do so, and there's a host of other things some of which I've never bothered to come up with names for and I tune all that as well.

The concert of your mind will please me, Bonesaw.
I'm clutching at my bruised chest, gasping for air and half-wondering if I've got injuries to my goddamn ribs while Bonesaw calls out, "Stop messing with my head! Stop making things complicated! Stop making my head hurt!" I didn't hear the goddamn thing coming, I had like a tenth of a second of warning, a brief glimpse of something green hitting the ground in front of me before it slammed right into my chest and that fucking hurts and it vanished, and I a-fucking-gain got no warning from the corpse. I didn't get warning from Bonesaw! How is she even directing the dude and why is it I can't read either of them in relation to it?

Also: seriously. Ow. Struggling for air. Struggling to push past the pain. Can't really hear what Bonesaw is saying, ears roaring, but Taylor doesn't like it. Taylor really doesn't like it. Taylor is-she's panicking. Bonesaw's own panic is leveling off, something about what she's doing has the comfort of a familiar routine to her and fuck that I'm edging off her comfort and making her feel bad for whatever the fuck she's doing to Taylor -keep it subtle, Cherie, keep it subtle- you're not going back to your Little Miss Nine routine girl, it won't cleanly make you feel better, I'm ruining that life for you. Hell, let's add a stab of guilt when Taylor has a particularly strong freak-out-

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Destination.

Agreement.

Impact.

Lossaimlessmissinglosslossloss-
aaaand now I'm on my side, still clutching at the stabbing pain in my chest and I don't remember how I got here. Struggling slightly less badly for breath, though.

"-d-darn it I didn't have the monitors on her!" Huh. That's like the most genuine, unadulterated spike of emotion from Bonesaw I've ever felt. She's genuinely upset about... whatever she's complaining about. What just happened? What have I missed? Did Bonesaw do something to knock me out? Why aren't I already dead or captured already, then?

"You are going to fix this, and we are going to be friends." Taylor says it like 'friends' means 'I'm going to torture you and destroy everything you love'. Her actual emotional profile is a bit flat, though. Wait, wasn't she panicking before... whatever the hell happened? What's going on down there? Why is she suddenly unconcerned? Well, maybe not unconcerned per se, but definitely unafraid. Odd. I really need information.

In any event, I decide I would like to express my support for Taylor's course of action!

"Y-you tell'er boss!"

That come out a lot more slurred than it was in my head.

My hands go for my head. Did I hit my head during the bit I don't remember? Ow, yes, there's... a tender spot. I doubt it's a real concussion, but I think I hit my head on the railing. Or maybe this is a side effect of whatever the hell led to me waking up on my side, unable to remember how I got there? 'cause that sure sounds like the kind of situation in which brain badness has happened, and from what I recall those kinds of problems don't tend to go away instantly. Seriously, what happened? I've had some pretty serious issues before, but I can't recall the last time I just blacked out without it involving actual factual drugs, when I've been clean for a few months now, thanks to Taylor.

Oh, and Bonesaw is talking. "You want me to ruin art!" Surprisingly genuine. She actually does care about 'art'. Too bad her definition of 'art' is horrible. "You can't make me do anything! No one ca-"

That is a lie she wants to believe is true. "'cept yer 'Uncle Jack' righ'? 'e can make ya do anythin'."
Bonesaw is... actually having a panic attack again. A real one, pretty closely correlated to the tantrum she's visibly throwing. She knows I'm right, doesn't want to admit I'm right- "Shut up shut up!" -and doesn't have even a crappy deflection or defense. And she resents... not sure if she's resenting me pointing it out or resenting Jack or resenting the universe for this state of existence being true.

I'm still too woozy to follow the details, but Taylor is zippy and her silhouette is weird and hold up I see tentacles even though I'm looking right at her. What happened?

Bonesaw and Taylor are talking, but I only really catch the tail end of Taylor's surprisingly calm threat. "I'm making it happen. Bend, or you will break." As awesomely useful, Taylor means it, totally unyieldingly.

Actually, she sounds like something out of a horror movie. I mean, more so than she usually does. Ah, fuck, I've been too caught up in this shit, Hatchet Face is nearly here- "I'm reaaaaly likin' the horror monster routine ya got goin' on Boss, but Hatchet Face is nearly here."

Why I am slurring like I'm drunk! I don't fucking feel drunk! I don't fucking feel high! The head injury is sensitive, but there isn't even any blood!

Taylor heads off with a little direction from me and kills... the Trickshot dude, I guess... while I work on needling Bonesaw some more emotionally. Subtly, still. And one time, verbally. "Nowher' to 'un. We're nice' an Jack 'nyway'.” Did I bite my tongue? Is that what happened? I take a moment to feel around in my mouth, but my tongue feels fine and then I realize I don't taste blood. Bonesaw tries to run, and this time she doesn't even try to respond to me. I'm still working on edging her emotions to our ends, and I'm pretty sure it's working, and I'm fine with her being a wee bit afraid of Taylor.

Especially since Taylor shows right up and lays down the fucking law while I do my best to fiddle with Bonesaw's emotions so she's more inclined to play along going forward. Complicated by the fact that I can't hear most of their conversation. Having to rely on emotional cues, and I've already long established that this by itself isn't actually that reliable a tool. I need context and shit to use my power effectively. Still, the emotional back and forth between her and Taylor gives me enough of an idea to suspect my guesswork-tweaks are probably helpful. Like, Taylor is trying to get Bonesaw to... behave or whatever, Bonesaw is still trying to resist, it's irritating, the whole shebang. I do manage to drag myself to a standing-ish position, leaning against the railing, and so see Taylor tear up one of Bonesaw's hands after it unfolds like a demented flower into... spiky things, I don't even know.

Also-
"He's here, Boss, and I can't fuckin' dissuade him."

-Hatchet Face is here and while I don't think he's immune to my power he's been shrugging off my attempts to do Pavlovian conditioning for some reason. I'm having trouble forming theories on what's up with him because goddammit I still can't think clearly and I'm distracted by the question of what the hell is going on, why is Taylor able to be half a squid now even while people are looking at her, why am I missing time, what the hell is all this shit?!

Still focusing on Bonesaw. Okay, do I say anything while Taylor is off doing her thing? I kinda feel like this is working, the shaping I'm doing seems like it's getting Bonesaw away from sticking with her current momentum and actually embracing her buried feelings of 'fuck Jack'. Difficult to be entirely certain, especially since I know for a fact that she's partially faking. I have to wonder how much she's modified herself, and how relevant that is. Maybe she's got, I dunno, computer chips sitting inside her brain that are doing thinking my power can't read?

I haven't made up my mind by the time Taylor gets back from utterly fucking up Hatchet Face. No idea what she did, but he's clearly in pain and Very Sad and not moving. Taylor gets back, says something-or-other to Bonesaw, and Bonesaw... "I'm not stupid. I already know I have a Kill Order on me. I ruin Uncle Nilbog's art, and you'll just kill me afterward, if you can." Hmm. I think she's being genuine here. Feeling like maybe I've miscalculated here. Was Jack enough of an... fuck... an anchor, like Taylor for me was for a bit there, that Bonesaw accepting his death and all equates to suicide? Is that what's going on here? She says something else, but not loud enough for me to catch it, and then shouts, "Just kill me already!"

Before I can scramble for how to fix this, Taylor says what turns out to be the perfect thing. "I had considered the possibility that you were an innocent child twisted by those older and wiliest than you, and was inclined to give you a second chance." Which, yeah, we discussed this, so it's not like Bonesaw can catch her out in a lie, 'cause it's not one.

That hits Bonesaw hard. Right in the heart. Taylor is apparently on target, and Bonesaw knows it. But! There's suspicion and hey there's Taylor-style paranoia! Let's round some of that off and throw some words out to boot! "Boss ain' lyin', Bonesaaaaw." WHY ARE YOU SO UNCOOPERATIVE TALKING PART OF MY BRAIN. "Sooo funny. Heh." It takes me a second to realize I actually said that. You know, aloud. With my mouth and vocal chords. I mean it is funny because the idea of Taylor giving one of the worst members of the Nine a second chance is hilarious after stuff like killing Leet accidentally-intentionally, but I clamp my lips shut anyway because oh god what is wrong with me.

And it's a good thing I do, though I can't stop giggling. Taylor's weird new crap just feels weird- it is a good thing I am quiet, I was just thinking to myself, because Bonesaw finally... bends? Snaps?
Gives in? There's a cautious hope, more than anything she let herself feel before -and I prop it up that bit more, of course- and she says whatever she says that's clearly an agreement and. God. I dunno. My head is starting to pound and I'm reconsidering the possibility that I do have a concussion and fucking fuck argh.

... it's probably a really terrible idea to suggest Bonesaw try to fix my brain. I'm finding myself considering it anyway. Partially because oh god the pain, partially because I'm Cherie Fucking Vasil and so all my decisions are awesome and/or terrible, and partially because... it would be a show of trust. That did eventually work on Taylor, kinda. Though Bonesaw really isn't as mistrustful as Taylor is, either. She's being cautious, but it's not like Taylor's constant stabs of paranoia and insistent need to stab things to death just in case they're maybe not completely trustworthy. Bonesaw puts me more in mind of some of the experienced criminals and cops I people-watched, the ones who were reasonably confident they could handle things if they went very badly but were still trying to avoid them going badly and/or minimize the fallout if they did go bad. It has me wondering if Bonesaw has an angle. I don't think she's plotting to betray us or something per se and go back to the Nine. If I had to guess, I'd say she probably expects us to turn out like Jack, different name and faces but basically the same dynamic, only she feels more confident in her ability to cut and run from us.

Which would be very silly of her if so, but it's my guess. I wonder if it's my fault? I've been subtly massaging her feelings this whole time, and while I wasn't specifically trying to prop up her confidence I was trying to undermine the stuff that had her convinced Jack was some inescapable truth and shit. It occurs to me that possibly Jack was tearing down her confidence in general as part of keeping her entrapped, in which case undermining his hooks in her might well be incidentally pushing her into a more confident state of mind. She is one of the scariest members of the Nine. She did approach us with a fairly absolute confidence, it's just she hung a certain amount of it on Jack. Not even the other Nine, just Jack.

Interesting.

Taylor leans down and mutters something to Bonesaw before whoa jumping up toward me and doing a tentacle-thingy to grab me and get me on her back. She doesn't say anything, just trusting me to get what she wants, and I'm happy to oblige! I'm half-expecting her to, like, warn me about hand placement or something, but no, she doesn't say anything. I decide not to risk anything anyway since I don't have a handle on what's going on with Taylor. Her power has changed, I'm wondering if anything else has. Like, I already know her power gutted out her guilt, maybe whatever the hell is going on did something else I haven't figured out yet? Like she was panicking before The Missing Time and then she wasn't, and maybe it's just a natural flow of events having to do with circumstances or maybe she won't give me any warnings before stabbing me over being annoying anymore because of some invisible-to-me-change in her thinking meats.

Taylor leans down to grab Bonesaw, too, and I point out that Bonesaw has a fairly distinctive look, but then Bonesaw shrugs and her hair turns fucking brown before my eyes.
I gawp at her for a moment, and then have to resist the urge to slap myself on the forehead. "N' w'nder n'body could find you!"

Bonesaw gives me this weird, shy little smile, and while her feelings don't fully jive with that -it's an act in part- she is genuinely a bit pleased by the implied compliment. I mean, I think she's taking it as an implied compliment. Mostly I'm feeling like an idiot. People already know she can do some kind of ridiculous plastic surgery, that Jack has been retroactively identified as having wandered through cities without his regular face, and regular hair dye is a thing. Hell, for all I know she looked at chameleons and did some Tinker bullshit to translate that into hair!

... I want hair that can naturally give me a red stripe instead of periodically messing with fucking hair dye.

Taylor takes the exchange in silence, and then goes right back to leaning over to pick up Bonesaw, holding her like an overly-large baby. I notice her arms turn tendril-y inside the clothes, though her gloves outright vanish. Leveraging her monstery strength and shit to make it easier to carry Bonesaw? Or just paranoidly trying to avoid letting Bonesaw have ready access to merely human flesh? Wait, since when can she do that what the hell happened? I'm not reading paranoia off Taylor anymore, but I'm not reading anything conventional off her so that doesn't mean anything. The latter is what the Taylor I know would be doing.

I, meanwhile, grin at Bonesaw -she's held so she's facing backward, and I'm not sure if that was accident or intentional on either of their parts, it would make sense to hide Bonesaw's face but I'm really not sure either thought about it- and ask her, "Wha' would you need to give me hair that could do that."

Taylor doesn't comment to tell me I'm an idiot. She doesn't try to give me a sharp look. She doesn't feel anything in response. She just starts moving, heading out the mall, not even bothering to avoid stepping on bodies initially -she pauses briefly when a tendril-y limb shunks right into someone's leg, looks down at herself, and apparently decides she shouldn't be doing that, leg briefly reverting to something human and clothed and shoed before going back to the tendril-y limb but with no blood in the goo around it.

Bonesaw, meanwhile, lifts her head up to look at me, feeling a bit of surprise, then a stab of suspicion I try to edge off, and then answers the question with chemical names that don't mean anything to me.

I wave a hand at her, or try anyway before remembering I'm clinging for my life to Taylor. "N', I dun mean logistics. I mean what do you want in 'xchange."
Taylor still ignores the conversation, though... *something*... I can't quite put a name to ripples through my power's feedback. Hmmm. Is her being partially squid-y messing with my power's feedback? Would I be able to cleanly identify this if she wasn't partially squid-y right now?

Bonesaw, on the other hand, is even *more* surprised, and I grin at her and ask, "Wha', n'body on the Nine ever *compensated* you?"

She sort of blankly tells me, "We're a family. Family *helps* each other."

*That* gets a fairly strong response out of Taylor, though if I didn't have some vague idea of how she physically reacts in murdermode I'm not sure I'd attribute any significance to how her legs stab a little bit harder into the ground, punching minor holes into the ground. Power feedback indicates anger and shame and shit, which is consistent with what I know of her so I'm pretty sure being partially a squid isn't foiling my power? Though on the other hand she's fully squid now to pick up speed, so I suppose it's possible half-squid gives me weird pings while full squid and no-squid don't? In any event we're nearly outside the indoor portion of the mall, I'm gonna need to start guiding her in a minute, so I just shake my head at Bonesaw and say, "N't *my* family."

Which has a double-meaning I'm not going to bother to explain to either of them. The Vasil family was cutthroat and mostly centered around Doing What Daddy Wants. Me and Taylor is another layer I'm talking about -while Taylor is shittastically bad at consciously playing along, we've been slowly developing a bit of give-and-take. Sometimes it feels like I'm doing most of the giving, and hey maybe that's not surprising given the family I grew up in, *but* Taylor has tried to apologize for shittiness by being nice afterward and I've made it clear to her The Call Of Adventure is *waaaaaay* better a payment. She's doing better than Daddy, who was more likely to punish me when I did exactly what he told me to do and the world just conspired to make it so it didn't work out exactly the way he wanted.

Point being, I'm not just *taking* from Bonesaw.

She just sort of stares at me and fails to respond. I think I'd feel bad for her if I was most people. Instead I'm retracting my low opinion of Jack's ability to manipulate her. He's leveraged good ol' family, uh, *family-ness*, and made it so being a good little girl means letting psycho nutjobs tap you for fuckin' *nothing*, seems like. Has me wondering if he even bothered to *smile* at her as a 'reward', or if he got her to the point where she was reinforcing the brainwashing *herself*.

Though it also occurs to me that if Taylor suspected this was done to Bonesaw... that *miight* explain why she was willing to let me go nuts on Bonesaw. Undo brainwashing with brainwashing. It's kinda like her stopping murders with murders.
And then I'm out of time to think and have to keep a running monologue for Taylor's benefit so we can avoid the various capes, minimize how many civilians see us too, and especially avoid the faster capes. I... think someone is watching us, but they don't seem to be doing anything about it. I slip in commentary about how we should try to hurry when we get to the truck, just in case they're intending to track us in short order. Not sure who it is. They're a flying cape, though, they got involved in the whole Mimi/Shatterbird debacle and were flying theeeeeeen- power

why are you still telling me Mimi is alive and feeling angry feelings

she's not

she's dead

she hasn't moved for like an hour

Fuck, is this something to do with the weirdness with Taylor? Like, Taylor's power changed, and my power changed, and... I dunno... I feel fucking ghosts now?

And then she moves. Following us. That.

That can't be right. She died. Like Jean-Paul. All my fault all over again because I'm shitty and just keep getting people close to me killed, fuck I even got Taylor killed that one time it just didn't stick. Mimi isn't Taylor, though, she just like throws fire and teleports and shit. Right? She... she couldn't be alive, right? She couldn't.... couldn't have been fatally injured and powered through and be fine... right?

She keeps teleporting closer, following our trail, and I abruptly notice Taylor is still stabbing holes into the ground in a manner that would historically have meant She Mad Yo, and my power is telling me still means that so cool I guess? I open my mouth to tell Taylor she's leaving a trail and shouldn't, then close my mouth. Mimi is dead... but if she isn't.. if I'm not imagining her... if she's following our kinda blatant trail... I mean, yeah, it means other people can track us too, but... I want to not fuck up this kinda thing. And we can handle enemies if they chase us.
So I keep quiet.

Amazingly, making it to the truck isn't difficult. Like no I wasn't expecting Crawler to manage to break away from his shindig or anything, but given the thing with Haunt and all I was all keyed up and totally expecting someone to teleport or sneak up or something anyway. Taylor lets me off her back, pauses for a moment while looking at Bonesaw, and eventually shoves her wordlessly into the passenger seat and murmurs something threatening-sounding (Real anger backing it too, power says) Bonesaw takes in stride before hopping into the back of the truck and getting out of her costume under the tarp, apparently trusting me to keep witnesses away.

Which, you know, I'm doing. It's kinda nice how Taylor is just trusting me!

And then Mimi gets close enough I hesitantly turn to face her and she notices something and her anger spikes but I'm already throwing myself at her sobbing and declare, "Ohmygod you're alive I thought I'd gotten you killed! I- I thought I was hallucinating you! Have I mentioned I have a head injury?"

And I think back to Jean-Paul and breathe just a little bit easier.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!