Summary

Taylor Hebert sees all the world as a system, and in light of the damage superhumans have done, it's a system that needs to change. Unfortunately, one teenage Thinker with nearly no combat ability isn't going to be changing anything any time soon--at least, not until the day she meets a woman in a suit. She's come with an offer Taylor won't refuse: all the power she's ever wanted, if she's willing to spend the rest of her life saving the world.

Notes

Welcome! This is a Worm fanfiction. Standard disclaimers requested by John McCrae: I lay no claim to the aspects of the setting, characters and ideas I've borrowed. The original Worm can be read at https://parahumans.wordpress.com/ and the sequel can be read at parahumans.net. I have no intention of ever trying to make money off of this.

This is a reposting/tidying-up of the original posting of this story on the Spacebattles forums. If you read it there, this is largely the same (outside of a few changes to the first arc, which will be posted in that thread). As of the time of original posting, it's up to Arc 7. For those who haven't, this is my attempt at writing a large-scale story centering on Cauldron, the Protectorate, and the PRT. Combat is lower-focus, with perspective focused on the interplay of people and systems. The rest should hopefully be evident as you go.

I write arc by arc, with each "book" of the story consisting of three arcs (with possible future exceptions). When I'm finished writing an arc, I'll post each chapter of the arc every three days, to give me time to finish up incomplete bits, edit, and refine future bits with feedback. Updates to this version may be slightly slower.
I took a deep breath, even as I kept the corner of my eye on the city's Protectorate building. Another, more metaphorical corner kept watch over a web of lights.

'Protectorate.' I'd spent a lot of time thinking about words lately, on little nuances in meaning, and 'Protectorate' was a word I'd spent some time staring at. The immediate association fit: the Protectorate protected. The superheroes had gathered into an organization, and they protected everyone, the people with powers and without them, from the capes who were less scrupulous about their power. But that wasn't what the word 'protectorate' usually meant--it was the second definition in any dictionary, at the very most, even if the organization had become the top entry in any encyclopedia.

No, a 'protectorate' was someone protected, not someone who protects: the protectorate of the Protectorate was the people. So who was the protector of the Protectorate? Formally, in law, a protectorate was also a state subordinate to a larger one. So their name was a declaration of service to the government?

That was probably a good thing, but a part of me chafed at that... All the more when you considered that if I signed up, I wouldn't be joining the Protectorate. I'd be joining their junior branch, the Wards. Ward: 'a person placed into someone else's care.' I wasn't very eager to join a group called 'The Orphans,' not when I was here to escape a different form of state care.

Labels, definitions, names, words: I'd learned all about the power of little distinctions. People had 'rights,' but within certain bounds 'rights' became 'privileges,' and people were a lot more eager to take those away. That went double for students and children.

And then there was Shadow Stalker--Sophia Hess.

Still, if we were talking about rights, I'd been granted ones no one else had. The events of last month made me valuable now. There had to be some way I could convince them to let me be more than just a Ward.

I had no delusions that I was unique. I was certainly no Scion, no golden god of parahuman combat, the first and greatest of us, someone who could save all the world and end all fighting if he didn't spend so much time fishing kittens out of trees. The sudden appearance of powers forty years ago had had its share of problems, and so much of that was the unknown. When any person on the street could control minds or disappear from sight or shoot ten kinds of lasers or turn into a dragon, what could possibly assure safety? The Protectorate and PRT did everything they could, both the capes and the unpowered people who helped them, but they could do more. There were probably reasons they weren't, but that didn't matter.

All that mattered was that right now, people feared the darkness. And I was pretty sure I was one of the few who could really help the heroes fix that.

Which is what made it the fact I wouldn't be much use as a Ward so aggravating. What was the point of patrolling Brockton Bay's streets when I could already tell them about every villain on them? What need did I have to train my power when it was already better than nearly every Thinker I'd ever heard of? And when I wasn't especially strong or skilled or speedy, what was the point of putting me into combat? I couldn't be a WEDGDG Thinker, I'd checked, they didn't have a Wards equivalent, but waiting two and a half years to reach legal adulthood wasn't an option--that was seven to ten Endbringer attacks. How many people might die while things weren't getting better?
But if I was put into some more central location, if they made the most of what I could tell them--I felt the web of light abruptly gain a new vertex. The bearer hadn't entered from the edge of my range, they'd simply appeared at its halfway point.

Observation: Entity-Restricted Object-Oriented Path

The words that came to mind weren't really words, just my mind's attempt to translate the concept--if I stared at an unhelpful label long enough, I could force the words into synonyms. If I played twenty questions with my powers, trying to narrow down what all of the words had in common and what synonyms weren't showing up, then I could generally get something pretty precise... But it took a lot of time, and it gave me an awful headache. Doing that for all of the city's official heroes and Wards (and most of the villains) had taken me ages.

I could do that for this cape later, maybe, if there was a later. But not now.

This wasn't a teleportation power--the other Observers I'd seen were a subset of Thinker. Someone else had teleported her in, then?

'Object-Oriented'--goal-directed. 'Path'--multiple steps. A planner. A long-term precog, then? The restriction was odd, though.

Strong, very strong: this was a high-quality power. No possible situational enhancements, but they probably didn't need it.

They were heading this way.

They'd appeared close enough that I knew they'd teleported, just far enough away for me to get time to look at their power before they arrived, and they'd chosen to appear in a place and time that would let them walk straight towards me without slowing down or stopping.

Whoever it was, they were here for me, and they wanted me to know it.

Right as that thought came to mind, she walked through the door. She actually looked kind of like I hoped I'd look, some day: short black hair somewhere between wavy and curly, slim, attractive even if she was no model. She was wearing a black suit and tie, and her eyes were on me the moment she stepped into view.

"Observer."

"Administrator," she replied, words strangely accented. I'd met Italians, and that accent didn't fit her skin tone or the cast of her features. Had she grown up somewhere else?

The silence stretched on. I was the first to break it.

"I kind of expected you to react to me not reacting to something you couldn't have known."

"The fact I didn't is giving you some idea of my power as a precognitive."

It did. She wasn't categorically bounded in a way I'd missed--coming here and saying that had required her to gain information related to my knowledge, my location, and her best course of action, and it'd done it before she'd been teleported here. A lot of Thinker powers were much narrower or gave much looser answers.

There weren't any mind-readers anywhere near me (I'd checked within all ten blocks of my power),
and most powers didn't extend nearly so far as mine. In light of that and her short description, I could now safely assume she had limited access to omniscience, at least so long as she asked the right questions and didn't run into any blind spots.

"Can I ask what path lead you here?"

"I am a member of an organization with the ability to grant powers."

So they wanted my ability to assess them?

"To give you an example, Triumph of the Protectorate was one of our clients."

"Battery too, right?" A nod. "Are all of those powers dead?" Her eyebrows rose. If I had to guess, she was asking for clarification. She'd probably know in an instant if she asked her own power... Maybe she had, and she was just being polite. "I see a web of lights; if I focus, each light has a description. They light up more if they're currently using powers, but theirs are dimmer even when they do... I think it might be the energy the power has left to use? Not sure." I shook my head. "I keep thinking they're 'dead,' for some reason, but that label isn't on the web itself, so I can't pull twenty questions. 'Inactive'? 'Inert'? I don't know."

I'd spent a lot of hours in this coffee shop working on that one. The Protectorate was just about nine blocks away from here.

"Yes." A beat, a small smile. "Apparently. That does explain a persistent question."

I tilted my head slightly. The woman continued.

"Eidolon is another one of our clients. It seems he's losing the strength in a number of his chosen powers."

Oh. That... was bad. In a lot of ways, really, because if they could give other people powers as strong as the strongest superhero in the world--no. Focus, Taylor.

"If you want me to look at him, I don't mind," I said. "He's, uh... kind of important."

Granted, if she wanted to kidnap me, there wasn't really anything I could do to stop her. If she'd come here on some path to restore his powers, though, I'd be happy to help with that. Learning that the strongest hero, the biggest bulwark between us and the Endbringers, was getting weaker...

"More than that," she said. An answer to both the spoken and unspoken question? "There will be a reckoning in the indeterminate future. Granting powers is part of a larger attempt to avert an impending apocalyptic event that will occur simultaneously in every dimension of Earth."

Oh. Crap.

And I'd thought the Eidolon thing was scary.

Even with my newfound grasp on the English language, there wasn't much else to say to that. Even knowing about her power, I glanced around us, but... No one reacted, of course. She wouldn't have said it if they'd have heard.

"I'd feel a lot better about this if I had some sort of truth-teller here," I said.

"The only one Cauldron knows and trusts is Eidolon."

There was basically no way to know if she was telling the truth. Even if I brought a truth-telling
power here, her power ensured that she could have bribed them a month before we ever met.

But this was pretty much irrelevant, because they had a near-perfect precog and I wasn't one of her blind spots. If they told me to jump, she could Path until I said, 'How high?'

If I focused too much on that, though, life would get really depressing. For now, best to just grin and bear it.

I breathed out. "Um," I said, rallying. "Can I maybe just help with the Eidolon thing first?"

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The woman lead me into an alleyway. Shortly thereafter, I found myself in a simple area, kind of like a bar, warmly lit but mostly shadowed. Eidolon was waiting for us there--I knew that, even if I didn't recognize his face. That green bodysuit and cape were just too distinct... And he pulled off that cape in a way very few other people could.

Still, I was starting to see why Eidolon usually kept the green glow up inside his hood. If I was being honest, he was kind of ugly--it wasn't anything about his expression and he had a surprising lack of scars for his length of service, he just didn't have good genes.

"Hello," he said, shaking my hand, smiling a little awkwardly. Did he not have a power that could let him grow back his hair? That was a little hard to believe... What was I even thinking? I really hoped he couldn't read minds. I'd heard there were no telepaths, but--

Right, he hadn't finished talking. "It's nice to meet you."

He didn't introduce himself, but he didn't really have to.

"Hi, I'm Taylor Hebert." I paused. Was I supposed to use a cape name? Did I HAVE a cape name? "I guess you can call me The Administrator, if I ever get a costume."

We sat down. There was a moment of silence.

I should have brought a drink or something. My throat was already dry.

"Excuse me for a second, I want to look at your power with mine," I said, and he nodded.

Administration: Selection and Distribution

A strong light, but for all that it wasn't dim, it was still 'dead.'

I repeated the label, opening my eyes, and he nodded. "I can do a quick thesaurus check, see what synonyms I get, narrow down exactly what it means," I said, "but... Um. I want to sidetrack for a moment, real quick." He nodded. "Have you ever tried giving someone else one of your powers?"

His eyebrows rose.

"I mean..." I breathed out, then in. "Okay. Do you know who Clockblocker is?"

He frowned. "A Ward, I believe," he said. "I would assume Brockton Bay?" A ghost of a smile. "There was somewhat of a stir when he announced that name of his."

There really had been. I almost admired the courage, even if I questioned the wisdom.

"Yeah. To my power, he's 'Striker: Host-Invariable Variating Absolute Imposition Earth-Referenced"
"Space-Time Prison, Connection-Variation Inevitability," I said. "And that's being economical with the words. So it's touch-based; the length of effect varies, but he can't control it himself; the effect is to lock things into time and space relative to Earth; and his power is stronger when he's in a situation where he's feeling helpless, allowing it to radiate out to objects connected to the thing he's affecting. That's actually pretty short for a power, because the effect is so strong that there's not many limiters on it. Yours is the shortest I've seen, though. And..." I gestured. The woman was still standing to our side.

"Contessa," she said.

"Contessa, thank you, her description is nearly as short: 'Observation: Entity-Restricted Object-Oriented Path.' She's a Thinker, she has blindspots relating to 'entities,' whatever those are, I'm pretty sure 'entity' doesn't mean 'thing' like it usually does because that contradicts 'object'--" Eidolon was frowning, which I did my best to ignore. "--and she has objective-based precognition. That's it. I know I haven't tested it often enough to see if there's limitations to my power that I'm still missing, but I don't think so. Something tells me that if my Coordination has a flaw, it's not in the information it provides me."

"Let's operate on that assumption for now." I glanced back at Contessa. "Can I ask how you're described to your own power?"

I appreciated the assist. If the all-knowing super-Thinker wasn't contradicting me, I was probably doing well.

"'Administration: Coordination, Space-Time-Bounded, Shard-Specified, Control-Locked, Range-Variation Confinement,'" I said. "So I can look at shards--that's what my power calls powers, I guess?--and figure out how to use them, but I'm restricted in how far away I can look and I can't actually use the 'control shards' part of my power. Which, uh, is probably for the best? I really don't want a kill order and I can't turn my power off, I've tried." I shook my head. Rambling. "I've seen several powers that have that sort of multiple-domain name and then lock off part of it, so it's probably common. That might have something to do with second triggers, I don't know."

"I notice your power is another fairly short one," Contessa said.

Was she building up my credibility? Should I act more confident--

She nodded, the motion slight enough that Eidolon may not have noticed. Dealing with even bounded omniscience (what did you call that, exactly?) was kind of cool, at least when we were on the same side.

"We should probably start. Eidolon," I said, looking back to him. "Get a power. Pick one that still has energy in it."

He started a little--I guess he wasn't used to being ordered around by random teenagers. Whatever; Contessa wouldn't have let me if I wasn't supposed to. He frowned a little, eyes flicking to Contessa--maybe he was thinking the same thing?--but he did it.

There was a new light sparkling there, sort of weirdly nested inside his light... It made the label inside difficult to focus on.

"Okay, now get one that doesn't," I said.

He was frowning at me, even as his node on the web glowed a little brighter. I could see the new node-inside-a-node sparkle dimly. "I've tried this."
I'd kind of hoped he hadn't. I mean, of course he would, but...

What exactly could I do that Contessa couldn't? Why was I here, just a few months after getting my power? What did I know?

The only thing I could think of was the web. It was possible she just wasn't asking the right questions, and all I had was perspective. I'd use it, then.

"Pull out a third power. Energy or no energy, it doesn't matter."

I focused on the web, pulling out as much detail as I could manage, and there was a sense I was zooming in--

I'd just received the barest glimpse of the way Eidolon's shifted when Contessa suddenly cleared her throat, startling me out of it. Even that glimpse left me dazed.

I took a deep breath, looking to the side. "Thanks," I said. "Really."

"I can't say I know why I did that," the woman said, a slight smile on her lips, "but you're welcome regardless."

Really? That was interesting... But I'd think about that later.

I looked back towards Eidolon.

"Okay, so. Your powers." I blinked, doing my best to focus. "You aren't actually connected to them most of the time. It's kind of like..." I frowned. "My second sight lets me view a web with points of light on it--the powers. My range is really large, so I usually see anyone with a power coming from a long way away. The exception is teleporters, like when Contessa showed up." He nodded. "Well, every time you pull out a new power, you get a new light on the web inside your bigger light. I was watching when you pulled it out, and you connected to a space with lots and lots of other lights, more than I'd ever seen. If Contessa hadn't distracted me, it probably would've been, um, bad."

I shook my head, just a little. Distracted. Rambling.

"Okay, so, the point is," I said, "scratch what I said earlier, you may not be able to do the 'give people powers' thing. From what I can tell, you can pull powers and move them into your own power. That's all you really do, the shards themselves handle it from there. I don't think the other powers are even yours, exactly, it's just that you're the only one who can reach the place where they are. You know about Glaistig Ua--okay, you're Eidolon, of course you do," I said, and he smiled, one hand moving to cover his mouth. "Figure of speech. Anyway. You know how Glaistig Uaine can do more than just claim the dead? She can pull powers out of living capes, too." He nodded slightly. "You can do the same thing--like, I'm 90% sure on that. It's probably actually a lot easier than the other stuff you do, it's just a really direct usage of your real power. One of your Thinker abilities should show you how."

His eyebrows rose.

"Except, uh, I'm pretty sure that's going to kill the target, just like when she does it. So!" I said, voice much more energetic than I felt. "If we just ignore the whole 'murder' thing, then that's probably the easiest way for you to repower yourself--just pull energy out of their power into yours instead of pulling the power itself. If you want to try moving energy from some of your powers into the other powers, then that's probably a lot harder, but I think you can do it. It's just that that'll take familiarity with how it feels to move power like that, and, well. You know. Murder."
Eidolon frowned, brow crinkling. Contessa cleared her throat.

"Capes will die, regardless of what we do." For one horrible moment I thought that was a verbal shrug, but she smiled reassuringly at me. "Even if we restrict experimentation to those dying capes that we can take away discreetly, I think we'll have plenty of test subjects."

The smile was kind of unsettling when you combined it with the words. I'd say 'at least she was trying,' but with her power, not succeeding wasn't trying.

"Contessa," Eidolon said. For a brief, shining moment, I thought he'd say something like, 'Shouldn't we save them instead?'

"Not in front of Taylor."

Well, that was kind of disillusioning. Obvious, considering they had the portals, and if they had the ability to give powers then they surely had some form of healing, but... Still disappointing.

"She is somewhat of a pessimist," Contessa said. "She has already realized we could be doing a great deal more than we currently are, and also that we are perfectly capable of being less moral on this matter. Therefore, she'll respect us a little more for our honesty, even if she dislikes the truth."

True.

I sighed. "I'm just glad I was able to find something," I admitted. "I mean, I pretty much knew I would, since Contessa's Path thought I'd be useful, but--"

"Eidolon is one of my blind spots."

Wait, what?

"I suspected you could," Contessa said, and her smile looked much more genuine than any of the others I'd seen. "But for once, I didn't know much more than you. There are things even I have to take on faith."

My mouth was open. I shut it.

"Oh."

Eidolon laughed softly, and while I blushed, something about it was warm instead of mocking. "I trust your answer. If it's true, then we all have a great deal less to worry about." He looked almost relaxed, now--human, approachable. "It took me considerably longer to do something Contessa couldn't have, even with all of my power. You should be proud, Taylor."

That really did feel pretty good to hear.

Contessa stepped forward, placing a hand on my shoulder, eyes on Eidolon. "I think this is worthy of a little celebration. Let's go get lunch."

So then I went to grab a meal with what were definitely the two strongest superhumans on the planet, if you ignored the Endbringers.

You know, your normal Saturday.

Incidentally, all-powerful precogs pick great restaurants, and a man with hundreds of powers can make some pretty good disguises. Being a man for a bit was interesting.
As the portal opened, I winced. A new vertex had entered my range, and I really, really regretted my inability to turn my power off. If Eidolon's power had been a light with other, smaller lights inside it, then this was a disco ball, comprised of many smaller pieces. It pulsed, and with every pulse, it shifted between one larger light and a multitude of smaller ones. Every time it did, every time I so much as glanced at the lights, it drove a spike of pain through my skull.

Even being near it hurt. It hurt a lot.

Despite that, I could sort of understand it. The more I looked at it, the more it shifted between one and many, the more it came together... And the more it hurt. At current information to pain ratios, I'd black out long before I actually got there.

I'd set it aside for the moment; it'd be useful to practice my ability to ignore information from my power. If the number of capes at an Endbringer attack added up to anything similar, then I'd be useless there... Plus, it'd be useful to know if Contessa's power would make her step in, should I overestimated my tolerance. That was useful information, and it'd put me closer to figuring out what the 'Entities' mentioned in her power were.

Yes, she'd been perfectly nice so far, but she was still a nigh-omniscient member of a secret organization with purposes that weren't necessarily benevolent. If it turned out that 'Entity' meant 'duck,' then first, that implied some interesting things about Eidolon, and second, you could damn well call me Darkwing.

"Ah, so this is the girl?"

The woman behind the desk had dark skin and long, braided hair. She had clothes about as professional as Contessa's, plus a lab coat. She peered at me over clasped hands, her elbows resting on her desk.

"I heard you've made significant headway on Eidolon's problem. Thank you. You've done the world, and Cauldron, a great service." She stood up. "It's good to meet you, Taylor Hebert. I am Doctor Mother."

"Thanks," I said, doing my best to ignore my growing headache. "And, um. What should I call you, exactly? 'Doctor Mother' is kind of a mouthful."

Judging by the single raised eyebrow, she wasn't used to that kind of question. Judging by the small smile, she found that amusing. "'Doctor' will do."

"Okay, Doctor." I breathed out. "So. I'm guessing you want me to help with the whole 'give people superpowers' thing?"

"At some point, yes." The doctor held her hands behind her back, the gesture not quite right, as if she'd picked it up from someone else. "For now, I would like to ask a question: do I show up on that web of yours?"

I shook my head almost immediately. The weird light was coming from the wrong place; if I overlaid my web with the real world, the light came from the brain, and hers was coming from a pocket. She frowned.

"A shame. We've discovered a region of the brain that differs in those with the potential to trigger as
capes... If any other power would give insight as to how to incite a trigger event, or even to show the value of the resultant power, it would be yours. I had hoped you could sense the dormant agent."

'Any other'--oh. Contessa. Right. She had a blindspot regarding the result of someone getting powers? That seemed like a pretty big weakness in their line of work... How did that relate to 'entities,' exactly?

"Do the powers you give people react strangely with dormant powers?"

"Yes. Additionally, the process still carries with it an element of risk... All the more when we are uncertain as to what power will result. Even if I had no dormant agent, we could not risk it."

'Agent'--a potential power? My power's use of 'Shard,' her use of 'Agent'... 'Agent' implied agency, deliberate action, 'dormant' tended to be used in reference to animals or plants or volcanoes, usage in the case of the former two denoting an eventual return to previous activity--

She reached into a pocket, and I dismissed the thought until later. "Could you look at this, please?"

It was a vial, but that wasn't really what she meant.

"I've actually been trying not to look too hard at that," I said, scratching the back of my head. "Every time I do it hurts. It's just... too many words, too many labels. It's getting clearer and clearer, but it's too much."

"Door, fragiles storage," Contessa said. Doctor Mother lowered the vial into the portal beneath her hand, and then it was gone. I breathed out.

"Thanks." I shook my head. "I think I can probably break that down, but not right now. All of the labels kind of run into each other and blur together, so it's going to take a while and the headache will mess me up. Can you just point me to whatever you made that out of? That'd be easier on me."

She traded a look with Contessa, and the latter turned back towards me.

"I suspect that the source of our formula and the great well of lights you saw Eidolon reach into are one and the same."

"Well, that's out, then..." I frowned. "Okay. So an intermediate step, maybe? After you go mining for whatever that stuff is, but before you mix it? Lots of lights isn't usually a problem--I can sit by Protectorate HQ just fine--it's just when they're clustered really close together and they're all different. Variations on a theme should be fine, I think."

"Door, external hallway to formula storage, end of the hallway outside," Contessa said. She glanced my way. "Your power works through our portals, and this one should place the formulas at the very edge of your range. Move slowly."

As I walked, one eye on the web of lights, I spoke up. "So. If I can ask, what's the usual procedure for mixing the formulas? I mean, I saw like maybe three or four different labels in there? But they were overlapping and mixing really strangely."

Doctor Mother was the one to speak up this time. "Our source exists in multiple dimensions and is largely visually homogeneous. Different regions do map to different concepts and powers, but Contessa cannot predict the form that granted powers will assume. That formula was the result of drawing from a new region." So they hadn't known what it would do, either. "Additionally, we've found a stabilizing factor, one that appears to regulate the Manton Effect."
"That's what lets people affect organic or inorganic, but not both, and either themselves or others, but
not both?" She nodded. "Okay. More of that factor puts more limits and makes the power weaker,
less of it and... What? Pyrokinetics can set themselves on fire too?"

"Among other effects, yes. Unfortunately, that is a rather tame example of the problem."

Right. *That* was worrying.

And then I stopped talking, because the edge of my power had reached the edge of the storage.
Shorter than usual? I guess I hadn't been feeling very helpless.

It was less like a web and something more like a bundle of Christmas lights--many smaller nodes, but
there were enough of them, and they were close enough together, that the result was pretty bright.
Unlike the formula, though, all the hues were much closer together, and that made it easier to look at.

It was a good thing I wore glasses--that gave me a simple mental image, one of unfocusing and
letting it all blur together, that made the commonalities easier to see.

"The samples are grouped by location in the original source, aren't they," I said absently. "At least as
much as you can when projecting slices of material into a 2D space." Doctor Mother nodded. "Okay.
If I sort of unfocus my eyes--not actual eyes, I mean my second sight--then I can sort of group them,
instead of looking at all the labels individually. It's still giving me a bit of a headache, but, well,
nothing too bad. Should I start pointing out where the real boundaries between types are?"

"That can wait. Please take a step back; we want to avoid taxing you overmuch. We are very much
still in the proof-of-concept stage."

I did as the doctor said, even as Contessa strode into the portal. She moved to one particular area,
picking up a container and bringing it to my range.

"That's the stabilizer?" Two nods. "Okay, yeah, that definitely fits the description I'm getting, but..."
My eyes narrowed. "Okay, can you grab one bottle's worth?"

As she did, I stepped back again, looking more closely. It wasn't unlike the earlier formula: there
were lots of little lights, even if I could let them blur out to one larger one.

I breathed out slowly, letting it fade back out to a blue blur. "Okay, I think I know why you're
getting unpredictable behavior," I said, looking up at them. "You know how all of that stabilizes?
Well, I'm seeing my 'Shard-specified' modifier in there, along with 'organic,' 'inorganic,' and some
ones that are kind of grammar-confused but I THINK they map to locks on part of a broader power
set, like how I have 'analysis' but not 'control.' Not all of these are going to apply to every shard, and
that's before you get into individual person-based variations. From what I can tell, if you're doing this
blind, then you're basically just playing mad-libs."

"We know the category of word, but not the specifics, and the results are often absurd," Doctor
Mother said, voice heavy with irony. "True. It seems you have a gift for metaphor, Miss Hebert."

"I've been spending a lot of time on words lately," I said. I pointed at another couple of bottles, this
time outside of the regulatory group, and Contessa obliged me, shifting the portals appropriately.
"Okay, yeah, I think I've got this, I'm getting sufficient detail when I focus. I've got no idea how all
of this adds up, and I have no idea whether we can get enough material here to really control this, but
I think this is definitely possible." I smiled. "I always wanted to be a Tinker."

"We're still considerably constrained by host reactions and the internal adjustments of the agent,"
Doctor Mother cautioned, but she couldn't quite hide her own answering smile. "All the same...
Thank you very much, Miss Hebert. It's been quite some time since I've felt so optimistic." She looked towards Contessa. "I believe we have a pending order for a client?"

"We do."

"Okay," I said, clapping my hands on my cheeks and straightening up. "We've got a little more time until we meet with the Triumvirate, right?" Two nods. "Show me how this works."

---

I made an effort to stand as three figures walked into the room, though one of the shapes waved me down. Eidolon's green, blue and white, black and gray; that had been the blue and white. Legend.

I was really meeting the Triumvirate! I'd have been more delighted if I was in less pain.

"Thinker headache," she said crisply. I'd guessed the dark one was Alexandria, but it was good to have confirmation; I wasn't willing to pay too much attention to my power. "Careless of you, in light of this meeting."

Despite myself, despite who she was, I bristled at her casual judgment and her sheer presumption. I wanted to rip into her, but every retort on the tip of my tongue sounded childish.

"She had a particularly adverse reaction to the last sample set," Contessa said, even as she guided me into the chair again. Her hand gripped my shoulder a moment, something about the little gesture somehow reassuring. "I should have anticipated it, but we pushed her too far without considering her limits." She bowed her head briefly. "I apologize for my carelessness."

The greenish blur of Eidolon stepped forward, placing a hand on my head. A moment later, some of the pain abated a little, and then he winced, shaking out the hand with a grimace. "What did I just do, Taylor? I'm curious as to what your power says about those ones."

"Absorption and displacement, in short," I said automatically, and then I blinked. "Wait, you can turn a superpower headache into other kinds of pain? How does that even...?"

"I don't understand the mechanics behind the vast majority of what I do, even with my agent's rudimentary explanations," Eidolon said, deadpan, stepping back. "I see you can offer no insight on that, at least." He smiled at me--he wasn't hiding his face this time, either. "By the way--" I tilted my head. "--your solution works."

The greenish blur of Eidolon stepped forward, placing a hand on my head. A moment later, some of the pain abated a little, and then he winced, shaking out the hand with a grimace. "What did I just do, Taylor? I'm curious as to what your power says about those ones."

"Absorption and displacement, in short," I said automatically, and then I blinked. "Wait, you can turn a superpower headache into other kinds of pain? How does that even...?"

Then the fact caught up to me, and the smile slid off of my face. He'd killed someone...? He seemed to understand my hesitation, and he was opening his mouth--

"You'll remember that I stepped out, earlier in the afternoon," Contessa said, and I glanced her way. "I located a person who, by sound mind and reasoned thought, wished to die."

"A late-stage victim of a persistent power faced with the loss of their last bit of autonomy," Eidolon said, and one hand clenched into a fist at his side; he didn't seem to notice. "A powerful cape, once... But even we couldn't have saved her, with all the power at our disposal. She thanked me." He breathed out slowly, even as the third figure stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. Eidolon glanced to the side, smiling at him just a little, before turning back to me.

"I'm afraid I'm largely ignorant of what we're discussing," Legend said, releasing Eidolon's shoulder.
as he stepped forward. "By fixing a problem--?" He glanced to Eidolon, who nodded, before turning back to Contessa and me. "We found a way to return Eidolon's full power, but it required someone to die? That's..."

Legend was one of the few heroes who actually wore a skintight costume, blue with white lightning and flame designs, and a mask that covered his eyes and not much else. It wasn't armored, because Legend didn't need it to be. That let me see the signs of discomfort in full, in both the way his weight shifted and his mouth moved.

"Not just anyone," I said, and he looked towards me. I stood up again; the last of my headache had left me. I felt good. "A Cape. Eidolon's real power is to take powers into himself. There's a reservoir for each power that usually seems to recharge itself, but formula capes are hooked up to static sources. It means he can drain the well of another cape to refill his own, at least." I breathed out, grimacing. "Not neat, but it's a first step. I'll see if I can find a better way."

"I see," Legend said, considering me. "You're a Thinker? The product of a particularly useful formula, I assume."

"A natural trigger. She can discern and analyze powers." Doctor Mother folded her arms behind her back. "Contessa's periodic sweeps for relevant Thinker powers turned up a result, and she's shown the ability to understand the components of the formulas by simple inspection. We thought it prudent to bring her more fully into the fold, but I gather that she would prefer not to simply vanish from the wider world."

"If there's really no other way--" I hesitated. No, best not to give them too wide an opening to change my life. "But I don't think that'd be best. I mean, I can identify powers, even if I'm not anywhere near them, and I can break down exactly what they do. Have someone fly me through a city and I can analyze every single cape in it. Get a new Ward and I can tell them exactly what they can do--I'm pretty sure parahuman researchers don't know some of the things I do about the mechanics of this all, and I've only had this power for a month. The formulas give me a headache after a while and that makes me useless, so while I can help a little with those, just sitting here and helping with formulas seems like..."

"...a waste," Eidolon said, speaking as I trailed off. I nodded, and he smiled reassuringly. "Understandable. I'd feel the same if I were in your situation, and as useful as you are, I can't justify sitting on call as your medic." He turned towards Legend, even as Alexandria shook her head.

Her costume wasn't armored either, because that was even more unnecessary: just black with grey, with a tower at the center and a long, flowing cape. She did wear a cape, however, and though she wore a helmet, I could see her eyes--or eye. The Siberian had taken the other one, and she had a scar there to show it, even if there was a prosthetic in its place.

She still didn't look happy to see me here.

"We wouldn't be here if you were proposing to bring her into the Wards," she said, her eyes on Doctor Mother. "It doesn't matter how impressive the Thinker ability, we can't afford to circumvent the rules in public view. If we bring a teenager into the full Protectorate, heads will roll. Her status as a Thinker would make that worse, in many ways."

"We can," Contessa said, all matter-of-fact. "I've already taken the first steps. The Youth Guard is an impediment; we would eventually need to destroy them regardless. The correct steps, taken afterward, will allow us to establish the Administrator as a fixture before any significant obstacles arise."
All eyes turned towards Contessa... Legend in particular had tensed a little. Did he not know...?

"I should clarify, Legend," Contessa said, "I am the Thinker 12. I find the Path to Victory, the most efficient way to achieve any goal I ask for, and only Triggers, Scion, Eidolon, and the Endbringers are outside my insight. Whether we can do this was never in doubt. The only question is whether we will do it, and what we will do afterward."

Legend looked towards the other two, and his tension didn't change. Alexandria had a perfect memory and a sharpened mind; Eidolon was Eidolon. They'd both known, and no one had ever told him? What the hell? What were they even...?

My headache was returning with a vengeance, and the shouting hadn't even started yet.

"This is stupid."

Everyone turned towards me, and only then did I realize I'd spoken out loud. I flushed, but I'd already said it--I owned it, now. Trying to backpedal would make me look weak.

"Legend, I don't know why they didn't tell you about Contessa, but it doesn't matter right now. You probably already know they're not telling you other things, and I don't know what it is or why. Whatever reason they have for not telling you, it's probably stupid compared to all of the problems we already have to deal with. We're not in such good shape that we can fight among ourselves for stupid reasons."

Even Alexandria looked surprised. Eidolon, meanwhile, was hiding another smile. Yeah, yeah--laugh it up, David.

"The important thing is, my power tells me that Contessa is telling the truth about her power, and there's not an ounce of ambiguity to it. Even ignoring that, she's shown me things that make me believe it. So the actual question is, 'should we do this?' You can have your fight after we decide that, when I'm not in the room."

Legend turned towards me, giving me his full attention. I did my best to ignore the voice in the back of my head; for some reason, it wouldn't stop screaming about how stupid I was being. I just needed to keep my eyes on the lights.

"You're a Cape Thinker," he said. I nodded. "Tell me one thing I don't know about my power."

I spoke immediately, trusting my instincts. "It's not meant to be a weapon." He tilted his head; a practiced overacting, something he'd picked up after years in mask and costume. I made a note to check for other people that did that, then remembered that I'd know they were capes anyway. "Your power is for long-term long-distance space flight. Your lasers are just a side product of an energy conversion system that's supposed to sustain you with radiant energy from passing stars. It even puts you into a kind of mental hibernation when you move fast enough." I frowned. "It's... a really weirdly specific power. I mean, you're a Cauldron cape, right? You used a formula? Something's off here..."

Sure, if he was a natural trigger--an astronaut, perhaps, someone who had an accident back before the Simurgh made them ground all the programs--I could see a power so responsive to space in particular, but... Not him. It was too neat, to the point where I wanted to call it a 'space travel module' instead of a 'space travel power' or 'space travel shard'. It just bore too many marks of careful design. I knew that was a common false positive in human thought, but a little nagging voice in the back of my head was telling me that this was important--
"You really are a Thinker," Legend said, a sudden humor in his voice. I blinked, looking up at him, and he laughed. "An obvious answer makes you call your superiors idiots before you even think about it, and when there's an interesting problem in your specialty, you drop everything to focus on it. Tunnel vision. It's a very common Thinker-Tinker flaw." I flushed, starting to apologize, and he waved it aside. "No Cape who's done their time will be too bothered; we all owe our life to some Thinker, Tinker or eccentric. All the same, it's something to be aware of, especially as a member of the Protectorate. You can always be better."

"Legend," Alexandria said. "She's a child. They will not respect her."

"With all due respect," Eidolon said, cutting in, "what point is there in putting her with the Wards? She'll have every hero, villain and rogue in the city profiled in a week--"

"I already did that, actually," I said, and he laughed.

"Right, of course you did. As a Ward, she'll have nothing to do. There's a reason we don't have nearly enough Thinkers." He shook his head. "No, Contessa found her, and Contessa believes she should be in the Protectorate. I trust her judgment."

"And this precognitive of extraordinary power believes putting her in the Protectorate is worth airing out the things you've kept from me," Legend said, voice just this side of cold. "I'm not very happy about these secrets... I am extraordinarily unhappy, even. That she did so regardless says quite a bit about the worth of young Taylor here."

For a second I started—wait, when had I told him my name?—before remembering Eidolon had said it.

Alexandria sighed. "I would feel better if I could not read a certain amount of spite in this decision," she said, single eye fixed on him. Her eyes flicked to Contessa, then back. "But I cannot overrule you on the matter of the Protectorate, nor can we afford public dissent among the Triumvirate."

"I will contact you with instructions soon," Contessa said, stepping forward. She settled a hand on my shoulder. "For now, there is one more matter the two of us must attend to."

---

Contessa knocked at the door as I stood behind her. I took a deep breath.

I hoped my dad wasn't worrying too much. I knew he was—he worried, even if he was awful at actually following through on it—but I could hope, at least.

Well, it was a Sunday. Hopefully that'd minimized it a bit.

She half-turned back, smiling reassuringly at me, and I relaxed a little. I would have felt better about it if Dad hadn't picked just that moment to open the door. I heard him before I saw him, both the creaking door and the way his breath caught in his throat.

I couldn't blame him: in the evening light, in profile, with that smile, her paleness and our curly black hair... I hadn't realized it until then, not consciously, but on the whole, Contessa looked a lot like me. More than that, she looked a lot like my mother--more like me than Dad did.

Then she faced forward again, one hand moving to straighten her tie, and the spell was broken. The features were slightly off, she was a little too short, the suit didn't fit the way Mom had dressed... But the illusion hadn't needed to last more than a moment, and his first impression would linger. It was a
tiny little advantage, a small way of rigging the game that he wouldn't ever suspect she had intended.

That sort of little advantage was something Contessa's power made her very good at setting up.

"Good evening, Mr. Hebert. I apologize for keeping Taylor so late; the time got away from us," she said, expression shifting to a more distant warmth. "I am known as Contessa, and tonight, I am here on behalf of the Protectorate. I'd like to talk to you about your daughter's future."

His eyes widened, moving to me, and I nodded very slightly. He looked back to Contessa.

"Good evening," he said. He took a deep breath. "Please, come inside."

He still seemed a little rattled, and I found myself gritting my teeth. Mom's death was rough, but... It was roughest of all on Dad. I'd always been closer to Mom, and he'd adored her. To see someone who was on our side use that against us...

I focused on the lights, because I had to do that or try to punch her. The gesture gave me a little self-control, but it also meant I was staring directly at her power, that I was reminded of what she could do.

It had to have been intentional. But what message was she trying to send, exactly? She hadn't been trying to slip it under the radar... Her power wouldn't let her fail if she intended to succeed, not without a blindspot interceding. Was there something deeper here I wasn't seeing yet?

I really, really hated having to figure out the near-omniscient precog's game.

As my dad stepped back, Contessa glanced back at me again, nodding very slightly. Her power was directing her to agree with me, somehow? Was that nod a response to my doubt? She nodded very slightly again as we stepped inside.

"I'm sorry to ask," Contessa said, "but this may be a long conversation, and Taylor and I have already done quite a bit of talking. Would you mind preparing drinks?"

"I was just about to say," Dad said, smiling. "I actually have some tea in the house for once, thanks to some friends--or would you prefer coffee or water?"

"Tea sounds excellent. Thank you." She glanced my way. "Would you like some as well, Taylor?"

"Please."

"I'll be a few, then," Dad said. "Why don't you two sit down and get comfortable?"

He left for the kitchen, leaving me with my thoughts. Dad would be rattled by her appearance and by the mention of the Protectorate, would connect the implication I had a superpower to the way my behavior had changed, to the things at school... He might just stare off into space until the water started boiling.

She had just given me time to think.

Had those unprompted nods of hers been agreement with or acknowledgment of my thoughts?

I couldn't doubt that there was some Path she could have taken, some way to assuage my instinctive unease around the all-knowing and all-capable. She was very nearly omnipotent, but I wasn't; she could have convinced me somehow, but she hadn't. She'd let me keep my very human discomfort with her power.
That couldn't be optimal.

I was important: I'd already made headway on Eidolon's problem, and the test with the formula materials had turned out well. Even if I just spent time teleporting between the Protectorate branches, resolving little questions about powers, dealing with new capes and all of the Wards, I'd be very valuable. Ensuring my loyalty was a net gain, and so anything that brought it into question was a bad idea for them.

And yet she'd shown herself to me directly, had let me see and understand her power. I obviously wasn't a blank in her foresight, so there was no reason she couldn't plot around me; if she'd simply handed an employee some script to follow, then she could have made it work. More than that... She was handling this last task herself. If I worried about people manipulating me, then I worried about Dad twice as much. If I had any real weakspots (aside from being a teenage girl with no combat power in a world full of superheroes, anyway), it was my dad, and having her power near him made me nervous--I didn't want him around the Simurgh, either. Contessa seemed a lot friendlier than an Endbringer, but the point still stood.

And yet she was here, handling this.

Why?

She sat on the couch, eyes closed, perfectly still, showing no reaction to anything I thought. She wouldn't be giving me any answers right now.

--or her power wouldn't, anyway. It seemed to be omniscient, with a few set exceptions, but she'd alluded herself to an ignorance of the information it calculated before giving its answers. 'Yes, apparently,' she'd said... She probably hadn't known why she'd nodded like that just now, not unless it was part of a very short Path.

She probably spent a lot of time not knowing why, except in the very broadest sense. Goals and steps, but not explanations... Not that most people were likely to know that. Cauldron was a secret organization, extraordinarily powerful, and they'd already alluded to some shady business. Even if they hadn't, they'd figured out the formulas by trial and error, working blindly, because Doctor Mother said Contessa's power didn't tell her what powers a formula gave. Even if they only experimented on the willing, that meant they had a body count. And if she was their ultimate line of defense, then it was in their best interest to seem as strong as possible.

Few would know about her--even fewer would know she had any weaknesses, because that would limit the paths to victory. And that meant the few who did know she existed had even more to worry about than I did.

And she'd dealt with that for a long, long time. If Cauldron had given Eidolon his powers, and if she had been a founding member, and if she was about as old as she looked, about as old as my mom would have been if she was still alive--

Then considering the Triumvirate's length of service, she'd had her power since she was about my age. She'd lived twice as long with that power as without it.

I took a moment to digest that.

The toll that'd take on relationships alone, to say nothing of living with all of that power, of losing all your own agency to something that strong... You could turn it off, but that'd mean risking death or danger, and you'd lose so much time. You'd find excuses, reasons to keep that power in your own hand, until the day you woke up and found you were utterly helpless without it. It wasn't a matter of
will, because virtually anyone with that power would lose themselves to it. That was just the nature of the beast.

The doubt flickered back then, as I'd expected it to, as it should have. Sympathy, empathy: I couldn't know if Contessa had chosen a path to tie me to Cauldron with something a little stronger than mere expediency. That was something much easier to maintain if they laid their cards on the table early, and I didn't have much in the way of relationships. I might hesitate to lose that bond, even if Cauldron turned out worse than I'd thought, if it meant going back to nothing--and Cauldron could certainly keep me busy enough that I'd lose any other ties. And if there was any Path here, it was to manipulate me for their benefit; I doubted Contessa had set a Path because she really, really wanted a friend. If she did, I was sure she'd have picked someone more interesting.

And yet...

Now that I'd come here, whether I'd done it on my own power or whether I'd been lead, I still felt more sympathy than fear.

"Hey, Contessa," I said, and Contessa opened her eyes. Then she nodded slightly--my dad couldn't hear us, then. "You can resume paths, right?" Another nod. "Then turn your power off for a moment."

She did. Her bright light dimmed in a way I hadn't seen it dim before... But I couldn't be sure it was absolutely off, not when I hadn't seen it that way, not when the base hue of every light was different, and not when I didn't know how many steps ahead she could see. The Path to Victory didn't need to be on for her to be on-script.

I'd still have to trust, at least a little.

"I want to ask: what's your name?"

The girl behind Contessa's mask wasn't very good at schooling her reactions. I saw the little flinch, the way doubt crept into her eyes. She opened her mouth, then said nothing.

In that moment, she seemed almost as awkward as I was... And somehow so very young, even to me.

"That name was from... before," she said, turning away a little. "There's a reason I stopped using it." Her arms had risen, half-crossing, shoulders hunching inward: defensiveness. I could see her light shift a little, as if she was tempted to activate it again--but it stayed dim.

"You don't have to say."

She didn't. Either way, I'd stay.

She took a deep breath, then let it out, squaring her shoulders. She turned back to me, meeting my eyes.

"Fortuna."

Her odd accent was stronger on that word than any other... A lingering trace of the place she'd come from.

"Thank you, Fortuna," I said, smiling at her. "That's all I wanted to know."

Some of the tension eased from her as she nodded. The light brightened once more, and in an instant,
all her cool confidence returned, as if the woman of a moment ago had been a product of my imagination.

Maybe it had been, but I couldn't keep doubting myself forever.

By the time Dad returned, we'd settled into a comfortable silence. I closed my eyes, watching the lights, just as I'd done countless evenings since that day. Contessa rested beside me on the couch, humming something soft and musical, pleasant but somehow strange, as if it was a song produced by an instrument I'd never heard. Whatever it was, it was relaxing.

"All right there?" Dad stepped back into the living room, smiling at me, even as he carried a tray. "You look pretty worn out."

I yawned. "Yeah," I said. "I was a bit too eager to show off. I'm a Thinker," I said, even as he started to look concerned. "I wasn't in any danger or anything, Dad. Don't worry."

"That's a convenient segue," Contessa said, accepting a cup. She took a sip. "Mr. Hebert, do you know the general schema of superpower labeling?"

"Thinker, Tinker, Brute, Blaster, Master..." Dad ticked off a few, and Contessa nodded.

"Mover, Shaker, Brute, Breaker, Master, Tinker, Blaster, Thinker, Striker, Changer, Trump and Stranger." She crossed her arms, leaning forward a little. "Taylor is a Thinker, which means that she has mental powers--knowledge, understanding, analysis. She is further classified as a Trump, meaning that her power directly relates to the operation of other superpowers." He nodded. "Additionally, there are rankings from one to ten, with twelve reserved as a special designator for capes a magnitude above; this serves as a general measure of the resources necessary to defeat any given cape. Your daughter is a Thinker 9-Trump 3."

Thinker 9? That was excessive. Trump I could sort of see, but even "3" seemed a bit much when I was a Trump on a technicality; it wasn't like knowing what people could do let me turn their powers off, and I certainly didn't gain any others of my own. I sat back and took that in for just a moment. "Really?" I couldn't quite hide my skepticism. "I mean, don't get me wrong, it's really useful, but those ratings seem a little--"

"You've thus far shown a large degree of subconscious intuition of cape abilities and behaviors," Contessa said, looking back towards me. "Powerful intuitive Thinkers can develop borderline precognition in their field, and your field is capes. Ratings are based on threat level, not on absolute power, and even weak precognitives merit a 3 or higher in all circumstances--it often allows them to punch far above their metaphorical weight class."

"Oh. Okay."

She would know, I supposed.

"Furthermore, your range of perception is unusually large and your power is one that other powers are unlikely to prevent; therefore, were you heading a team, these two factors ensure that you would be extraordinarily effective against parahumans, who form the backbone of any anti-cape effort. Hence, you merit a high inherent threat rating, even at your current level of experience."

It didn't really matter, but it was good to know. It certainly made me a little more confident in my thoughts about Contessa's power... And that little show of her knowledge seemed to impress Dad.

"In light of her level of ability," Contessa said, turning back towards my dad, "the Protectorate would like to offer her a position."
He turned towards me, as if to confirm that I hadn't suddenly gained a decade, before looking back at her. "Not the Wards?"

She shook her head slightly. "Taylor would work with us as an analyst," she said. "Traveling by teleporter, consulting with various Protectorate teams, assisting other capes in the further development of their power... She already assisted considerably with a persistent issue of Eidolon's, and as such we are convinced enough of her potential. To be frank, having her work with the Wards would be a waste of her time and ours."

His brow creased. "Can you really do that? I was under the impression that the Youth Guard would make a lot of trouble. And I do want you to finish school, Taylor."

"Dad," I said, glancing at Contessa. She nodded. "Eidolon's problem, the one I helped with? He was losing his powers." His eyebrows shot upwards; he leaned forward, seemingly despite himself, eyes fixed on me. "Each of his abilities only has so much energy, and he was running out of a lot of the individual ones. It's been a growing problem for about twenty years, and fixing it took me five minutes... And I've barely learned how to use my power."

He looked to Contessa, who nodded again. He had to sit back and process that. It took a long, long time; if something surprised Dad, and it wasn't something he could be angry at, it kind of knee-capped him. Mom's death was proof enough of that. I wasn't going to rush him.

"Right," he said, after two or three minutes. "That's hard to believe... But I don't think you'd lie to me like that, Taylor."

"As a proof of concept, we'd like Taylor to consult with the Brockton Bay Wards. I believe she's already conducted a relatively thorough breakdown of their abilities, due to the large range of her perception." I nodded as she looked back towards me, and she turned back towards Dad. "Thus, this will allow us to get a solid grasp of what she can do for normal capes. At that point, we will consult with our other Thinkers and develop a plan of action."

By 'other Thinkers,' she probably just meant herself.

"I think I might even be able to figure out some things about where powers come from, and why they work like they do," I said. "I really might be able to make things better, Dad, in a way no one else can."

He bit his lip, looking back and forth between us. Then he sighed deeply. "Taylor. I'm sorry for saying this, but... Are you sure this isn't just an excuse to get away from school?"

'I couldn't really talk about it at the time, Dad, because I didn't want to reveal I had powers, but..." I breathed out. "Basically, my power's kind of like a second sight. Everywhere around me, about ten blocks, I can see little lights and labels--the powers." He nodded. "So when I got the power... It was kind of like falling asleep. I just kind of retreated into it, watched the lights, thought about them... It actually took me a few hours before I could pull myself away. And then I remembered I was trapped in... that," I said (and despite myself, my voice faltered then), "so I just kind of stepped back again. It was bad, and I wouldn't want to do it again, but most of the time I was somewhere else entirely."

I bit my lip, looking down at the floor.
"But while I was there, I started connecting lights to people. Retreating that far made it easier somehow, I don't think I could do it now. There was one other light in the school... Shadow Stalker. Sophia Hess. She's a Winslow student." I looked up. "She's also the main person behind me getting shoved in that locker to begin with."

I saw him breathe in, then out. It didn't seem to help. His fists were white, clenched so tightly that I worried his nails would draw blood.

"It'd be fairly trivial to remove her," Contessa said calmly, her hands resting in her lap. I looked her way. "She was pushed into the Wards as a probationary measure, due to excessive violence as a vigilante. I imagine the school administration has been overly accommodating of her bad behavior, in light of her status as a Ward."

"I already have a plan," I replied, and my smile was only very technically one. "So I want her to stay right where she is." I looked towards Dad. "That's the only reason this was a question at all, Dad--I didn't want to join the Wards, not if she was one of them." I took a breath, suppressing the next few things I wanted to say. "But it's okay now. I'm going to change the world, and with my power, I won't need to spend much time around that bitch to do it."

"Language, young lady," he said, with a weak smile. He sighed, looking at my face for a long moment. "You really are your mother's daughter, Taylor..." He pushed himself to his feet, looking at Contessa. "Okay. Contessa, was it? Is there anything I need to do?"
I woke up that morning and did some jogging. I'd started a little less than a month ago, after my Trigger.

Dad was a worrier, and I was cut from the same cloth. My power let me stay far away from any dangerous parahumans, at least so long as they weren't coming after me, but 'trouble' was a lot more likely to be a kid with a knife than Lung or Kaiser. There's only so many parahumans, and most people just aren't that important.

Now I was important, though, and I'd found a powerful patron. I was pretty sure that if I was on path to run into a Azn Bad Boys vs Empire Eighty-Eight turf war, I'd find myself running into a portal to a safer place, or meeting a group of Wards, or the thugs would all be killed by falling frozen turkeys or something. It was nice.

No reason to be stupid, though: I kept to the Boardwalk, the nice part of town, jogging with my eyes on the lights.

Why'd I have to Trigger in the winter... I'd only done this for a couple of weeks, so my lungs and legs were still killing me.

When I finished the jog, I stopped by home. At our meeting, Dad had insisted that whenever I could have breakfast with him, I would. That meal, at the very least. I could have had every meal with him, if I really wanted to, but I letting Dad know I was part of a superpower-granting world-hopping anti-apocalyptic conspiracy would probably freak him out. He's kind of overprotective.

"So, what's your plan for today, Taylor?"

"I talked it over with Contessa yesterday." I kept my eyes on my plate, mechanically shoving food into my face between phrases, thoughts already far away. "I'm going to visit a tailor and pick up my costume, then I'm going to stop by the Protectorate PR consultant. I think I know basically what I want my image to be, but I've got to really impress the rank-and-file capes if I want them to listen to me--downside of the whole 'teenager' thing--so it needs to be perfect. I'll probably do lunch with him too, and then I'll be doing some public-speaking training. Then I'll be stopping by the Wards after school ends. I'm kind of cheating, since I've had a lot longer to look at their powers than I usually will, but they don't need to know that. After that, more training. I may not be doing any fighting, but I'm still a hero... Need to get better at my thing."

Most of that was true, except the very last part--I wouldn't be using my power for most of the day, mostly so I could conserve it for the end. We were going to try to make a formula tonight.

I looked up and tried not to wince. Judging from his expression, I didn't need to bring up Cauldron to freak him out.

"I know you've had some time to think about this, but... I only found out yesterday, you know." He shook his head. "Are you sure you're not going too far, too fast, Taylor? No matter what the job, you always need a little time to settle in."

"My power's called Administrator, Dad. Ordering capes around is sort of what it's for, you know?" I smiled, but he didn't look very reassured. "And it's friendly turf. The worst that happens is that I spend a little longer on training before the next advising session. I'm not worried."

I really wasn't. I knew I should be, but... Something about the plan, something about walking into a
room with at least one outright enemy, really appealed to me. I wanted to use my power, and I wanted to use it to win. I'd heard, reading, that Thinkers often fell into megalomania and self-delusion, and in that moment, I could believe it. I hadn't ever done much public speaking, but I didn't doubt for a moment that I could do it... Or that I'd find it fun, even.

I wouldn't necessarily succeed, though. Megalomania, self-delusion, Legend's warnings about tunnel vision... An excess of such self-confidence had put Teacher in the Birdcage for good, and the strongest Thinker I'd seen living in Brockton Bay was just a petty crook. I had no plans to follow in the footsteps of either example. Contessa was the proof of how far a Thinker could go, but her sheer power made the exception that proved the rule. I'd aspire to that, but I wouldn't expect it.

Maybe some of that self-restraint bled through, because I saw him relax. He leaned forward, placing one hand on mine. "I know you can do it, Taylor. I've never doubted you could do great things, even without superpowers. Just don't push yourself too hard... And remember, if all else fails, you can always come home. I'll always be your father."

"Yeah." I put my other hand on top of his. "Thanks, Dad."

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Glenn Chambers wasn't exactly what I would have expected from someone in charge of appearances: overweight, not conventionally attractive even ignoring that, hair gelled into a mohawk, clothes that seemed on the 'tasteless' side of flashy. I'd read about countersignalling--the idea of being good enough that looking low-class was actually a status symbol, like the way they fade jeans for fashion--but I was pretty sure countersignalling wrapped back around eventually.

But of all the PR people in the world, the Protectorate had chosen him. He spoke to every Ward (a brief teleconference, at least), advised every hero, coordinated campaigns... He didn't have a power, but he was one of the most important men in the world all the same.

Contessa, not Teacher. I'd chosen to dress accordingly.

"Good morning, Miss Hebert," he said genially, stepping forward. "Or should I call you Administrator? You look like you're ready for a job interview."

"I'll be at one this afternoon," I said, shrugging one shoulder even as I reached out to shake his hand. "A proof-of-concept meeting where I'll be telling capes older and more experienced than me what to do and what they've been doing wrong. If I try to pull off 'cape,' they'll be thinking of that. I need to show that I have status that isn't based on punching things, so the suit and name are part of that."

He nodded, and his smile dropped, expression abruptly all-business. His grip tightened a little on my hand. "Good. That's the level of thinking you need to do, if you're going to advise capes. Perceptions matter every bit as much as combat realities, and all reality starts with perceptions. I want to use you, but if you're in the way of the greater mission, you go before I do. Got it?"

He'd be surprised.

Still, I nodded back. "I'm a power thinker, not a PR thinker. I still have things to learn. I won't be stupid."

"Good. You don't really believe it yet, but you're at least saying the words--that's the first step." He released my hand, gesturing towards a seat and returning to his own. They were good chairs; I'd have to buy one, once I had actual money. "Let's talk costumes first. The suit cut is good, charcoal is good... I don't think your complexion and hair support much else. Still, you're Protectorate, not New
Wave, so you need at least a pretense at a secret identity. What's your mask?

I reached into the purse I'd carried in, lifting up a mask. It was a mock-up, something I'd asked for a little earlier—the Protectorate was very good at quick fabrication. I held it up to my face.

"A mirror," he said. It was. It was curved in a way that suggested a face, something like a semi-cylinder around my head, and completely featureless otherwise. I'd tied up my hair to wear it, letting the bun rest behind the featureless square of the mask's back end. "Interesting. One-way, I assume?" As I nodded, he leaned forward. "Explain the concept behind it."

"Two points," I said. "First, again, distinction. There are featureless masks, but outright mirrors are rare... From what I know, anyway. Part of that is Shatterbird, but I'm confident I can sense her coming." He nodded. "Second, I'm not in this for me--I'm not interested in turning the Administrator into a big Cape presence. Ideally, I won't have many public appearances at all. The more time I spend in the spotlight, the more time I'll screw up. So I'll only wear this on the way into the meeting." I removed the mask. "Capes who aren't on the same team each other tend to keep the masks on, even in the Protectorate."

"It's symbolic--a focus on the people you're talking to?" I nodded. "The suit, the moment of confusion when they first see the mirror, removing the mask, outsize status to your new arrival... You're planning to keep them off-balance. It should be equally disorienting to look at you in combat, with all of the reflections you'll be throwing off." I nodded again and Glenn nodded back—acknowledgment, not approval. "That approach won't win you many friends, Taylor."

"I only need a strong first impression, and this is already a special case." He raised an eyebrow. "Shadow Stalker and I have serious bad blood in our civilian lives. She'll treat me with hostility, and I'll leverage that. Even if I'd normally come off as arrogant, I'll be able to use her as contrast."

"Explain."

I did.

"Interesting tactic. To be crass, working with Thinkers tends to be an enormous pain in the ass, but you're reminding me why it can be enjoyable."

He'd responded to my mention of a common enemy ploy with his own... And if I hadn't thought the same about other Thinkers, if I'd found it flattering instead of obvious, I might not have noticed.

I was pretty sure he was making a point, especially when he grinned again. It made him look a lot younger.

"Administrator," he said, "This is a thing I say very rarely: I can't actually give you much advice." He chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "You see, your plan is excellent; you've covered the majority of the angles, and you have all of the appropriate institutional back-up to follow through. The problem is that it has a single point of failure." His hand rose up, extended index finger resting at the level of my heart, and all of his false cheer vanished in an instant.

"You. Your plan is execution-heavy, and you're an amateur. You'll succeed today— you have a friendly audience, Shadow Stalker aside, and you already have a clever plan to turn her hostility into an asset." His tone of voice made it hard to tell whether 'clever' was sarcastic. "But the moment you run into some team head who's willing to make things difficult, and you aren't able to eliminate it..." He spread his arms expansively. "In the long run, your plan requires reputation and experience. You don't have either yet, and we can only give you softballs so long. We're breaking the usual rules, and that means you won't have long before we're forced to shove you out of the nest. If it's you or us,
"In other words," I said, "I can't screw up or we're all screwed."

"Never," he said, words dark and heavy. "I don't know who you know or how we got to be here, but I have never seen a situation like this. There's a reason for that, because this is dangerous for everyone. You have to be flawless--this time, next time, the time after that, on and on and on and on until people respect you like they respect Alexandria. Treat every single meeting as a battlefield, treat every single predictable difficulty as potentially career-ending, because it could be. Your plan requires you to be distinctive, different, and to inspire a kind of awe, and I can't give you anything better yet. The moment you stop looking bulletproof, Taylor, people will remember that you're a fifteen year-old Thinker, and then they fit you into a pattern. And then we get in trouble for putting you there."

He stood up, extending his hand, helping pull me to my feet.

"So long as the possibility remains, you'll have my full resources at your disposal." He looked at me, expression grave, larger hand tight on mine. "Make no mistake, Taylor: on odds alone, you will fail. The vast majority of people would, given your plan and your powers, because it requires you to be superhuman in a way that isn't based on 'punching things,' to use your phrase. All the same, we can't wait for you to grow up, and if you don't have the spark, sequestering you away in speech classes won't make a damn bit of difference. I have no idea why the bigwigs would put all of this on your shoulders so soon, but... It's do or die, Administrator. Impress me."

I nodded, outwardly undaunted even as my stomach twisted and my power expanded outwards.

"That's the way every other parahuman lives," I said. "If I want to change them, then I have to be at least that serious."

He nodded. "Good." He turned. "Walk with me and I'll brief you on the Wards. Today's a softball, especially with your own preparation... But I'm not going to let you stumble at the gate."

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"Good morning, Armsmaster," I said, extending my hand to shake. He met my eyes as returned the shake with a firm grip--slightly too tight, but not quite at 'shake my hand out' levels. I'd gone to meet him in his lab, and he sat in his dark blue power armor; his visored helmet sat on a nearby table, half-disassembled. He was adding some new part, it seemed.

I liked the beard. He had to as well, considering the helmet would've left his mouth exposed even if he'd worn it. That made me think of vanity. Armsmaster was an Efficiency Tinker, someone whose power lay in compartmentalizing and compressing, none of which had anything to do with hitting people. And yet Armsmaster fought like a Brute, not a Master, despite the fact that he'd have been one of the best in the world at drone-related work, despite the fact that anyone with a normal human's physical ability going toe-to-toe with real Brutes was eventually going to die. That suggested that he was the type who fought on the front lines because he wanted to.

So. Crazy. Somewhat vain. Hero complex. That suggested an approach, but it was the approach everyone else with a brain would have come to. I wasn't going to push my luck. ...not so directly, at least.

"Good morning. The Administrator, was it?"

His voice was gruff, his words clipped; the Efficiency Tinker power he'd been given seemed to fit
"Yes. I'd rather you called me Taylor, though. Much shorter." He nodded.

"Colin, then." He glanced down at the papers in his free hand, more as a gesture than necessity, because a man like him had the important parts memorized. "Vouched for by the Triumvirate. You're a rare Thinker, it seems."

"So I'm told." I paused. Glenn's briefing hadn't covered Armsmaster... The question was why. The answers that came to mind weren't fun ones. "I'm lucky--I knew the right people to sidestep a lot of bureaucracy. I would have been a shitty Ward."

He looked up at me, eyebrows raising. "Really."

"I spent a week figuring out my power. It's simple enough that it has easy-to-deduce limits. None of it is directly combat-relevant, and none of it requires me to be on the front lines. The only thing I can improve is the speed of my analysis, and that's not going to happen if I spend the next several years here, mostly working with the same people. My power's combat applications lean towards large-scale battle, and Wards don't do those." I shook my head. "So, instead, this. Glenn expects me to fail, and I can't say he's wrong, because doing this requires me to manage the Wards, the heroes, the bureaucrats, and the public, and that's ignoring the actual analyses I'm going to conduct. Any one thing goes wrong and this gets blown to hell."

"You think you can do it regardless," he said dispassionately.

I considered him for a moment, and I let him see me do it.

"The problem isn't that I can't do it," I said. "The job itself isn't that hard. The problem is public relations, because it doesn't matter how good I am--once you get to the level I need to be at to do my job, I'm a public figure. And once I'm a public figure, then the good I do gets forgotten and they remember every time I fuck up. There'll be wolves in the wings waiting to take me down, even if they think they're really 'protecting the public welfare' or 'defending our children.'" A short nod from him. "I'm a people Thinker, and managing bureaucracy is people Tinkering. The question here isn't whether I can do it, the question is whether or not I can get enough people like you to support me, so that this bullshit impossible task becomes something more reasonable."

"Which is the real reason you're here." Armsmaster considered me with narrowed eyes.

"Yes. Because if Glenn was really on my side, he would have pointed that out before I met you. He wouldn't have kept my attention on the Wards and then dropped me unbriefed into the most important meeting I have today."

"You believe he wanted you to alienate me, which would likely cause your first consultation session with my Wards to fail--"

"--and give him an excuse to backbench me, because I make his job harder. He expects me to fuck up, and if I do, then that means more work for him. Whatever he said before, he's not on my side." I leaned forward. "Armsmaster, let me be blunt with you: I'm not fighting for the right to help the world, because I'm going to do that regardless. I'm fighting for the right to keep helping you in ways you can see."

It seemed he'd already come to the same conclusion. "Normal teenagers don't get sponsored by the Triumvirate, after all."

"Yes. I expect that part of my biography will quietly disappear if I show my chops here, to keep
people from drawing that exact conclusion. I think they want me to fail, too, which is probably why they're also throwing me in the hot water immediately." I sighed sharply, pinching my nose; his scrutiny had only intensified, and not all of my headache was pretended.

Sure, I was bullshitting him, at least a little, but Contessa had casually mentioned Armsmaster's lie detector yesterday; I was pretty sure it was in his helmet, but it was so conspicuously unavailable that he just had to have a back-up somewhere on him. So everything I was saying had to be something I believed, at least a little... And knowing Contessa, it was entirely possible she was trying to break me of my current goals. If I gave up on this, then I could sit in Cauldron's labs, safely perfecting formulas, and with me securely tucked away, she could keep her attention on other Paths.

If that was what she was doing, then I'd lose and find myself delighted with the result, or at least too disgusted with the Protectorate to argue the point. Knowing that didn't mean I wasn't going to fight her the whole way.

I dropped my hand, meeting his eyes. "Still, all of that public scrutiny is also an opportunity. If this works, I get to keep working publicly, because it's difficult to make such a public cape vanish. Whether or not I get to do that, Armsmaster, hinges on you. If you fuck me over here, there's not much I can do about it--I really do need your help."

"Appealing to my vanity?" He snorted, lips quirking upwards. "Clever of you."

"You're a hero, I figure it's at least a little likely you have a hero complex." That got me something closer to an actual laugh.

"Make requests. I won't accede to blanket support, but I'm willing to listen if you have specifics in mind."

"I can do that." First benchmark passed. "For now, I need to lie to the Wards one time, and I need you to back me up on it--say nothing, if you want, just don't deny it. You can judge what you want to do from here on out based on what I do for them."

"Explain."

That response wasn't actively unfriendly, and I just needed an opening.

"Well, before I can do that, I'll need to tell you about my Trigger Event--"

---

I arrived at my afternoon meeting exactly on time, stepping through the door in suit and mirrored mask.

"Good afternoon, Brockton Bay Wards." I glanced over the room, head turning to meet each eye in turn from behind my mask. "I am Taylor Hebert, also known as the Administrator. I am a Thinker 9-Trump 3, and my specialty is capes. My power grants me the ability to see and analyze the power of every single hero, villain and rogue within ten blocks of myself, and operates as an intuitive Thinker understanding of capes in general. I know who all of you are beneath your masks, so I thought it fair to extend you the same courtesy."

I reached up, pulling off the mask, and put it down on the lectern. Then I walked forward, stopping in front of the front row of desks.

"You will notice that I am not a Ward. I am a consultant. I am the first of my kind in the Protectorate, and I am here today to offer you my services. Do you have any questions about an aspect of your
power? I can answer it. Do you believe you may have a secondary power? You are very likely correct; I can tell you what it is, and I can explain how it works. Is there any tool you require to better do your job? I had a personal meeting with the Triumvirate this time yesterday; I have connections, and I will advocate for you. This afternoon, I am at your disposal, and I suggest you take advantage.”

There was a long moment of silence, and I began to count. One, two, three, four--

"Bullshit."

She'd spoken before I hit five, just as I'd expected.

A girl in a heavy black coat leaned forward, black mask glinting in the light. I couldn't see her eyes, but I knew them--dark, nearly always narrowed. Every time she talked to someone, she'd stare into their eyes, unblinking, until they backed down. I always had, because I couldn't afford to escalate.

Today was not 'always.'

"It's true, Shadow Stalker," I said. "Incidentally, your actions against me earlier this month were a violation of your probation. Doubly so, in light of the fact that those actions induced a Trigger Event. The Protectorate was quite eager to score points with me by sacrificing you." I met her eyes; my power told me where they were, despite the mask. "But I plead your case, on the condition that you be watched more closely. You're scum, but your power is useful, and if I'm being honest I'm rather grateful that a cape was involved--the academic literature suggests that that's what made me a partial Trump. Still, make no mistake, Sophia Hess: you remain free only so long as I want you free. Now sit down and shut up."

The silence continued... But all the other heads in the room turned a little, eyes on Armsmaster, standing silently in the corner. He didn't react; no denial, no reprimand, not so much as a word. He simply continued to look straight ahead... And in its own way, that was damning.

Eyes turned to Shadow Stalker. When she tensed, ready to move, to say something, they followed suit. Her eyes flicked to her right, looking at the others who were looking at her; there was a kind of silent negotiation, and by the end of it, she backed off. She had to.

I paid them no mind, continuing to speak. "So," I clapped softly on the word, and it echoed in the silent room, bringing all eyes back to me. "I have something to say to each of you, but the order is your choice, and I can dedicate more or less time to each individual issue. Anyone interested in going first?"

No one did. I hadn't expected them to--they were obviously still focused on my revelation about Shadow Stalker.

Good. So long as I got to decide what was happening, I'd keep control of the morning. I waited five seconds before speaking.

"I'll start, then. Kid Win," I said, and he jumped.

He was probably the most brightly-colored of the Wards, in brilliant red and gold, face concealed by a visor. Gold was the single most common color among Tinkers, thanks in part to its presence in Hero's costume... Hero, the strongest Tinker, who had been a part of the Protectorate before the Siberian had cut that four-person team down to the Triumvirate. No one quite sat still, but he fidgeted more than the others. His file said he had some variant of ADHD, among other things. Becoming a Tinker probably hadn't helped.

"I believe you haven't intuited your exact specialization as a Tinker." A short nod. "It's 'adaptation.'
There's three effects on your inventing. First." I ticked up a finger. "Modularity. Your inventions will function better if you design them to have multiple physical configurations. You should strip your hoverboard down to essentials and create optional add-ons to improve specific capabilities--you'll notice an improvement in performance right away."

He got a distant look in his eyes, one I almost recognized from myself. I'd remember Legend's warning about Thinkers and Tinkers for quite some time to come.

"Second." I ticked up a second finger, waiting until his eyes snapped back to me. "Multiple settings. Different mechanical implementation, same philosophy: don't focus on making a generally strong tool, make a variety of specialized tools within one item. It'll take more time, but it'll work much better for you. This is a focus of Armsmaster's and a place where your powers intersect--the two of you can do a great deal of quid pro quo. Cooperate with him to reconfigure your weapons and see what you can do for his. Third--"

I ticked up one final finger; this time, his eyes mostly stayed focused on me. "--you have an additional Thinker ability related to your Tinkering: Adversity. You'll invent better while you're under personal stress or strain. When it comes to mid-battle adjustment or optimization, there aren't many Tinkers better than you. Be aware of it but don't rely on it. All the same, if you're in a corner in a real situation, it's something to be aware of."

As I finished speaking, I reached into a pocket, pulling out my Protectorate phone. I pressed through the menus, opening and sending a pre-saved message. "Check your e-mail later for a more detailed breakdown. I'm a Thinker myself, so I spent more time on that aspect. Read it on your own time."

That part was an excuse; I doubted he'd appreciate having his teammates learn about his dyscalculia, at least like this, and so I wouldn't make that choice for him. It'd given me an excuse to draw up dossiers for each of them, at least.

Even as he pulled out his phone, I looked up from mine, returning it to a pocket. "If you have no immediate questions, Kid Win, I'll move on. Any volunteers?"

One hand this time: Aegis.

Aegis had a costume in rust red, helmet included, with silver trim and a silver shield emblem. That element of his costume made me sort of uncomfortable; they called him an Alexandria Package, but normal capes flying bricks didn't need a costume that'd hide the blood.

"I don't think any of us would have expected Kid to have a Thinker power," he said, glancing at Kid Win. I couldn't quite see his mouth, but something about the body language was friendly. "I'm guessing I have something similar?"

"The same one, yes, expressed with a different shard composite." He turned back to me, his bearing attentive. "Consider it a specialized form of Uber's: you'll easily learn anything that allows you to overcome a physical disadvantage. You've already noticed this in part, with how you can adjust to your body's developmental redundancies, but it's wider than that. It would take you an afternoon to become fully ambidexterous, if you aren't already. You'll pick up sign language very easily, but not French."

"Anything I can use in combat?"

I waited a moment; best to look like I was considering it. "You'll find you're much better with kicking-related martial arts than punching; techniques like judo or aikido are borderline, since they're meant to overcome even stronger opponents. It may come down to mindset... Note that this doesn't
include the use of assistive technology, it has to be a part of you." I crossed my arms. "In a better world, we'd have biotinkers that weren't Bonesaw. Theoretically, anything that's actually incorporated into your body should count... But that's an unproductive line of thought at the moment. Keep it in mind, if you're open-minded and we're lucky."

I hoped to start on that soon.

I drew out my phone again. "More details in the e-mail, including a short list of skills that I think you'd find useful. Next?"

Gallant.

I'd have recognized his silver powered armor as Armmaster's work, even without their files. Apparently he had enough money to commission it and have Armmaster maintain it, and keeping Tinkertech in good shape wasn't easy. That purchase said a lot, and I didn't know how to interpret it. Caution, to want the protection? Arrogance, to want the best? A focus on appearances, because that model wasn't THAT much better than normal gear?

"I'd ask," he said, amused, "but..."

"You can tell I know," I said, nodding back. It's hard to be mysterious around an empath... Unfortunately. "Before I answer, I need to establish some background science on Trigger Events first." More than a few eyes went to Shadow Stalker. "Scientists have noted that the expression of a power tends to be connected to the traumatic event that triggered the development of the power. What's less well-known--barely in the literature, but I imagine veteran Capes all know--is that many powers vary in strength, and they do so based on emotion. Specifically, the closer your emotional state to the time of your Trigger, the stronger one particular aspect of your power. In my own case, the standard range at which my power perception applies is approximately half of what it was during my Trigger, and it expands when I feel particularly helpless. The base is about seven-point-five blocks, but I'm enough of a control freak that it defaults to approximately ten."

So far, I'd hit every point I'd planned to. This afternoon was going pretty well.

"All of which is to say that, in your case, your control over the Blaster aspect of your power, the emotional projection, is your variable aspect. You always possess a small degree of control, but it should be greatly amplified when you're experiencing one particular emotion most closely connected to your Trigger. To preserve your privacy where others are concerned--I can't help but see it, and I think you can relate to that--" He nodded slightly. "--I've left that detail to your e-mail. The same applies to all of you with your own amplifiers, all of which are noted in your own e-mails. Kid Win, I should note that your Thinker ability is separate from this general tendency." I clapped my hands again. "Questions? No? Next, then."

Clockblocker.

He was in the classic skin-tight bodysuit, a pure white, with armor placed where it wouldn't get in the way. The animated clocks on the panels were distracting, which was probably intentional--if it took your attention away from his hands for even a moment, then there was a better chance he could make the most of that power of his. That might have been why his smooth white helmet was so nondescript, because it made it harder to see where he was looking.

"Two questions. One, is there any way to know where we are on that scale? I'm pretty sure what my variation is, but it's hard to predict."

"It's channeling of the power along interconnected parts. And your power can't be reversed, so it's
hard to test... That's a good question.” It was a good thing I'd already thought about it. "Tell me: you can choose whether to time-lock interconnected parts, correct? And you can't actually freeze yourself. Your costume, yes, but not yourself." Two nods. "That's one test, then--check how far your power extends using the one thing you can't freeze. You're always--" I paused just before I said something unfortunate. I really didn't want to be remembered for walking into a joke that easy. "Rather, let's say that you are always in a position to use your power on yourself," I said, I said, smiling, and there was some quiet laughter. It seemed at least some of the Wards had noticed what I'd almost said. "Although I won't rule out the other phrasing. There are sayings about teenage boys..."

I think the rest got it, then, judging by the other reactions.

"That's actually a great segue into my other question," he said, and my eyebrows rose. Armsmaster cleared his throat, I heard someone say something about 'sexual harassment training,' and Clockblocker held up his hands. "I meant the joke, not the... reference. I mean, you've got a sense of humor, you're rocking that suit, and I'm totally into the woman-in-charge thing you've got going on. Any chance we can maybe see a movie some time?"

Well, if nothing else, it seemed I wasn't acting totally unapproachable. Now if only I was sure that was a good thing...

"Sexual harassment training," Aegis repeated, louder this time.

"And if you're going to hit on her," Vista said, "you should probably remember you're wearing a mask."

"Point," Clockblocker said, ignoring Aegis entirely, and he slipped off his blank white helmet. He ran a hand through his hair, preening dramatically in a way that didn't match his wide grin.

Hmm. He wasn't bad-looking... More importantly, their banter had given me an opening to recover my equilibrium.

"My mornings, afternoons, and evenings are fully booked from now to quite far in the future," I said, and he sighed... But then I smiled. "Still, I think I can manage lunch this Saturday. We can talk details later over e-mail."

He pumped one fist. "Score!"

"Now that we've entirely undermined my carefully cultivated atmosphere of strict professionalism," I said (I really should stop smiling), "we should probably move on. Vista or Shadow Stalker, please."

Vista raised her hand. I nodded at her. "General advice, or do you have an issue in mind?"

"General advice."

The first thing you'd notice about Vista was her height: short. Her costume was alternating white and green in long, twisting lines, but it couldn't hide the fact that she was the youngest person in the room. For all that her power couldn't be used directly on others, her ability to alter and shape empty space made her the second-most dangerous person in the room... Especially considering she was the second-most experienced.

She was trying, and failing, to look like she was paying close attention. I didn't doubt that she was used to being talked down to.

"Honestly, you're the hard one of the group to advise, both because your power is quite strong and you're already very good with it." Even with her visor hiding her face, I could feel her surprise. "That said, you do have an obvious issue: you neglect to use your own body. True, your team is
quite uncommonly capable by Wards standards, but out of your team, your power renders you the absolute priority target in nearly any engagement. You need to act accordingly, and your power doesn't require empty hands. Pick up a taser, baton, pepper spray, a containment foam weapon... You shouldn't use martial arts against anyone that wants to engage you that way, but tools work just fine. Use them. You need to learn now, in the Wards, while the fights are easy, the stakes are low, and Panacea lives in the same city. As it is, Vista, sticking to your power means you've already wasted far too much time. You're better than that."

"That's not the usual advice," Vista said, and something about her voice was strange. I wasn't the only one whose problems came from my age.

"If the usual pattern requires us to be stupid, then fuck that," I said, pronouncing the words crisply, tone remaining calm and even. I pulled out my phone, sending the message I'd prepared for her. "Consider this an order, backed with my full authority as a member of the Protectorate: I expect you to act on this advice. If you can't find a competent teacher here for any combat skill you want to learn, then let me know and I'll get you one, even if it requires a teleporter. And if anyone in your chain of command tries to contradict me on this, you have my e-mail address--tell me and I'll handle it. By the same token, I have full access to all Protectorate recordings. I expect you to improve."

"Yes ma'am," she said, smiling as she sketched a quick salute.

"Good." I turned to the last member of the room. "Shadow Stalker. It made sense when you were a lone vigilante, but I have no idea why you're still fighting the way you do. Your shard is going to waste."

"What the hell do you know?"

If I was being honest, I took more than a little joy in tormenting her. It was useful, of course--she wasn't liked and I'd expressed why I hated her myself, so taking her down a peg would endear me to the other Wards, make me seem more human--but I'd had time to think about Contessa. It wasn't impossible her power had expected me to ask what her name had been far before I did, that it'd told her what to do when she did.

After all, showing weakness, showing that I could still be a petty teenager, might make Armsmaster underestimate me. He'd be more likely to work with someone he thought he could outmaneuver, if we were working in a place not governed by my power.

And that was also satisfying, in its way. Gallant's power would tell him what I was feeling, but not why--and that was the key to working around it.

"Feel free to ignore me. I'll be honest: despite the sheer potential of your shadow state, I don't expect you to make full Protectorate. You're impulsive, over-aggressive, and you have a strong fixation on social dominance, and those three traits feed on themselves to get you into trouble. Hence, I can only assume, your current strange determination to piss on the electric fence." I heard a sort of strangled choking laughter to the side of the room, but I couldn't afford to take my eyes off of her. "So you'll do something stupid soon, you'll end up back in jail, and you'll be the one I got wrong." Her hands clenched on the desk. I watched her, impassive. "But I have a certain degree of professional pride, so I'll keep talking. Feel free to surprise me, Sophia... I'd be happy to be wrong."

I waited a moment, to see if she'd rise to the bait, then continued.

"First. Your power renders you largely immune to physical blows. Energetics--fire, electricity--are a problem, but you have nothing to fear from the vast majority of humans. You can't affect them either until you phase back in, but this is a bonus: your shadow state lets you flow around enemies,
allowing you to attack them at unexpected angles. There's very little most people can do about that... And as a track runner, you're already quite physically fit. You're no Brute, but like Vista, tools are always useful. Don't get me wrong: you should always start a fight at range, at least until you identify who can actually hurt you. But after that, the majority of your strengths lie at close range."

"I know," she said, speaking through gritted teeth. "I do all that."

Did she? Honestly, I hadn't been able to watch that much of the footage; I'd only gained access to it today, after all. I thought she might, but her power made her hard to keep track of. Knowing Sophia, though, there was still something I could seize on... That was the only reason I'd taken the risk to begin with.

"You act like an ambush predator," I replied, unfazed. "You circle fights and attack the weak, and you don't close in unless you can drop them. Don't get me wrong, that's a totally respectable strategy--for Clockblocker, Vista, Kid Win, or me, because we're no tougher than any powerless person. Or, for that matter, for a single lone vigilante, someone who doesn't have anyone else they can rely on." I shook my head. "You're in a team, Shadow Stalker, a team with a single Brute. Clockblocker HAS to be at close range to use his power, but not for very long. Aegis can't shield everyone, and he can't be in all places at once, even with Vista's assistance."

She scoffed. "So, what, should I just stand there and let them hit me? I'm not THAT tough."

Good, it'd worked.

"Stand there? No. You don't need to get hit to keep people busy, but you don't do that. The fact is, your power, in this team, puts you in the support role, because everyone else hits harder. Get over it." I raised my hands, palm up. "Now, if that part of my assessment is invalid, if you are doing everything you can to protect your team? Anyone can chip in and tell me I'm wrong about that, and I'll happily accept it. But I don't think so."

No response, including Shadow Stalker... Which, in this case, was what I wanted. Good. I nodded.

"Second. Any trick good enough for an enemy is good enough for you. You've heard of Fog, the Empire Eighty-Eight cape--poisonous mist transformation." I reached into my bag, pulling out a can. I tossed it in a low arc, and she caught it. "Pepper spray. Spray that in front of you, change state, and float towards an enemy. Your shadow form has enough mass to carry it along, so go for the eyes--congratulations, you've instantly incapacitated the vast majority of targets, Brutes included. No matter how tough your skin is, the mucus membranes stay vulnerable. The same protections that keep you from adding smog to the inside of your body will work on the pepper spray. When you're damn sure you know what you're doing, you can do the same with containment foam--it won't contain your shadow form, but you still can carry it along. That'll work on nearly anything not stopped by pepper spray, and you can also use foam as a shield against charging capes and projectiles, giving you another means of defense... That said, it wouldn't be hard to catch yourself in foam as you're untransforming, and then you'd be helpless. That one will require practice."

Lead with the weakest advice. Improve as you go. I wasn't sure about the containment foam, but if she tried it in the training room, it failed, and she was humiliated... Well, I wouldn't shed any tears.

"Third." Was it just me, or were they all paying more attention now? "You'll discard this one outright, I'm sure, because you don't think it'll fit your image, but it's the one I'd most strongly recommend: get someone to add an electric fan to the back of your armor--or your boots, or your shoulders, wherever--and add buttons to control it to your gloves. I know you can do selective phasing, and if you're mostly in your shadow state, then you're light enough that wind will provide a substantial speed boost. Pride is the only thing standing between you and full-on flight... And there's
considerable use in a fight for a quick, easy, on-demand speed boost in a direction you choose. Clothesline, quick escape into a wall, that sort of thing."

"Fourth--"

"Holy crap," Clockblocker said, seeming almost alarmed. "Do we need to be meaner to you? How come none of us got this many suggestions?"

"Clockblocker, you already do most of the things I'd suggest. The one thing you're lacking that I know will work is some sort of string shooter, something to create time-stopped triplines or try to freeze targets at range, and I already included that one in your e-mail," I said, even as his eyebrows went up. "Vista is also quite creative already, so I had to focus on her other aspects. Aegis got the list of skills, Gallant got some commentary on his control issues--" (His triggering emotion seemed surprisingly easy to safely self-induce; I was surprised he hadn't already noticed) "--and I already commented on ways Kid Win could adjust his inventions to better suit his specialty. I half-expect Sophia to ignore the e-mail when I do send it, so I'm hedging my bets... Maybe peer pressure will do the job for me."

"CC me on it," Aegis said. "Or, well, forward me a sanitized version without sensitive information. I take my duties as team leader seriously."

"Christ," Shadow Stalker said. "No need to be such a damn drama queen... I'll read your stupid e-mail."

No promise to listen to any of it, I noticed.

"Good." I clapped my hands. "Thank you for your cooperation, Brockton Bay Wards--if this was a class, then I've officially entered my office hours. I'm going to take a water break and do some cape research for my next session. Read your e-mail, think, and if you want to discuss anything in more detail, see me in the next room and we'll talk. I'll be here until five, but if you miss me today, you have my e-mail."

Then I strode out of the room, slipping on my mask on the way out.

Water. Couldn't go to the bathroom, couldn't risk being heard vomiting. Couldn't seem nervous.

'Cape research.' Now would be a good time to watch some of U&L's old recordings. A spectacular failure might cheer me up.

God, I hoped this got easier.
As I left the building that evening, Contessa sent me a text. I ducked into a back alley, and when I stepped through a portal, I found myself in a non-descript white padded room—‘martial arts' padded, that is, not 'insane asylum' padded. It was as featurelessly white as any other Cauldron room I'd seen, which was almost impressive, every other type of athletic padding I'd seen was blue. Had they custom-ordered it? That was just weird, even for an eccentric secret conspiracy.

When I looked up, Contessa was smiling faintly. Either she'd seen something amusing in my face or she'd figured out a line of questions that could let her more-or-less read thoughts. That was almost worryingly plausible. Or she was just being friendly and I was being paranoid.

"Before you go to work on formulas," she said, "I'd like to get a grasp of your physical abilities, Taylor. I know that you jog, but that's not all a hero is required to do."

"You want me to be combat-ready," I said, and she nodded. "With your powers, can't you keep me out of combat?"

"I could," she said. "But the gaps in my powers include the Endbringers. Naturally, we have technology to observe their movements, but even so the point remains: even my power isn't absolute." I grimaced. Eidolon, probably Glaistig Uaine, the Endbringers—-that kind of gap in her power was almost too convenient. It certainly explained why she hadn't single-handedly ushered in world peace, but it made my continuing ignorance of whatever an 'Entity' was all the more aggravating. "If someone should discover your existence, and seek to eliminate you, we want you able to defend yourself long enough to escape. And should you decide to use your power to serve as a combat leader, you need to ensure that you are not an easy target. After all, even the ability to determine the positions of parahumans is enough to make you highly valuable in a large-scale conflict."

I nodded. "I see. It's about preparing for the worst and keeping my options opened." I breathed out. "Though I don't think I'm ever going to fight like a precog. I mean, I've got some sense of when people are feeling aggressive, but--"

I stopped short. Contessa was nodding. "That will be the focus of our training, Taylor, today and in the future. That ability to sense aggression, if developed properly, will allow you to sense incoming parahuman attacks. Develop it further, and develop the knowledge needed to identify the kind of attack, and you will be a powerful defensive fighter. I expect that's all you'll require. Now, go on, tell me more about how your power works."

I breathed out. "Okay. I see a great web of lights and labels, right?" She nodded. "It's sort of like a bulb on a dimmer switch: some lights have a higher 'base' brightness, and I've got a sense for where that base is, but all of them vary. A light's dimmest when the person is asleep, brighter when they're not using their power, brighter when they're using it peacefully, brighter when they're feeling aggressive, brighter still when they're attacking someone, brighter when they're attacking with a power, and brighter than that according to much of their power they're using." I frowned. "Which is why I thought base brightness might be how dangerous a person is, but that doesn't make much sense. The 'dead' shards Cauldron gives out are sort of oddly-colored, but they still obey the dimmer switch scale, and I really don't think Legend is less dangerous than Armsmaster or Shadow Stalker. You're the only person I've met whose light fits my theory."

"It's worth thinking about," she said. "But for now, let's focus on training your ability to use that knowledge." I nodded. "Today, I won't teach you forms or movement. All of that is secondary to
reacting. When you think I'm going to attack you, regardless of the method or the means, do your best to retreat and to dodge. I want you to be able to, on reflex, identify whether you're facing a powered or unpowered assault. With my power to maximize, these sessions shouldn't need to stretch beyond thirty minutes--but we'll do them every single day, regardless of the rest. Do you understand, Taylor?"

I nodded. I had a feeling this was going to suck.

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"Okay," I said, breathing in, then out. "Give me the details on this order."

Doctor Mother nodded from the other end of the hallway, standing in the storage room. Even through portals, we had to speak very loudly to hear each other... A hazard of my enormous range. "You will remember that we sell to clients in terms of three values: P, O and R. These represent power, uniqueness and stability, respectively." I nodded. "The client in question stated a wish for high P and O, neglecting R. This made it an ideal test case."

I nodded back. For once, Contessa wasn't present; triggers and formulas were two of her blindspots, and so her time was better spent elsewhere. That was probably good. After spending half an hour in such a one-sided 'fight,' I needed some distance to nurse my wounded pride.

"They stated a preference for personal Breaker powers, acknowledging our warning that the particular classification of a power is difficult to control. Upon elaboration, they stated a specific preference for defensive Breaker conversion over offensive transformations. We chose to focus on sample oh-nine-six-two, which appears to allow for conversion between various forms of energy. Previous formulas conferred a supportive effect that allowed the user to alter another's energy-based powers, an ability to convert personal kinetic energy to fire and light and vice versa, and a ranged explosive blaster power that we believe involved some form of nuclear fusion. Four more formulas resulted in death, presumably due to insufficient Manton protections. It is one of our riskier samples for," her lips quirked in sudden amusement, "mad-libs usage."

On one hand, I was happy Cauldron believed in me. On the other hand, I really wished that they believed in me a little less. Did everything have to be sink-or-swim?

"All right. Pass me the sample."

She stepped down the hallway, carrying a large container. I let my eyes unfocus as it entered my range, and by the time she placed it on my desk, I'd started running through the finer distinctions.

"It looks like you were roughly right in your assessment," I said, voice a little strained; I didn't think I'd ever get used to the way my senses lit up the moment even a partial formula entered my range. "The common factor is energy conversion." The container was roughly square, a box, filled with something like a cross of loamy soil and powdered packing peanuts. I picked up a trowel, dividing out sections at the edges. "Okay. We've got some cross-contamination with other samples here, here and here. I think we want predictability now, so let's remove those portions."

She picked up a second trowel, and we filled a number of small jars; she carried them back to the power room, even as I unfocused my eyes. I'd barely used my power at all today, but I could still feel a building headache.

"Before we actually do this, I want to ask: what's the psych profile of the person in question? From what I know of natural triggers, it might affect the result."
She looked at me neutrally as she crossed the hallway. The silence dragged on, and I started to wonder if I'd pushed my luck.

"A former petty crook," she said. "She was a member of an international group of low-powered Parahumans, known as the False Flag, which focused on committing interesting crimes while simultaneously also enriching themselves. They were a fixture of the news media, not unlike a more fondly-regarded Uber and Leet--unlike the two of them, one could count the number of times they resorted to violence on one hand."

With less online streaming, presumably.

I nodded, and she continued.

"But that group was a recent victim of the Slaughterhouse Nine, who I believe wished to recruit a member. She is one of very few survivors, but lacks the potential to trigger; still, a number of her compatriots bought her life with theirs. Her current stated goal is to, I quote, 'join some Protectorate squad that will hunt down those motherfuckers, because they need to stop living,' end quote. Hence her willingness to neglect personal safety in the pursuit of power, I assume."

I needed to get Doctor Mother to do these psych profiles more often. Hearing her calm, level voice say 'those motherfuckers' had done a lot for my mood, even if it came with such a grim story.

"I guess you don't get much more at risk than that," I murmured. "Got it. I can't see how that'll affect the result, honestly. In terms of needs, something that lets the user escalate up to lethal, while still being non-lethal enough to use as a cape... Okay." I let my tool drift along the surface, searching out the lights, then suddenly stopped. "Conversion of light energy." I said. "I'm thinking this is the same sort of base as E88's Purity. Heat right next to it, too."

"Purity... Primarily a Blaster," she mused, and I tried not to show my surprise. I'd expected that I'd have to explain, but it seemed she'd researched Brockton Bay capes. "But she is quite powerful, and heat conversion would increase the versatility of the formula."

"I'm thinking we want a balance of thirty-five/fifty on heat-light, with the rest a little kinetic conversion to increase her personal durability and provide a little energy as she moves. Kinetic conversion is useful, so we should be sparing with it." I was trying to think long-term.

Was that a good thing to do this early...? There was a saying about unhatched chickens.

I dismissed the thought and pushed on.

"Enough heat conversion to use defensively, to convert a pyrokinetic ally's attacks, or to use body heat in a pinch, but it's much easier to get sunlight or a floodlight for fuel than a flame... There's both 'from' and 'to' sections here in this material, and I'm thinking we want her to have a larger defensive conversion factor, because she wanted to be a breaker." A nod. I began to scoop out a section with a smaller tool, and though it took me a few tries, I managed to isolate the rough balance I wanted. Dr. Mother handed me two marked bottles; I filled one for both the offensive and defensive portions of the power.

"Okay. So defensive light-heat-kinetic conversion, to... Wide-range dynakinesis, from heat to light to force. I'm getting the sense that this power works conceptually, so I think this should give both positive and negative projections of those two--force, some kind of slowing field, light, darkness, and both heat and cold. I don't think it works that way on the defense, though, it has to be a positive force. You can't exactly pull energy out of darkness, after all."
"Regardless, it should be sufficiently powerful to fulfill her request," Dr. Mother noted, smiling slightly. "Excellent."

She stepped out again, pulling out a small bottle—a small regenerative agent, to alleviate the effects of the initial empowering—and another larger container. The restriction agent.

"Okay, so..." I frowned. "This is the hard part, because I've got basically no idea how much restriction in any one category will code to a power limitation, and the safer this gets, the less useful it'll be. How about you follow usual procedure for this part and I look at the restriction mix before you add it? Better yet, make two or three restrictors; I can try to figure out what they have in common."

It was more and less complicated than I expected—she sifted through the material, eyes on some quality I couldn't see or understand, filling the vials at an irregular pace. That said, it'd probably looked the same the other way around to her.

She soon presented all three to me for inspection.

"Okay," I murmured. "Three vials. This part is a lot less straightforward... It's like I'm trying to pick up a grammar by ear in a language I don't know. Yet, anyway," I corrected absentmindedly, eyes still on the web of light behind the vials. My headache was pounding harder and harder every moment, but I kept on pushing through. "Some of the labels cancel out. The one on the left has an additional restriction on use against organics, which we don't want. It'd turn this into more of a Mover power, only able to push yourself and others or destroy objects... The other two both have a standard self-protection property to different degrees. If I had to label them, I'd say the one on the left is safe but weaker and the one on the right is stronger but more dangerous."

"The right, then, by the wishes of our client. Do you believe it will be dangerous to her as-is?"

I bit my lip. Big question, in light of what this formula had done to previous clients... But after a moment, I shook my head.

"No. Maybe I'm just being optimistic, considering what the sample's done before, but... This is a more inherently defensive formula. The lower safety threshold should be fine."

"I would agree." She sounded openly approving now. "A good sign—a strong power can only bring you so far as a Thinker."

She placed the two prepared restriction vials to the side, then began to mix the three vials. I stepped back into a hallway, away from both the storage and the new formula, ready to leave at any point... But the light was easier to withstand this time. Maybe it was because I already knew roughly what it did, or watching it form had helped, or maybe using my power in its creation had made it simpler? Either way, when it was completed, my headache was better, not worse.

"Door, temporary single storage," Doctor Mother said, depositing the formula, before she began to store the rest of the components. I stepped inside and helped with the tools as she returned the components to storage, and as the last of the objects exited my range, I took a moment to breathe.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to do more than one a day," I said apologetically as she returned. "Not if we're also doing cape consultations before or after. I'm sure it'll get better as we go, but--"

"This is not a procedure that can be done sloppily," Doctor Mother said crisply. "I am well-aware of the hazards of Thinker-related power strain, and I would have required as much regardless. Door, my office."
We both stepped through. The process had taken us twenty minutes total, and the client would be here in forty more minutes.

"Speaking of the client's psych profile," Doctor Mother said, "I would like to have you join us for the meeting, as Contessa is otherwise occupied. I am not asking you to provide security, naturally," she said, smiling again; I guess something had shown on my face. "I merely believe it would be beneficial for you to see how the empowering process and the choice of client each affect the formula. If your power presents a problem, then we will ensure you are taken care of."

"Good point," I said. I took a breath. "Okay. Can I get the rest of the information on her? If I'm going to be interacting with a client, I want to know as much as possible."

"Naturally." She picked up a file on her desk, handing it over to me. "Here are the results of her background investigation; you will find additional notes and observations from our meetings at the end. If you have any additional questions, I will be here."

I sat down at one of the white chairs in front of her white desk, opened the file, and began to read.

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Rebecca Still's first words were, "Huh. Either the bird in the suit can change her age, or she's got a kid. Wouldn't've pegged her for it."

I wouldn't have expected the accent if I'd only skimmed the file; it seemed she was an expat.

I liked her suit. She had a darker complexion, and the pale gray didn't make her look washed-out like I would have. She pulled off the boyish cut of her hair well, even in her thirties.

"No relation." I stood up, brushing a black curl out of my eyes. "Other than our employment with Cauldron, naturally." I glanced at Doctor Mother, who nodded slightly, and turned back to the client. "We've met your request for a low-R high-P formula, and we took the opportunity to tailor the process."

The doctor turned away slightly. I wondered whether she was grimacing at my choice of pun or trying not to smile; either way, it was nice to see that little human reaction.

"Either you will die, or you will have stronger powers that much more closely match your request," I continued. "I'm afraid that the powers we could grant that match your description are strong enough that there won't be much middle ground."

"You sure don't sugarcoat things, do you." Still took a breath. "Right, okay, that's what I signed up for, isn't it? Let's get to it."

"Naturally." The doctor took over. "You will note the jumpsuit." She gestured towards a folded square of gray cloth on the chair. "There is a chance that you will destroy your clothes in the first expression of your power, especially with this sample, but the choice is yours."

"I like this outfit," she said, a hand moving to her top button. "Let's not take chances." I turned away, though I kept one ear open. I may not have been providing security, and I was sure she could beat me in a fight, but I liked to pretend caution could make a difference.

A moment later, she cleared her throat, and I turned around. As the doctor handed her a contract, I kept an eye on the metal canister containing the small vial. As thick as my thumb, as long as the stretch from my wrist to my longest finger, and it would give her powers strong enough to hopefully fight the Slaughterhouse Nine.
I'd become part of something very, very big, hadn't I?

"Huh." I glanced to the side, but her eyes were still fixed on the contract. "You're a Protectorate Thinker? Guess this conspiracy thing's bigger than I thought. Especially if you're that sure I won't blab about it." I tilted my head, and she must have caught it, because she shrugged. "Words on paper aren't worth much."

"My Thinker power is powers. You can see why that'd be useful here." I shrugged back. "I'm not averse to offering you a pro-bono consultation afterward, if you're interested? I'd rather you be a strong cape than end up as one of Bonesaw's toys."

"Sounds good." She signed three places on the forms with a flourish, handing off the clipboard. "Okay, let's skip the standard filler. Dream quest part sounds interesting but I don't really care, and I followed the rest of the procedures. Not going to fuck this up when I paid that much."

"As you wish. Drink quickly."

The doctor unscrewed the metal canister, handing her the vial inside. Still drank it in a single long swig.

"Chalky, with a paper-like bouquet," she said, voice deadpan. The doctor took the vial back. "I suppose I didn't expect anything bett--"

She pressed one hand to her chest, falling back against the chair. I looked to Doctor Mother, who seemed calm as ever.

"The pain is normal, and it will fade quickly. Remain calm, if you can."

"Easy for you to say," she managed to get out through clenched teeth. "Fuck me, is this acid?"

She clutched the armrests, and though she twitched and jerked, she stayed seated. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then thirty--

*Two immense beings floated through a void of space and not-space, twined through the thousands and thousands of dimensions, spiraling around each other in an intricately choreographed dance. They communicated every instant, sharing every aspect of themselves, accelerating with no regard for the restrictions of the speed of light but always keeping close--*

I staggered. Doctor Mother's hand rested on my back, keeping me on my feet. I barely registered the touch of her fingers, barraged as I was by the continuing sensations.

This was all so familiar, somehow, as if I'd once seen it in a dream...

*Their eyes, if you could call them eyes, were on Earth. They saw every dimension in a flickering multi-faceted vision, discarded countless, seeking some criteria I couldn't understand. Every dimension without people was discarded in an instant, most with people were, but they fixated on one quickly: ours. And as they moved, they shredded and shed parts of themselves, letting them disperse towards the place in their view.*

And then I knew, like filling in the center of a half-constructed puzzle:

*Entities. That was why all of the powers I'd seen in people seemed so designed, why I could understand them, why something about the formula creation had seemed so natural to me. These shards were literal shards, part of those immense evolved beings, they'd let them disperse out to fill this world, and I'd been given a piece of that process--*
Even as the images started to fade from my view, I felt a wind at my back and a grip on my arm. I was pulled through a portal, and a cup was lifted to my lips.

"Drink," a familiar voice said, her hand resting on my back to support me.

I drank, and as the world went dark, I dreamed of the dance of the Entities.

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I woke up to a soft chair and a fuzzy head. Contessa stood to my left.

What had I been--oh. Oh!

"You remember," she said, and I nodded slightly. "All trigger events incapacitate nearby capes, just as triggers themselves do. The formulas are no exception."

Hence her absence from the chamber, I imagined.

"Because we all see the Entities then," I murmured. "And... If you'd done nothing, I would have forgotten again, right? Just like after my Trigger."

"Yes. But if you fall asleep quickly enough, the safeties do not engage." Contessa shook her head, a small smile on her lips. "Thankfully, this time, I had access to chemicals which could knock you out with a relative degree of safety."

Something flickered in her eyes, then. It took a moment for her to look up at me.

"It has been fifteen minutes. You should return."

I nodded, and she directed me at the hallway. Open the door, turn left, and I felt her enter my range.

Good, I thought, eyeing her shard. It'd turned out just as I'd hoped.

"Oh, hey. Wondered where you went." Still waved from her seat, pushing herself up; she'd just finished changing, from the looks of it. "So what's the word, doc?"

She meant me, judging by the eye contact.

"Basically as I expected." I stepped forward, cocking back an arm, and hit her, open-palm, in the chest. She registered the lack of pain with raised eyebrows. "Feel that energy build up and fade away? It looks like you've got a little bit of storage, but for the most part, you're a redirector--you can take incoming light, heat, and force and push it back out again as heat or force. You'll have to find your upper limit on heat, I can't tell you that, but you can form a loop with your redirection--you absorb light most strongly and it's mostly harmless, so you can use that to build up a charge. Absorb kinetic, release light, absorb light, release light, absorb light, then push it all out as force, fire, ice, you get the idea." She nodded, and I frowned. "That said, I did expect your power to have a bigger battery. You're the proof of concept, and I guess there's a few kinks in the process that need working out... You're stronger than you would have been without my help, at least. You very nearly became a Mover-Breaker instead of a Breaker-Blaster."

"The loop might do everything I need, if I get good enough." She grinned, hopping off of the ground. "I'm still pretty strong, yeah?"

"You'll want to work with a team, preferably one with someone who can feed you light or fire, or else you'll need a fair amount of wind-up... But yes. While you can hurt yourself if you push past
what you can absorb, that's because the power isn't restricted for safety. Avoid dying and you'll find you have a lot of room to grow. Go do some Protectorate testing, make sure you know your limits for all three types, and practice using the power on yourself to make loops." I met her eyes. "And when you do, remember, you triggered naturally and we've never met."

"I've worked in crime with capes for ten years, all of that without a power," Still said. "I know a little something about not giving the game away." She stood up. "You're the Administrator, right? I'll keep an eye out for you. Let me know if there's ever something I can do you." She glanced at Doctor Mother. "You know, aside from the standard Cauldron favor thing."

I marked that down as something to ask about later.

"Kill any of the Slaughterhouse Nine, especially one of their big guns, and I'll be the one that owes you a favor." I held out a hand. "I'm just a Thinker, after all."

"Heh, yeah, guess so." The former thief shook my hand once, looking towards the doctor. "So. Anything else, or...?"

"You're free to go. Your exit is at the end of the hallway."

"Gotcha." Still brought her hand to her head, a gesture a little like tipping a hat that wasn't there. "Good day, then."

She walked out the hallway.

"Good," I murmured, even as the portal closed behind her. She hadn't realized, had she? One advantage of my age.

Doctor Mother walked to my side, facing the same direction, and met my eye in my peripheral vision. Judging by her expression, she was less apt to underestimate me. I tried not to let my unease show.

"You expected her power to have relatively little storage," Doctor Mother said. It didn't sound like a question. More importantly, she didn't seem surprised. "Rather, I suspect you designed it to be so. I'm rather curious as to why; that is unlikely to be what she would have desired, had she known your level of control."

"Adding more storage would have reduced the quality of the conversion, that part was true, but... Yes. I expected that." The doctor wasn't surprised, but she didn't seem upset, either, so I'd take my chances with honesty. "She'll be much more reliant on allies this way. As it turns out, villain teams have much higher turnover than heroes, for all the reasons you'd expect."

"I see. That power will be a boon in a team, but a liability as an independent cape, then. When alone, she'll have a Lung-like ramp up requirement without nearly so much strength, while in groups she will be a powerful force amplifier. A strong incentive to become a hero." She faced forward again, standing at my side, and no particular emotion entered her voice then. "A deliberate hedging of your bets. Do you trust us so little, Miss Hebert?"

I shrugged, eyes still on the empty hallway. My voice came out more casual than I felt.

"It just occurred to me that words on paper aren't worth much."

"True." Doctor Mother closed her eyes. "We sell to both would-be heroes and would-be villains. Now that we have proven your capabilities, I am not averse to selling your formulas only to the better sort. Capable heroes tend to last longer than villains, after all, and we are seeking to build up a
stockpile for the world's end." She opened her eyes again. "Naturally, it would be difficult to acquire background check records on your own without compromising our secrecy, and so we will continue to provide them for you. You must trust us to an extent—one cannot prove a negative, after all—but we will do our best to meet you halfway. Would that be acceptable?"

"More than I expected, really." I breathed a little easier. "Getting smart with the shadowy secret organization generally isn't a good idea." I laughed humorlessly. "I was worried Thinker arrogance was setting in already."

"You are valuable, and there is a time for courage. I would rather it was not with us, but rarely is fortitude so selective." She looked past me, then. "And I believe that Contessa wishes you filled in on a little more of our ultimate purpose. There would be many other opportunities to preserve your memory of the Entities, after all, if we are to continue taking clients, and yet she chose now..." She tapped one hand on her hip, eyes staring forward. "We chose, years and years ago, for me to lead, even if she directs, and it seems she wished me to make my own choice this time. Still, I do know her well, after all these years."

I turned towards Doctor Mother. I'd only heard her calm and composed; this new Doctor Mother was nostalgic and somehow sad, and I wasn't sure how to deal with that.

"Door, my office," she said, and I followed after her. She reached into the fridge as we emerged, handing me a bottle of water. "I believe it will be simplest if I first show you." Her voice rose, directed outwards, to make it clear she wasn't speaking to me. "Doormaker, please create two portals, such that the total distance between Miss Hebert and the fallen Entity spans twelve Brockton Bay city blocks."

'Fallen'? I'd started to suspect, after the vision, after I realized how powers were connected and seemingly designed, but hearing it...

So one of those two great things was dead.

Even without the lead-in, I think I would have connected my earlier vision and the shards to the maze of formula parts immediately. All three had the same creator's fingerprints, the same philosophy applied to flesh instead of superpowers: dozens of parts, each intricately designed, each operating independently, flowing in and out of each other and in and out of time and space. But where the shards operated independently, could and would and should work without each other, that couldn't apply to something alive. Each the dozens of hands was beautiful, yes, the curve of each neck made with an artist's hand, but hands weren't meant to be connected to necks. In composite, it was shoddy, ugly, the work of a learning algorithm that turned every painting into a maze of melted dogs. It was made in imitation of humanity, but it was a thoroughly alien understanding.

But then again, it had died while it was still learning, and its sheer size meant it had plenty of room to try. That was perhaps the most impressive part, really: in spite of all the time that had to have passed since its death, Contessa and Doctor Mother had barely begun to mine the great beast, had hardly made a dent in the mass of crystalline flesh. It was trophy and aspiration all at once, a sign of what Cauldron had accomplished and everything that they still had yet to do.

"Several decades ago, shortly before the arrival of the golden man we came to call Scion," Doctor Mother said, startling me out of my thoughts, "I found myself in a strange land. Twisted monsters wandered it, none of the people spoke languages I understood, and there was a great beast there, at the bottom of a crater." Her eyes were distant, set on the mass of flesh. "There, I met a young girl, about the same age as you. She alone could communicate with me."

"Fortuna," I said, and her eyebrows rose. Was my knowing the name that much of a surprise? She
"Yes. There was an accident, and as the Entity fell to earth, it lost parts of itself it had planned to keep. Fortuna received one of the most powerful pieces, and she used that power to find a way to kill it... But before she could, it stole away her ability to see it with her power, it and others like it." Her hands gripped the desk, lips pursed and eyes dark. "Due to the circumstances by which she gained her power, she saw much more deeply into its memory than most who trigger. She knew there was one other Entity--and she also knew that the Entities distributed the powers intentionally, as a part of their evolution, after crippling them so that they would not be used against their creator. By allowing them to be so used, they could force the powers to further develop." Her eyes had fallen to the desk as she spoke, and she looked up to meet my eyes again. "At which point they would reclaim all of the powers, destroy every single dimensional iteration of our planet, and move for another world that they might next consume. We had killed one of them, and the cycle was broken, but we could not trust that the second Entity would not try to destroy us regardless."

For a moment I stared at her blankly... And then my mind rewound the conversation.

No. That couldn't...

But it felt right.

"Scion," I said, the word emerging as a hushed whisper. "He's the other Entity, isn't he. The golden man is just a power he kept, and his real form is--"

"--something like that thing there, yes: a being that exists in countless dimensions, that tears apart worlds long before it devours them. He is Cauldron's true enemy." She sighed. "The claim has been further substantiated since. Contessa cannot derive plans against Scion specifically, nor can she gather information relative to him, but we have found certain ways around her limitations. The furthest ahead we have found any Path to extend is approximately fifteen years from now. Other paths result in the same, but in approximately three years, and there are any number of variances in-between. It is possible that this is due to another blind spot, but from what we've gathered of Contessa's power, we consider this unlikely."

I breathed in, then out, trying to keep it slow and even, but I still felt my heart speeding up every moment. In that instant, I felt truly helpless. To fight something that could so effortlessly stand against the Endbringers with a mere fragment of our power, that had carried perfected versions of every hero's ability and then simply discarded them... If it ever perceived us as an enemy before we were ready, we would die. If we were wrong, we would die. Everyone would die. Everything would all end in an instant.

I could feel my radius expanding.

What would happen when it pushed just a little further? If I saw everything that still remained in that fallen Entity... If even seeing a single randomly-mixed Cauldron formula had given me a headache--

I needed to say something, but my lips wouldn't move, my tongue was frozen, my throat was dry, my arms wouldn't move. And still it crept forward.

Doctor Mother stared straight ahead, either caught up in her own memories, or simply trying to give me space.

Funny. So politeness was literally going to be the death of me? Of all the ways to go.

Then a familiar light entered my radius, stepping out of a portal onto another Earth. It was still bright,
so bright, but I'd only seen that light so dim once.

It lit up. And then, in the last moment, the portal closed. In the next moment, a dozen other portals opened.

An unimaginable cascade of lights entered my view, winking on and off, portals opening and closing every instant...

A picture entered my mind, fifteen seconds into the unceasing barrage of lights and names, a great map connecting all of the disparate points of light even after they left my view--

--and then still more portals opened, all at once, and for a single moment, my power seemed to cover all of Earth, then still more Earths, until it encompassed every single living Cape, every parahuman created by Scion's shards and those of the fallen Entity.

And yet my head didn't hurt--it felt natural, more natural than only looking at a single power. It was as if I'd been born to do this, to stand above the world and see all of it, to behold the way it all connected together...

No, part of me had, the part of me that was part of an immensely greater alien, my 'agent,' the being whose name I'd chosen to take as my own... This was what it was born to be, and this was what it had been before it had been broken and released into the span of Earths.

Scion was a world unto himself, I knew that now. If each and every shard we'd been given, every single power, had been a piece of him, and if every power Cauldron created was a piece of the other... Then Scion had to hold as many powers as there had ever been capes, as many as there could ever be capes. Fighting him was like going to war with an entire planet. Humanity hadn't ever fought like that, not ever on that scale, and I was sure we would war among ourselves even at the very end--we weren't united, and uniting might be entirely impossible.

But there were many of us, and Scion would have to act alone. Every single cape in the world was a weapon in my hands, if only I could find the right way to wield that power. There had to be strength in our division, even as there was strength in his singularity. There had to be a path onward, even if Contessa couldn't take us there.

Only in that eternal moment, staring out across the endless expanse of light, did I truly understand just how many people there were in all our worlds. So many people to protect, so many people to fight beside, so many people to overcome, so many people trying to make a living somewhere in-between. So many people I didn't know, not yet... An entire world I'd barely seen, and so many worlds beyond that.

Thousands upon thousands of worlds, more than I could ever possibly see for myself, and the thousands more of subjective worlds, seen through each of their eyes. So many worlds, worlds that shouldn't all end in just fifteen short years--

And then all the portals closed. I abruptly returned to being Taylor Hebert... Just Taylor Hebert.

My breathing had stabilized, and I sighed, a hand to my chest. I reached up, wiping at my eyes, restoring clarity to the room even as I locked the memory in my heart. I wouldn't ever forget it.

"Thank you, Fortuna."

"I have a path set on keeping you safe from everything, yourself included." The woman in a dark suit, a darker black than my charcoal, walked through the door. She seemed as impossible poised as ever, as coolly confident; I couldn't see a single flaw in that veneer, no matter how hard I looked.
"It's nothing to thank me for."

I shook my head slightly. "You know why I'm saying that, don't you?"

Her power had been off in the moment before, and it was off now.

"True." Fortuna's body language shifted to something looser as she smiled at me, and I smiled back... And then the light returned, and she was Contessa once again. Doctor Mother was looking between us, brow faintly creased, but it smoothed out as I turned back towards her.

"My power's kind of tiring and the dead Entity is big, so you're going to have to get me a short list of the stronger samples and the ones you haven't quite figured out. After that, we need to take cross-sections of the parts you haven't mined yet, so we can take stock. Can't exactly scan it all myself," I said, but I couldn't help my smile. "I mean, really, you should have told me that we were going to kill omni-dimensional super-beings earlier... This is seriously messing with my timetable. I guess I'm going to have to move 'first dead Endbringer' up to seven months instead of six years. If we have an immediate apocalypse to avert, then I think I can table 'solving world hunger' for a bit."

The doctor stared at me a moment longer, then smiled.

"True. Rather inconsiderate of me... A good employer must lay out one's duties clearly, after all. I apologize for the delay." She stood up, and as I did the same, she held out her hand. "Once again, Taylor, and more truly this time: welcome to Cauldron."

"I'm glad to be here, Doctor."

"Call me Eva, Taylor," she said, as we shook hands.

"Eva, then."

But this was the second time she was shaking the hand of a little black-haired girl who'd chosen to help save the world, wasn't it? No wonder she'd taken me seriously from the very start of all this.

Big boots to fill, those. I'd have to try hard.

---

Once again, I was home later than I planned. Even as I stepped into the kitchen, Dad rose from the couch.

"Sorry," I said, yawning widely. "Big first day. You shouldn't have waited for me."

"It's no problem," he said, smiling. "It's easy to heat up." He really hadn't eaten... I wanted to sigh, but it made me happy--Dad had always done the same thing, back when Mom ended up working late. "How'd it all go?"

"Ask me in seven months," I said. "Hazard of my power is that I don't get to fix all the problems myself. It's a pain."

"I think I know how that goes, yes."

As a dockworker rep, I'm sure he would, the same way a city mayor knows something of being a god-emperor.

Still, I didn't laugh along with him; I hadn't been joking.
Behemoth, last time, two months ago. Leviathan or Simurgh next... And then the other, most likely.

prepare my [shards]:[arms/options/tools/weapons/selves/Partners]

I'd have to be ready.
The young woman in the cafe closed her eyes, relaxing. Cafes weren't usually her speed; there were too many little distractions, too many temptations to look into, and most of the leads were inconclusive or useless. Even a place like this, fairly close to the Rig, was more useless than useful.

Still, it was nice to walk around, to stretch her legs, to see the city with her own eyes--and to get a longer look at this specific piece of it, of course. There had been some disturbance in the Wards, in the Protectorate and PRT; she could see the ripples through their actions. Something had stirred the pot, and villains could sense it. Everyone was a little uneasy, she least of all, because she didn't know what it was yet.

She took that as a personal insult. If anyone outside knew what was going on, it should have been her.

She didn't really relax, even when she knew she should. Curiosity itched like a rat in her brain; if she left it to its devices, it would chew through all of the cables. She needed to do something, and soon. The Boss would start asking questions before long, and it might be best to have a question already in hand.

...or would proving too useful be dangerous? She considered it for a moment, in light of her ignorance of his exact power. If she knew and lied, then he could find out, she was sure of that. And if she'd deliberately tried not to find out despite knowing that he'd want to know--

The door's bell rang out. She looked up, just as always, logging the person and checking them against her memory--and then she stopped.

A girl, high school age at most. Tall, skinny, long dark curly hair. Not many high school girls wore suits, though, much less such well-fitting (tailored?) suits in such somber colors. She could be older than she looked, with that frame, but it didn't strike her as likely.

She had a smile on her face, the kind of look that said that there was some great cosmic joke that only she knew about. It was an expression she knew well.

The girl moved to the pick-up counter, taking a seasonal special: peppermint tea. She walked to the counter, peering over cream and sugar and other options, before ignoring all of them and walking directly towards her.

"Good morning," the girl said, setting down the cup on her table and sitting across from her. "Would you prefer 'Sarah' or 'Lisa'?"

There was a door in her mind, and she opened the crack ever so slightly.


"Lisa."

This happened to her before. Smiling because situation turned around, now the stronger Thinker approaching weaker. Knows more than her power provides.
"I'm a Power Thinker, as it happens," the girl said. "Can you turn yours off? I have actual questions, and if you get a Thinker headache before I can ask them, you'll waste both our time. I can't bring David in for this." She took a sip from her tea.


"My name is Taylor, by the way--Taylor Hebert. In costume, I'm Administrator. I'm full Protectorate as of this week."

*Uncommon position for age and recency of Trigger. Powerful allies. Will be insulted if I refuse or try to leave. Will not let me leave.*

Lisa closed the door all of the way. The moment it went totally silent, Taylor inclined her head slightly, lifting her cup to her lips again; it almost hid the slight smile there, concealing in a way that only drew all the more attention to it.

"Sorry, it's just..." Administrator waved a hand. "I started this week on the other end of this conversation and I've spent the time since on sink-or-swim. It's a nice break, getting to be the actually powerful one for a bit. I'll have to hope it's a pattern..

"It comes with the territory," Lisa said. "So. What's happening now?"

"You're Administration: Synthesis, plus a lot of modifiers." Administrator put the cup down. "Most shards are locked so that they explicitly can't do certain things. Yours won't lead you to certain places, to certain pieces of knowledge--but if I tell you the broad strokes and then you lead it there yourself, it will still work." The girl leaned forward. "I know certain things about the nature of our powers, and I need to confirm certain suspicions. You're a Thinker I know who can do the job on short notice. In exchange, I'm willing to let you put me in your debt."

"I see." Tattletale took a sip from her own cup, thinking. How to leverage this? "Do you have authorization?"

"I don't. I don't need it." The woman in the suit said it like it was simple fact. Most Thinkers would have, though, so that didn't mean much. "Besides. A Thinker with your power, staying in one place, committing petty thievery? That's not you. No, someone has you by the metaphorical balls, Tattletale, and if you had your way, you wouldn't be here. I can fix that." She waved a hand. "Feel free to confirm any part of that, if you want."

Lisa opened the door, just a touch. Her power burst through the cracks, but she kept a firm grip, shutting it fast a moment later.

"You believe it," Lisa said. "Which doesn't mean much."

"Coil." Hebert yawned, eyes squeezing shut with the motion. "I know when he activates his power, I know when he turns it off--and more than that, I know that his power just creates simulations. True, the information it gives might let him evade me for a little while, but all he has is a decent Thinker ability and a few well-armed thugs. No capes, no political influence, no doomsday devices? Hah. I could beat him without resorting to my shadowy backers, but I will, because he's a pissed off and we're almost to our next Endbringer attack. I have better ways to spend my time." She cracked open an eye. "So answer a few questions about powers for me, Lisa, and I'll get him out of your hair. Once that's done, you can go back to, I don't know, trying to get around the anti-cape measures on the stock market or something, while I go deal with the rest of the crap on today's to-do list."
Taylor Hebert got crabby when her competence was questioned. Also not unlike most Thinkers, admittedly, but likely a function of her age. False bravado, to some degree. The girl wasn’t quite conceited enough to think she’d ended up where she was entirely on her own ability, rather than the power she had been given.

"Not a fan of villains, I see," Lisa said, and Hebert opened her other eye just so could roll both.

"Jack Slash is a 'villain.' He's earned the title, and he uses it in useful ways, like keeping the rest of the world from realizing that he's actually some kind of precog or sensory Thinker. Which, by the way, is what I need to talk to you about--blind spots." She waved a hand. "Now make up your mind--either turn your power on so I can start asking questions, or leave and return to your leash. I have things to do."

Lisa looked at her a moment longer, weighing her options. Then she suppressed a sigh, forced down her pride, and opened the door.

Jack Slash. Unusual length of survival. Implies unusual aptitude with controlling or predicting willful capes. Cape Thinker? Common theme of slash-extending power suggests--

She grabbed ahold of the power, forcing it to stay, bringing it to heel like one of Bitch's dogs.

She held her mind empty for a moment, and then Administrator nodded, speaking.

"Our powers are pieces of immensely greater multidimensional beings that operate in pairs," she said, taking a sip from her cup. "They travel to planets and disperse their shards; the natives use them, and the Entities take that information and use it to evolve further." The girl narrowed her eyes, leaning forward. "All of which you were told, when you Triggered. Most Capes forget. If they can do that, then they have a direct line to our brains... And all shards are limited before they come to us. Thinkers are limited in ways that keep them from following the loose string back to the Entities. The question, Tattletale, is whether there's any other ways that our powers change us--shared blind spots, weaknesses, things we're not allowed to think."

The leash was shaking, vibrating hard enough to make her 'hand' hurt. Continuing to hold on on when it the door was already open wasn't an option.

Lisa took a deep breath, and then she let go.


'Fairy Queen' of Birdcage? May know more. Also insane, dangerous, difficult to contact. Unlikely to be useful.

Redirect it.

Common features of parahumans. Trigger requires intense negative event. Granted power dependent on type of event, solution to event, user. Shard altered to correspond to event? Likely not host.

Granted shard abilities include precognition, analysis, control of space and time. Powers exist in both Earths Aleph and Bet, possibly others. Entities not limited by linear time or single dimension. Luxury of choice for individual hosts.

Choice of hosts deliberate.
She leashed the power again, at least long enough to speak.

"They don't need to alter the hosts too much," she said, looking up. Hebert tilted her head, the gesture quick, birdlike. "They have precognition--they can choose who gets what to accomplish their goals."

"And most powers go to petty criminals..." Administrator's eyes narrowed. "But not all of them. If they want to evolve--"

"--then they need the shards to compete." A shared nod.

_Competition. Conflict. Shards do not change hosts, hosts change shards--mutually reinforcing? Powers go to people who will use powers in ways powers want to be used._


Redirect it.

_Precognition._

_Interdependence. Large-scale cooperation inhibits conflict. Powerful shards go to capes who will not cooperate. Nilbog, Sleeper, other S-Classes._

A moment of incongruity, before her power flew down a new set of hallways.


Outside of usual process? Yes.

A pause to consider.

_Administrator. Protectorate too young. 'Shadowy backers.' Conspiracy? Ties to Triumvirate? Yes. Common background._

_Administrator referenced being on other side of conversation. Powerful Thinker found her. Recruited to behind-curtain organization._

_If I try to publicize this, I will disappear._

Another pause, another moment of acknowledged confusion.

_Administrator not cooperative type. Shard desires authority, demands authority. No combat uses. Given to one without authority, without easy access to authority. Natural Trigger?_

_Shards desire conflict. Do not need to change host, chosen host will maximize conflict of own will in keeping with shard's wishes._

_Hebert wishes to resolve conflicts. Referenced Endbringers. Wishes to kill Endbringers. Believes self capable. Conspiracy resources._

And again.

_Administration. Chosen name based on information from powers. Administration shards important._

Similarities to world situation?

Cops and robbers. Prisoner's dilemma.

She shut the door. For a moment, she thought through the implications. She checked her work, checked it again, nodded in satisfaction. Consistent, supported, and she hadn't used her power long enough to descend into unsupported speculation... Good. It was solid back-of-the-napkin work.

And then she laughed.

Hebert watched, more than a little perturbed. Like any Thinker, she wanted to think she was the smartest in the room. It was unwise to bait the dragon for too long... But it was just too perfect. She'd been played like a fiddle, and this was going to be glorious.

"The shards don't change us, we change the shards," Lisa said, echoing her earlier thoughts. "Mostly. Some give additional senses that scramble us around a bit, but generally that's true. Instead, we're chosen because we'll conflict naturally. The really powerful shards go to people who will use them in ways that will force the shards to grow, change, develop. The Entities don't actually care about humans, we're just a tool for their testing."

Hebert nodded.

"So the strongest natural triggers," she said, emphasizing the next-to-last word, "go to so-called 'villains,' who're more likely to go solo or head their own group. Ones a little stronger than baseline go to natural 'heroes,' who are more likely to band together to stand against stronger enemies. The low-level stuff goes to petty criminals. This creates a natural ebb and flow of conflict where the less useful shards are continually fed to the more powerful ones, with new triggers regularly introduced to keep the pot boiling, and it's likely that old shards are recycled into the system at intervals. Without outside intervention, we probably wouldn't have had a Protectorate--no organization so large or so well-connected."

"I see." Administrator frowned, taking a slow sip of her tea.

"You know what a prisoner's dilemma is," Lisa said, and Hebert nodded. She'd have nodded even if she didn't know, because she was the type of person who'd get an Administration shard. "Most people given the shards conflict, they defect. People find it difficult to ally, because you're removed from the game when you're out of points... But the shards are all part of the same original system, so they're all cooperating. 'Ally' or 'defect,' whatever we choose, we choose it because they wanted someone who would choose it--it's all in service of the greater cycle, because the Entities are the greatest precogs we've ever seen. It's a giant game of cops-and-robbers where the Entities are heading and controlling both sides, keeping either from getting strong enough to end it."

Hebert's frown had widened.

"But precogs aren't perfect. They have blind spots, and other precogs can create blind spots. In this case, an outside force entered the game." Tattletale spread her hands in a wide, sweeping gesture. "Let's call them the Third Entity for now. As a result of their interference, they gave certain heroes their powers, and with that set of guaranteed 'Allies,' we were able to create the Protectorate. The first two Entities lost control of the entire board; the balance between ally-and-defect was lost, destabilizing the conflict." Despite herself, she felt her smile widening in anticipation.

"But think. Some shards are particularly important... You prioritize, because there has to be an
allowance for unforeseen circumstances when you're evolving something as strong as the shards. There's a short list of ones that should be placed in the most conflict. Some seed the initial pool, but the rest are given out later, once the situation is established and deviations are recognized. These high-priority shards are therefore given more latitude to self-modify and choose hosts so they can correct the course of the greater game."

Miss Administrator was beginning to get it.

Lisa was self-aware enough to realize that she'd been picked well for her shard, too... It'd probably be more productive to avoid antagonizing Hebert, but this was so much fun.

"Top of the list? Administration. The ones that let the Entities think, that help them perpetuate the cycle... They're the ones that are prioritized, given to those who will be in the places of greatest conflict." Tattletale leaned forward. "And the Entities have been playing the Prisoner's Dilemma for a long, long time. They're good at it. When you optimize a Prisoner's Dilemma, the best system is a variant of tit-for-tat—to do what the other players do. If they cooperate, you cooperate... And if you're betrayed, you betray right back. It's a system that requires communication, because otherwise, the betrayer can continue betraying without conflict."

Taylor Hebert had a pretty great horrified expression--it had to go on the top ten. If she had a camera, she'd frame it and put it on her wall.

"Congratulations, Administration Coordination," the holder of Administration Synthesis said, grinning widely. "Your shard self-modified—it changed plans. It decided to defect, so it chose someone it was damn sure would go out of their way to try to fix everything. It chose someone who'd be able to find all the secrets the Entities wanted hidden, who'd want to use that information to stop all of the fighting. And if you have to stop everyone from fighting, well then, you're doing to have to do a lot of it yourself, won't you? And the other shards are going to know that yours has gone off the reservation."

"You're not talking about... I don't know, capes just going crazy around me?"

"What? No. I told you, they don't change the users. They pick them, and they pick the expression of the power." Administrator looked relieved for just a moment, before Tattletale decided to pop that little bubble of hope. "No, it's WORSE than that. If you start working, and you start to succeed? Well, then I imagine we'll start to get some pretty spectacular Triggers soon. More Endbringers, maybe? I mean, they're a pretty fantastic system for perpetuating conflict, aren't they? A crude tool, introduced because the delicate ones weren't working."

Hebert's head dropped to the table with a soft thump, and Lisa tried really, really hard not to laugh. It came out as a sort of strangled chortle, and the other Thinker looked up with one baleful eye.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Lisa said. (She wasn't sorry.) "I know, it's my planet too, I live here, don't want anything to go too wrong. But, wow, you definitely got the shitty job. Enjoy that."

Hebert pushed herself up, pinching her nose. "Right," she said, standing. "I'm wondering if I should have gone with El-Ahrairah for my name instead... But I asked for this. I'll take the bad news with all of the good." She turned towards the door, then glanced back. "Coil. Do you object to me just killing him? He's useless to our plans and I'm already in a bad mood."

"Feel free," Lisa said, waving a hand. The girl wouldn't actually do it, but it wasn't like she'd know the difference. "Mind giving me a phone number? I know our leader would want to be a Ward, if he could get some additional accommodations. The others might be amenable, but both are a bit addled by their powers and backgrounds."
"I'll contact them myself, then." Lisa's phone vibrated inside her pocket. "That should be my contact information," Hebert said; she hadn't touched her own phone. Might be that more powerful Thinker she'd alluded to. Probably a precog. "If I were you, I'd talk to the Wards myself--with the precedent I'll be establishing, you might be able to make full Protectorate on the fast track. Less money, but much more safety and much less blackmailing."

"Right." Lisa raised her cup. "Good luck saving the word, Taylor."

Taylor sighed, but she was smiling. She was halfway out the door before she called her response out over her shoulder.

"I'm not the sort of person who'd do anything else, right?"

Lisa watched her go. For a moment, she tilted her head, thinking.

One way or another, Coil would be gone soon. With that done, there wasn't really anything holding her here. The Wards didn't know much about her, much less her original identity...

A fresh start, then. Somewhere far from the coasts, far from any power plants, and... Well, there really wasn't much you could do to avoid the Simurgh. Avoid interesting heroes, possibly, but the soon-to-be-former Tattletale wasn't the type to avoid challenges--if she was, she wouldn't have gotten an Administration shard.

She'd give the Undersiders due notice, then she'd leave. A new Ward in a new town--a new life, interesting enough to keep her busy and boring enough to keep her alive. Maybe some interesting local villain, someone she could drive a little crazy without them actually flipping out and killing her?

Find the right local Protectorate leader, say the right words, convince him to overlook the inevitable similarities to this identity. Work up through the ranks, do some honest work, impress everyone with her wit and talent, see if she could work out some good consulting gigs...

Meanwhile, her fellow Administrator would be here, there and everywhere, trying to save the world.

"Godspeed, you crazy bitch," Sarah Livsey murmured with a smile, raising her cup towards the door in a quiet salute. "And here's hoping we never meet again."

Chapter End Notes

I didn't imagine that it'd take me quite so long to go back through and post all of these, but I suppose that's the hazard of letting yourself touch-up old work. I'd like to say I'll have the rest of it all up within the next week or so, but I'm not quite that confident in my work ethic. Again, should you be reading this for the first time, the full work to date is up at Spacebattles.
The next morning, there was an unfamiliar figure at Cauldron's table.

We were in yet another one of their entirely-white rooms, one with entirely-white chairs and an entirely-white table. I knew that the aseptic look was great for getting the whole 'all-seeing shadow organization' motif across, but a little color really wouldn't have hurt.

"You're the new Thinker, I take it," the man in a suit said, standing and turning towards me. He wore glasses, and combined with his mild-mannered facial expression, it made him look like someone's dad. No tie today, though, so I guessed he was going for 'cool dad.' "I am the Number Man. I handle Cauldron's finances and track the world's.'"

Which would be where a lot of their intelligence came from.

"Good to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "Administrator, real name Taylor Hebert. I sense powers." I tilted my head. "An intuitive understanding of numbers..."

Powers were meant to be used in combat, and the ability to trace arcs, discern distances, and recite your billions times tables didn't seem very combat applicable. Of course, all my power did was see powers from very far away, presumably knowing that I could always just grab a gun. I had to assume that his shard followed the same principles. Additional senses, then, refined into combat deduction?

Even when he wasn't drawing on it, his light had a high passive brightness--dimmer than mine or Contessa's, but still far above average. Natural triggers like we three all seemed to keep a relatively stable power well, so I wasn't sure just why we were all brighter.

*high shard attunement*

My intuitive Thinker knowledge wasn't giving me anything useful on that topic, other than a certainty he was dangerous.

"I'll have to ask more about your side of things after this," I said. I looked at Contessa and Doctor Mother. "Is this a good time to discuss my affairs, or is there something else to attend to? I didn't really prepare for a proper meeting."

"Nothing of the sort," Doctor Mother said. "Number Man is simply the third member of Cauldron's planning staff. The Triumvirate largely handle the PRT and Protectorate, and so we are the ones you will work with most often."

"With you having joined us, that makes four," Contessa said. "We had yet to reach any matter requiring his attention, but now that you know of Scion and the Entities, we have no intention of hiding further aspects of Cauldron from you."

"In the interests of full disclosure, you may hear my name elsewhere," Number Man said. "I run discreet banking and investment services, which villains make extensive use of. I believe the reasons why should be clear enough, in light of my other duties."

Other duties? Cauldron financials, track the world's flow of money... Ah.
"A steady flow of supplementary income, but more importantly, a good source of intelligence," I said, and he nodded.

"It is difficult to track villains otherwise. I will also be handling any financial assistance you require for Cauldron projects. As an equal partner, you have your own access to our funds, but there is a necessary level of obfuscation before they become available."

"What did you do today, Taylor?" "I talked to our conspiracy's accountant about our money-laundering procedures."

"I see. Thank you, I'll ask about that when we have time to talk. Let's start, if there's nothing else in the way." We two Thinkers joined the table, and I took a deep breath—and promptly yawned.

When I opened my eyes, I saw everyone else looking at me, seeming a little amused. I couldn't help blushing.

"Late night?" Doctor Mother peered at me. "You're a little pale."

"I'm always a little pale. Got it from my mother." I tried to smile through my embarrassment. "But yeah, I was refining my notes for the meeting I've got Thursday with the Protectorate. I don't have to do anything official today outside of classes, so I thought I'd push it a little." Then I realized how that might sound. I hadn't even been a part of this for a week: if they thought I was already burning out, I wouldn't be here for long. "I still feel alert, though, that's not an issue."

"Take a break after lunch," Fortuna said. Her shard had dimmed a little, and her smile was a little less practiced, a little warmer. "We do have comfortable beds in an extra set of rooms."

Number Man nodded. "I make frequent use of it, myself. It's quite pleasant."

I'd apparently joined a giant worlds-spanning god-killing conspiracy that had a nap room.

I managed to get the giggles under control a moment later.

"Noted. Thanks." Look very serious, Taylor. "Now that we all know entirely too much about my sleep schedule... You've all received my e-mail on the matter I discussed with the Thinker Tattletale?"

"And the attached audio log, yes," Number Man said. I'd almost decided against that, but... I wasn't vain or paranoid enough to discount the possibility that I'd missed something important in her words, even if I disliked putting myself under the microscope. "Most of it is interesting but minimally applicable." A small shadow crossed his face. "Even if the talk of additional triggers and Endbringers is... concerning."

'Terrifying' seemed more the word.

"It is concerning, yes, but it's still a good sign," I said, trying to sound as optimistic as I didn't feel. "If the shards are bothering to change their plans because of me, then it means I'm in a position to do some damage. And if not, well, no harm no foul."

Doctor Mother was concealing a small smile, even as Contessa and Number Man nodded. It was nice, being respected like that.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk specifics on the excavation project with the fallen Entity. Now that we know that the schedule's likely to accelerate, I want to discover as much as we can about Scion's reserved shards by examining the fallen Entity's."
"The ones he kept back for personal use," Doctor Mother said slowly. "Tools intended to neutralize the threat of aggressive shard holders, then."

"And to deal with other Entities," I said, and eyebrows went up around the table. "It's obvious, isn't it? They're evolving. Humans don't need much more than a spear or a bow to deal with animals--you don't make nukes to kill bears. Subsistence doesn't require all of the abilities shards have shown so far. Plus, if shards are self-sufficient enough to distribute across a planet, durable enough that they still work when mostly crippled, and if Entities retain their sense of self even when a large number of their shards are changed--"

"--then harvesting from another Entity would be a highly efficient method of evolution." Contessa nodded to herself. "Therefore, even mid-cycle, the Entities would wish to reserve anti-Entity tools, so as to defend themselves if necessary. They would be his trump cards, and if they do not evolve further, then both Entities would have some version."

"How funny," Eva murmured, looking down at the table. I blinked, and she looked up at me, chuckling quietly. "At times, Taylor, even killing one Entity has seemed utterly impossible. We've tried not to dwell on their nature."

"The Path cannot see Entities," Fortuna said. She was smiling, too. "And so we instead chose to view Scion as simply another enemy, as something I could model. How do you fight a powerful human? You gather weapons, supplies, an army."

"And now we may win because our enemy is an Entity, not despite it." Another soft laugh. "You are correct--it is entirely possible that any number of shards are explicitly anti-Entity. That may be the key." She considered me. "But they modify shards, do they not? In part to prevent them from being used against their creators. Even should we find an unmodified Entity-slayer shard, it is possible that its label as such will be hidden from you."

"That's true..." I hadn't considered that. I probably trusted my own power too much, in light of everything I'd learned about the shards in general. "But it should at least still list effects, and it's possible that we've already excavated one of those anti-Entity tools. One of the priorities will be some sort of anti-nullifier effect, something to stop him from stopping shards--we'll need that against Scion."

If they needed to warp space to even exist within our world, then that was their most obvious weak spot. Moreover, a refined form of power nullification would be the strongest anti-Entity weapon. If they were made up of shards, and you had a way to prevent shards from operating, well, a stopped heart and a stopped brain fit most definitions of death.

"There's a number of samples that either dampen effects or appear to have no effect," Doctor Mother said. "I'll see to it that you're pointed to the right records."

"Thank you," I said. There was the sound of a cleared throat, and as I looked at Number Man, he began to speak.

"As for how we will conduct that search, my domain includes efficiencies of scale and search patterns," he said. "I'll work with Contessa to draft a plan and coordinate the actual sampling process. First, however, I'll accompany you to the storage rooms. If we discover the average dimensions of the individual shards, then the efficiency of any related model will rise dramatically."

"Good." I breathed out. "After that, in terms of my other long-range projects, I need to get in range to check Dragon's shard. Judging from her previous work, it seems to be a sort of Tinkering based on the work of other Tinkers, but the specifics are going to determine a lot of where I go from here. I
expect she'll be the key to useful large-scale Tinker coordination. On a related matter, Contessa, please make plans for getting rid of Saint and his lackeys. I don't know what advantage the Dragonslayers have over her, but I don't want them getting in the way. Additionally, please keep an eye out for any sort of Tinkering mass production shard, if you can... I know you found me, so I know you have questions for finding specific powers. We need force multipliers."

"All three tasks are simple," Contessa said. She considered me. "I might involve Armsmaster in the affair with Saint; from all accounts he has a cordial relationship with Dragon. If you wish to use both for the Tinker project, then it might be best to strengthen that connection." A small smile crossed her face. "And he does seem to have somewhat of a hero complex."

"That'd be fine with me." I considered asking for her help with the Brockton Bay Protectorate meeting, but I still didn't know her angle. They had referred to me as an equal partner, but experience alone taught me that no one ever entirely stopped jockeying for position. It was best to manage as much as I could on my own. "Best to get started on the dimensions check first, since that will enable the other steps." I paused, tilting my head. "Before that, though, do you all have any particular name for the fallen Entity? The nameless references are kind of a mouthful, and it'd be helpful to have something to use in mixed company."

"Not particularly," Doctor Mother said.

"I was thinking 'Heir,' then, in keeping with Scion's name," I said, looking around the table. And as a reference to the Entities co-opting the growth and the discoveries of the shard hosts. "No objections?"

None, it seemed, if simply because they didn't care.

Number Man called the door, and we walked through. I grit my teeth, but my shard's feedback seemed to have lessened some, after my brief glimpse of what it had been; I was still mostly fine.

We walked through the containers. I grabbed a white lab coat, putting it on. I offered Number Man one, but he waved me aside. Spoilsport.

I put the coat back, thinking, and then I met the other Thinker's eyes behind his glasses. He looked back at me with polite interest.

"One question before we begin," I said. "Not really an important one, but, well, would you mind telling me your first name? I don't have to use it if you'd prefer I not, it'd just be kind of strange thinking of a coworker as 'Number Man' all of the time."

For a moment, he froze in place. He turned, beginning to examining me more closely, enough that I was starting to wonder if he suspected my powers were more than I'd said.

Then he smiled at me, pushing his glasses up with a finger.

"My given name is James," he said. "I'd rather you not shorten it."

"Jimmy is fine, then? Same length."

He laughed, seemingly taken by some private joke, before turning back to the formulas. "I've grown into a rather tolerant adult," he said. "It will do, Taylor."

"James, then. Thank you, Number Man. Shall we begin?"

"Of course." James looked out over the room. "I'm not personally involved in the formula
construction, but from what I understand of their structuring, it would be best if we start by--"

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Most people join the Protectorate through the Wards; later joiners tend to be villains. This explains why there's so many required courses for non-Wards upon recruitment: malice. And perhaps a test of dedication and/or self-control, but mostly malice. Jerks.

It was a pretty intimidating list of classes, even with online course options. Until that got done, I wasn't meeting anyone outside our own city, and I'd been gently 'advised' to prioritize it ahead of, say, talking to New Wave.

Now, normally I could have knocked those out quickly, and I would have liked to. Unfortunately, I had a formula a day to do and a giant dead alien to analyze. My increased ability to scan large numbers of shards without headaches made it possible, but it still left me pretty out of it by the end of the day. We hadn't gotten much productive out of the scan of Eva's shortlist; most of the shards she'd highlighted were based on some human domain of perception instead of a more conceptual effect. Our formulas were proof enough that you didn't need all of a shard to use it for a power, so it was entirely possible that Scion had kept a little back--and if he still had my power sense, we'd need to interfere with that directly to keep him from using it. What was the point of stopping him from seeing us if he could shortcut that by looking for our shards?

It wasn't completely useless, though: we did find one power that dampened shard-based perception. To Contessa, Number Man, Gallant or myself, they'd simply be a void, expanding out to blanket everything around them. That'd be great if it could be directed, but most power nullifiers were indiscriminate... I'd have to find some sort of modifying shard that let abilities be used at-will, and it'd still have to go out late in the game. Even if they could control it, even if they were perfectly trustworthy, unpredictable gaps in the Path were dangerous.

I gave the Protectorate heroes (my coworkers, and Triumph aside, all nearly twice my age) a breakdown of their powers that Wednesday. We were in the same room we'd used for the Wards, and there were roughly just as many people there.

More importantly, I also delivered my 'villains of Brockton Bay' brief.

"--which gives me reason to believe that Oni Lee may actually be seriously brain-damaged. I think that if we're able to take out the leadership, he'll effectively be neutralized as a threat, because he doesn't really have the executive function required to make independent decisions."

He'd be a good one to discreetly feed to Eidolon's power well, I thought, even as a part of me still shuddered at the idea. I knew it was awful, but, I mean, if he had to kill someone...

"How certain are you of that conclusion?" I looked up, meeting Armsmaster's eyes through his mask. "That has fairly serious implications for our strategy against the ABB."

He was still in the dark blue armor with hints of silver. This time, he had the helmet and visor, revealing only his mouth and beard. He worked with efficiency and downsizing his creations, such that he could fit half a dozen functions in his single big halberd. He was my explicit ally in the room. (I hoped so, anyway.)

"Think I can see it," Assault said, arms crossed; he tilted his head, nodding slowly. "You've seen his eyes through that mask, right? Not hard to believe the man's not all there."

Assault was, like Armsmaster, in armor and an eye-covering visored helmet. He was an acceleration
Striker, capable of launching himself or anything he touched; he got to choose the vector, and he had a little Brute toughness to make his self-launching useful. He was the type to poke and prod, a little like Clockblocker, and I needed to seem more professional than I had against the Ward—they were kids and I was a kid and acting too adult would have rung false. I got the impression Assault was holding back a bit, though, so I guess he was being considerate. Not a bad person, even if he used to be a villain.

"You have to be a certain level of imbalanced to kill so many versions of yourself, considering his suicide bomber tactics," Battery said. She turned to face him more fully. "But you don't have to be brain-damaged to be strange."

Battery had a sort of skin-tight bodysuit with etched-in circuit board lines; if she stayed still, it reacted with her power, beginning to glow. She had a sort of strange Alexandria Package, where the longer she stood still, the more time she'd get to use her super speed, super strength, durability, and electromagnetic control. The weird thing was, it was all about whether or not she was moving herself, not whether she was moving, so it seemed they had quite a bit of success just having Assault fling her at things.

"I resent the implication, puppy!"

There was a chorus of muffled snickering, and I let myself laugh along. I couldn't look weak, but I couldn't look cold either.

Battery's cape name had come first, and I was pretty sure Assault had picked his to annoy her after turning his coat. Still, she'd married him, so it must have all worked out. She might have been why he was on such good behavior, and if it was, I'd have to send her a gift basket later. Everyone liked fruit, right?

"Please feel free to confirm it with other Thinkers; I can't judge his mind, only what his shard will do to it in time. It's entirely possible he hasn't deteriorated quite that far, but he's had a fairly lengthy career by villain standards." I exhaled. "After that, Lung."

**Escalation: Thermokinetic Self-Specified Alteration.** One of the simplest descriptions I'd seen, a shard very nearly unmodified—I'd have thought he was an especially lucky Cauldron cape if not for its steady glow. It had to be an especially important shard, one that needed to be set loose to evolve for future usage by the Entities, or I couldn't imagine that they'd let go of it; any fight long enough to threaten an Entity would last long enough for them to activate it and grow much more powerful.

And that shining piece of godshatter had gone to a petty, ambitionless thug. That was proof enough of Tattletale's talk of carefully-controlled conflict, if you asked me.

"If you're wondering if there's some secret Achilles heel to the Escalation shard, then I'm afraid I'll have to disillusion you," I said. "It doesn't have limits. I don't mean that those limits are hard to reach, I mean that they don't exist. If Lung was occupied, if he was faced with a continually ramped-up challenge, he'd never stop. If he faced off against all of the Endbringers simultaneously, he'd eventually grow bigger than the planet. The only thing holding him back is the fact that very nearly nothing would be a threat once he's grown that far."

That got a full round of looks to circle the room.

"Power nullification isn't an easy answer, either," I said. "Lung has two powers: first, conflict-based transformation, and second, thermokinesis. If you stopped his power, all you'd do is keep him from using fire or transforming further. Rather, power nullification might even prevent him from transforming back once a fight ended. It'd all depend on the specific implementation of the
nullification power, and I can see that sort of thing." I clicked my tongue. "Which would be great, if only the transformation power hadn't gone to fricking Lung."

I got a laugh out of someone with that, but the sea of masks made it hard to tell who.

"Is there any factor that controls how quickly he ramps up?" Dauntless. "That has serious implications for how we handle him, should we be alone."

Dauntless was the rising star. He had a white-gold outfit and an ornate helmet of some ancient design--Greek, maybe? Whatever. More importantly, he was a Trump, capable of gradually enhancing objects until they developed their own powers. I'd call it Tinker-like, except that he only chose what to charge: his power decided what happened to it. So far as I could tell, it didn't have a limit, and they were hoping he could stand against the Endbringers. Thankfully (and unlike Tinkers), I could read his tools, but that raised sort of uncomfortable questions.

Then again, even if his tools were all some sort of bizarre alien pseudo-lifeform, that wasn't even in the top ten of uncomfortable power implications.

"That's true," I said. "So far as I can tell, it's like a self-depressing spring. The longer he's gone since a serious transformation, the faster he ramps up, but the actual trigger of his transformation is purely mental. If he feels the need to be aggressive, then it's active, and you can't make it worse."

"That sounds like a challenge."

I let myself roll my eyes at Assault, because everyone was expecting it anyway.

"The real answer to Lung is the Birdcage or a kill order and an anti-tank rifle, because nothing short of that will last. Not much I can contribute there, I'm afraid, unless you really need a sniper."

I took a look around the room. "The final villain I want to discuss is Coil. He does have a power, but, well." I grimaced. "This is slightly complicated, so bear with me here, okay?"

I took in their nods, then breathed in and out.

"If you asked Coil, he'd bullshit you. If you somehow read his mind, though, you'd probably hear that he thinks that his power lets him live two alternate timelines and pick the one that turns out best." I held up my hands, palms up, and raised one. "In one timeline, he maintains a civilian identity; in the other, he sits in his supervillain bunker. If someone broke into his bunker, he'd collapse that timeline and be completely safe--" I clapped my hands together, then spread them apart again. "--at which point he'd split the timeline again. By the same token, any time he wants to do something as Coil, he can keep one timeline where he doesn't act. This means that Coil only ever seems to act if he wins, at least in the short term."

A low murmur passed around the room, and I let my hands fall back to my side.

"Sounds powerful, right? But that's not actually what his power does. He's a quirky precog and intuitive Thinker with delusions of grandeur." I shook my head with a slight smile. "Precognition interferes with other precogs, but the degree varies. Coil is somewhat of an exception, because his narrowness of scope and duration reduces the effect to nearly nothing. He learns from the simulated timeline, and it's fully accurate, but it's limited to his perspective and he can't look ahead. If I sense that he's somewhere, he's not going to just suddenly pop and appear on the other side of the city. I'm an exact counter to that aspect of his ability."

Honestly, though he might be limited, he was powerful. He'd be useful to have on your side! ...at least, if you lacked access to Contessa. To me? Not so much.
A hand was raised--Velocity.

He was in red with stripes down the middle, meeting in a V at his chest, and his power was like some sort of evil genie's interpretation of an increased speed power. The faster he went, the less he could do to the world; sure, it enhanced his thoughts and protected him from both his power and from others, but if he was fast then his blows were feather-light. Worse, the envelope for that Breaker power was so tight that carrying gear--any gear--was very nearly impossible, because his shard’s Manton Effect didn't protect him from forces imposed due to excessive weight.

If Velocity tried to carry gear while moving at superhuman speeds, the parts protruding out of the field would suddenly become a hundred times heavier than the rest of him, and he'd break both his legs or pull his arms out of their sockets or worse. Even with Panacea and Armsmaster in the city, this had motivated him to stop trying to get around it. I couldn't blame him.

"This is when you say, 'but,' isn't it," the speedster said, deadpan.

He'd been pretty down-tempo for most of the meeting. I couldn't solve his problems, not today, which meant I needed to admit he was currently a glorified scout without hurting his feelings... I could tell he'd hoped for more from me, and that had stung. I had hated letting him down. True, that was something I might have to get used to, but it didn't mean it was something I had to accept.

"But approximately three weeks ago," I said, "he started moving around more frequently, and from what I've checked of the reports, he's lowered his level of criminal activity. I imagine that if I strongly consider trying to take him out, he'll react preemptively... Which, combined with his period of quiet, suggests that this, in fact, has already happened. He knows I exist, even if he shouldn't know who or what I am, and he won't do anything unless it invites no reprisal from me. On the plus side, he at least appears to lack capes in his employ, so it'll take some time before he can do that."

I was lying through my teeth for most of that, naturally, but I'd planned the lie and I'd practiced it extensively. Unlike the Wards, there wasn't an empath in the room, and Alexandria wasn't here to read my body language.

"And that's my briefing. Any further questions?"

"Just one," Miss Militia said. I raised my eyebrows, waving her onward. "I noticed that you haven't addressed Faultline's Crew."

A good question. I'd expected as much from the number-two.

She was dressed in military fatigues with an American flag scarf covering her nose and mouth. Her power sort of reminded me of Alexandria: she had the part everyone saw, in her case the transforming infinite-ammo weapon (apparently she could go all the way up to nukes, and wasn't that worrying), and the part that really made her dangerous, a perfect memory and a tireless mind.

"True," I said. "And that's because I don't know anything about them. They haven't been in Brockton Bay once since my trigger, presumably because of their mercenary work. Once they return to town, I'll let you all know, and then I'll start on my analysis."

...and like Alexandria, I'd been a big fan of Miss Militia when I was little. Still, she wasn't on the Cauldron need-to-know list, and I needed to make sure she never caught me in an inconsistency. I'd have to make sure to do that analysis properly, once it was time.

There wasn't a second question.

"Okay. Armsmaster, can you stay back? I want to talk about my schedule."
The heroes streamed out of the room. Within the minute, only Armymaster remained.

Armymaster. I needed him, but he didn't really need me, and that meant I had to be useful. I'd given him an opportunity to hurt me with my reveal regarding my 'backers,' and he'd played along with my requests. In exchange, I'd delivered pretty good advice to his Wards, I'd built somewhat of a rapport with them, and I'd maybe done a little more to reign in a noted troublemaker. He'd seemed friendly enough in our e-mails back and forth since then, and, more concretely, he'd just let me lie to his Protectorate without comment. That had to be a good sign. Still, this wasn't enough.

What had worked once had to work again. I had to keep his trust, but more than that, I needed to keep his interest. I needed to look strong, and confident, and in control--even ignoring the plans for the future, the Tinkers and the Endbringers, I needed him in my corner to keep my foothold here in Brockton Bay.

I couldn't fail. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

"There's two things I left out of that," I said, and he nodded.

"I've already checked--we're clear. No one listening in."

"Thank you."

"Naturally. I noted partial truths on the Undersiders and several blatant lies regarding Coil," he said. "It pertains to them, I assume."

"Yes. I needed to talk to Tattletale to confirm some facts about powers," I said. "In short, our shards aren't an inherent part of capes, they're alive and possess a degree of independent will. It's a symbiotic but not necessarily mutalistic relationship. The details are complicated and unpleasant, but they don't matter much after the fact."

It wouldn't really matter to him, but I needed to tell him that for future things. I didn't think he was the type to freak out about it, so it wouldn't hurt.

"Interesting," he said slowly. "Are Master-type effects in play? Are we compromised?"

"No, thankfully," I said. "At least, in most cases, although there are sometimes side effects." Judging from the shadow that crossed his face, I'm pretty sure we were both thinking of Oni Lee. "For the most part, powers simply go to people who will use them, hence the relatively high proportion of villains--the shards were initially a sort of hive mind, so they used the principle behind Coil's power to choose us."

A nod. His lie detector was very useful for this sort of thing, especially when he was proud enough to trust in it. Even so, the man had one hell of an even keel if he could just take all that in stride. I had to admit, I was a little impressed.

"More immediately, Tattletale has left the city, and I believe she plans to join the Wards elsewhere under her original identity. Her Thinker intuition is quite powerful, so this is all to the good; if anyone connects the dots and contacts you, please advocate for her. On a similar note, Grue of the Undersiders will likely contact you soon regarding becoming a Ward. His darkness and power-dampening would be incredibly useful for subduing otherwise dangerous capes, so please try to be generous. His loyalty should be something we can buy fairly cheaply. I expect he'll want to move elsewhere, so similarly, please try to be accommodating."

"I'll look into it," he said. "The others?"
"Bitch of the Undersiders appears to have lost some degree of human social ability with her trigger, not unlike Oni Lee," I said. "A good psychologist, or a capable empath, should be able to prove as much. You could probably have her agree to guard duties somewhere, because she's not inherently violent so much as unable to interact properly. Regent, though?" I hesitated. "I suspect he's one of Heartbreaker's children. The resemblance is uncanny, both in appearance and in powers."

I'd realized that weeks ago, when I'd first seen Regent out of costume. Heartbreaker's emotional manipulation and tendency to kidnap women made him the living embodiment of Stranger Danger, and his face was well-known. He lived far away, far enough that most people wouldn't connect the dots, but if you knew what to look for...

Armsmaster had gone very, very still. "I see." His arms folded, the hand on top tapping against his arms. "More powerful than he seems, then? He's shown little ability for producing anything other than muscle spasms."

"Considerably more powerful. He's a human puppeteer, it merely takes time for him to develop the necessary level of knowledge on his target. Once he has it, I suspect that his control could be asserted near-instantaneously." I paused. "And it would include powers."

"Mmm." Armsmaster's low grunt was thoughtful... But it also seemed more than a little worried. "Likely emotionally deadened, I take it, the same as any of Heartbreaker's victims. Possibly a sociopath? You did say powers go to those who would wish to use them."

I nodded back. "I'm not sure how second-gen powers work with that--" Or how they worked at all, really, but he didn't need to know that. "--but it's still a worrying factor. Regardless, you MAY be able to recruit him into the Wards, but only so long as Gallant is there, and only so long as you apply stringent Master-Stranger protocols. Any type of unpredictable muscle behavior may be a sign of his developing control, after all." He grimaced. "Still, his power is most useful in circumstances we heroes aren't allowed to occupy, so I suspect there's little value in trying. While it would be immensely useful were he to take over Lung or Kaiser and use their powers for our cause, this would be... frowned upon."

"Unfortunately." He tilted his head, eyes on me, mouth quirking in something half-frown. He considered me, and then spoke slowly. "...should he mysteriously vanish, and should certain troublesome capes discover the value of heroic cooperation shortly thereafter, well... I won't investigate too closely."

I knew there was a reason I liked Armsmaster. I mean, it was almost certainly a trap, but it wasn't an idea without a certain amount of appeal.

"I appreciate it." We exchanged nods. "Finally, Coil is gone. Due to his secrecy, I could marshal resources to have him simply vanish without anyone suspecting anything, and he could be a problem if left alone. More than that, he'll make a good excuse for anything else that needs to happen in Brockton Bay. I'll do my best to report any such events here to you, or at least report that I can't report yet."

Coil hadn't really done anything yet, Lisa aside, but he was a villain and I had no reason to keep him around. He didn't hire that many mercenaries just to stroke his ego, after all. Plus, like I'd told Armsmaster, I needed a patsy for anything Cauldron needed to do discreetly. I couldn't just keep telling everyone that I was in a secret conspiracy if I wanted to get things done, and Coil had just ended up in the wrong place in the wrong time.

...he was probably still alive. Probably. Contessa hadn't given details, just told me that the task was done, and I was a little afraid to ask.
"I thank you for the trust," he said. "Even if you had little choice."

Armsmaster looked a little pleased, from what I could see of his mouth. Good. I didn't have many results to show him this early in the game, but I couldn't lose my momentum. The sooner I could stop worrying about Brockton Bay, the sooner I could start expanding my reach.

"I think that having this city cleared of villains matters more than the details, so long as the replacements aren't worse. You're someone I trust to agree." I couldn't imagine why anyone would want anything else, but admittedly, they didn't know about Scion. "Furthermore, Armsmaster, I want to gather Tinkers soon. With my ability and my resources, I believe we can coordinate multi-Tinker work much better than we have so far. Your specialties, efficiency and miniaturization, will be one of the anchors of that. This project lives or dies by your cooperation, and that means that I needed to bring you in sooner than later."

Armsmaster was usually pretty intense, but with that, his attention was very nearly a physical force. "Your project?"

"The Endbringers need to die," I said. "Once we do that, once we have a tangible success, my backers can step out of the shadows and we can use our full resources. We have to, sooner or later, and I want to do it on our own terms. Even after the Endbringers, we'll still have the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Blasphemies, Ash Beast, Sleeper... But the death of the Endbringers will make a good first impression, and it'll rally the world to the greater cause like nothing else. That comes first."

"I see." It was the first time I'd seen him smile. "Reasonable enough, if very ambitious. Do you have other candidates for the project?"

"Dragon, naturally. The rest? Well, I need to do more research on that, now that I have Protectorate access. I'd appreciate your insight."

"I'll see what I can do."

"That's all I have for today, then." I pulled out my phone, then paused, looking up at him. "By the way, I forgot to ask--any luck with that project we discussed earlier?"

"Some," he said. "I already have the first piece done and I'll bring Kid Win in for the next steps. I would have produced something of the like sooner, but I was unclear as to the restrictions involved." He frowned. "And he was uncooperative, no matter how I argued."

Sometimes I was reminded of why Armsmaster was kind of bad with people.

"My power makes me good at that, at least," I said. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," he said. "Look forward to the results. If that's all?"

I nodded, looking down at my phone. "That's all. I won't keep you here any longer."

Time for my second secret meeting here.

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Once the others were gone, I waited very nearly thirty minutes. I'd brought a book, at least, but that still left me entirely too much time to wonder if I was making a mistake.

Still, when Battery and Triumph arrived, I looked up, marked my place, and stood. Damn the torpedoes.
Triumph was a recent Wards graduate, and that was probably why he'd been the quietest at the meeting--he didn't feel confident getting in the way, not when he had his seniors on one side and the strangely influential teenager on the other. Or maybe he was just really embarrassed by that costume, because it was awful. It was mostly the helmet: there's no way to make a golden lion's head look anything but tasteless. I mean, he was pulling off the whole Sexy Gladiator thing pretty well, what with the skintight suit and the ornaments, but the lion helmet just killed it.

Still, I hadn't called either meeting to comment on his fashion sense. He had a minor physical enhancement, but more importantly, he had mouth shockwaves, strong enough to punch through concrete. The helmet was probably a lion's roar thing? I guess he was sort of pigeon-holed on costume themes, but there had to be another angle you could take. Glenn must not be as good as I'd thought.

"Thank you for coming. It'll be a little while longer, though, there's something I'm waiting for."

My phone rang. No one was listening or watching us, and we wouldn't be missed.

"And there we go. Door, my office," I said, and I saw the way their eyes widened. I took a step through, sitting behind the perfectly white desk in the perfectly white room; I hadn't had time to redecorate yet. The consistent branding worked for this, at least.

They shared a look, communicating wordlessly: Triumph stepped through first, while Battery had to steel herself a moment longer. (I noted that fact and added it to a small list.)

"So, you're also with Cauldron," Triumph said. "I guess that explains a lot, huh?"

"You two are proof that Cauldron ties don't keep you from being a hero, after all. Just consider this an aftercare meeting," I said. "You're formula capes, and there's a wrinkle to the process we weren't aware of at the time you were empowered." Two nods. "Natural triggers have volatile shards, which have their own boot process. A similar thing happens during a Second Trigger. Part of that process hooks them up to external power sources, which supply the power for the duration."

I had no idea what those sources were, which was more than a little worrying. We were dealing with creatures that would destroy our civilization without thinking anything of it; I wouldn't put it past them to power our shards with the lifespan of our sun. I really should have asked Lisa while I was there, but what was done was done. I'd wait until I had a more pressing question. She had to know she couldn't hide from me, but that didn't mean she'd enjoy having her face rubbed in it.

"As formula capes, yours don't have those hook-ups," I said. "Which is to say that your shards likely have a finite lifespan. Once that battery runs dry, your power will go dormant."

"How soon?"

Battery was more composed about it; for his part, Triumph was biting his bottom lip, hands curled into fists on his knees.

"Not soon," I replied. "And it may be fixable."

Battery's shoulders eased, too.

"One particularly demanding power took over a decade before it began to deteriorate in earnest. I would expect that the both of you have twenty to thirty years more, at the very least... But I'm going off of the brightness of your shards relative to his, and I can't exactly apply a lumens scale to a web only I can see. Triumph, this is a particular concern for you," I said, and he leaned forward. "The formula creation process was previously much more an art than a science. You got a mixed sample,
comprised of several different shards, and so it's possible that your power will decay unevenly; my power doesn't have the granularity I'd need to notice it. Keep an eye on that."

"Thank you," he said. He sighed. "I'm going to be nervous about this for weeks, aren't I?"

"You are, sorry. But forewarned is forearmed," I said. "From reports, you do good work, and I'm glad we can enable that. I won't have you hurt or worse because we made a mistake. That's all I wanted to tell the two of you, but--"

"Just one more thing," Triumph said. I looked his way. "You said that you might be able to help with restoring them?"

"I think so," I said. I considered him. "Essentially, we've all got partial shards, with certain aspects locked or with lowered power. Giving capes or potential capes formulas does bad things, apparently--I think their shard gets in the way. So we don't do that." He nodded. "Still, without the interference of a natural shard, I think I might be able to make a formula that will add a bit more of what yours is made up of, charging the battery again and maybe changing the restrictions slightly." I held up a finger. "But that's very definitely a last resort, because we've never done it before and formulas can be dangerous. Even if you survive, it may even induce an artificial Second Trigger, and I don't know how we'd explain that. I wouldn't advise it."

Plus, anything related to Triggers blinded Contessa's Path, so she couldn't necessarily tell me if it'd be fatal. I didn't relish the idea of losing that safety margin.

"Last resort, then," he said, smiling weakly. "I'll probably just retire."

"Please do, if it comes to that. Anything else?" He shook his head, and I looked towards Battery. "Battery, would you stay back a moment? I need some information about you regarding your sample--we have some of it left, and I want to maximize what we can get out of it. I can think of a few potential purposes, but I'd like your advice."

"Right," Triumph said. He glanced at the portal. "Uh, should you have just left that open...?"

"No one was listening," I said, waving him off. "Go on, make the most of your day. And get in touch with me if you have any questions or if you notice a problem with your power decay."

He nodded, heading out. The portal closed behind him. I looked at her a moment longer, and I saw the way her shoulders tensed again. The longer the silence grew, the more grim her expression became.

The problem with being a shadowy conspiracy, even a well-intentioned one, is that it's hard to earn trust. Armsmaster struck me as someone that wanted respect, recognition, and results, and I'd been able to dangle all three in front of him. Battery struck me more as an idealist: Cauldron's records said that she became a hero to stop a seemingly unstoppable villain, and she'd stuck with it doggedly until she succeeded.

(And then she'd married him, but no one's life goes exactly as planned.)

If we made an enemy of her, if she was allowed to harbor doubts about me, then we'd regret it. While our power might buy her silence for a time, she'd do something sooner or later. But by the same token, if we earned her loyalty as opposed to her mere acceptance...

"We kind of seem like bad guys, don't we?"

I don't think she'd expected that. It got her attention, at least.
"We work in the shadows, we do things no one should be able to, and my position is proof enough that we have a surprising amount of influence--enough that we don't really have to worry about looking fishy." She nodded slowly. "And that means you're worried about the one favor we still have over you, whenever you think about it. It's been a while since our last request, and now that I've shown up, you might be thinking it'll be called in soon. So, let me ease your mind a bit."

I leaned forward, but she maintained her stony silence. I'd been given a lot of latitude, but so far as I knew, changing the secrecy agreement had no precedent... Still, you need to spend money to make money, and the most valuable currency was trust.

"If you want to tell Assault about us, then please feel free--so long as you press the need for secrecy on him." You didn't need to be an empath to read the expressions that crossed her face then; I'd caught her entirely off-guard, and her defenses fell for just a moment. "I've seen enough of the man to know he'll do his level best to destroy us if we hurt you. More than that, I know that secrecy is a strain on relationships, and I know that so long as he's on your mind, you'll hesitate to do anything against your own best judgment. I want you to have that hold on us, because we'll need mutual trust to move forward."

I met her eyes steadily. For her part, she wavered, eyes on her lap.

I'd bet on the possibility that she was ashamed of how she acquired her powers, and it seemed I'd been right. That needed to end, because every advocate Cauldron had would ease our appearance on the world stage.

"You're claiming to ultimately be on our side," she said, looking up again, and I nodded. "Then why all the secrecy? Why charge people that want to be heroes for the right to help people?"

"We're fighting from the shadows because we know about an enemy the whole world will have to face, and soon," I said. "An enemy that makes the Endbringers look small. We needed resources for that--you formula capes are part of it, but money mattered too. It may seem petty, but it's a full-time job, and even we still need to eat." She nodded slowly. "But that'll end soon. We're reaching the end of what we can do in the shadows, and we plan to make ourselves known."

"You're not going to tell me about this other enemy, are you?"

"Not yet, because it's scary as hell," I admitted freely, and my casual tone seemed to break the last of the awkwardness between us. "I want to spare you that a little while longer, at least while we still have other problems. For now, I just want you to know that we're on your side because I want you on ours. We need every bit of help we can get." I held out a hand. "You don't have to answer now--just think about it. If either of you have questions, call me, and we'll talk until you're both satisfied--or until you are, if you're not ready to tell him yet. For now, regardless of what you decide, thank you for your service."

She looked at me a bit longer, then reached out, taking my hand. We shook on it.

"Now that that's done," I said, relaxing a little, "I really do have questions about your power. Do you mind?"

"No, not at all," she said. "What would you like to know?"
How did I go a month and a half between uploading the first arc of this and the second? Even if it's up elsewhere already, that's pretty bad. Sorry about that.

Since "when I feel like it" clearly isn't working, I'm aiming to get at least one arc up a week here, more if I can manage it.
Forgive the parting tip of a hat to a story that inspired this one.

Assault called me the next day. When he said he wanted to talk, I expected it to be in my office, or a room in the Protectorate Rig. At the outside, I expected him to suggest some sort of cafe.

I certainly hadn't expected them to invite me to their house for dinner.

What did that mean, exactly? Was it an extended hand of friendship? An attempt to keep superior awareness of a potential battleground? Was it supposed to make me feel guilty, if I planned to mobilize my great conspiracy against them? Was he just playing mindgames? Had he just not thought too hard about it? I didn't know, because in his shoes, I wouldn't have ever even considered it. That made me uneasy.

Either way, we made sure the place wasn't bugged, by capes or otherwise ('Path to Not Being Overheard' worked, apparently), and then I went.

They had a nice little rented place in the Brockton Bay Boardwalk, the nice part of town. It was the kind of place I tried to stick to on my morning jogs, a place where gang activity didn't really happen—essentially the only place in town, outside of the PRT or Protectorate's front doorstep. Even heroes had to get away sometimes, it seemed.

I rang the doorbell, and a man emerged. I'd have recognized him in an instant, even without my power, because something about him made me think 'male Lisa': he had that same sense of inherent swagger, a confidence right on the edge of excessive and backed up by competence. He was only a little bit above average in terms of looks, but that smile did a lot for him.

"Good to see you again, Taylor." An unmasked Assault extended his hand to shake, and boy wasn't that a loaded gesture coming from a Striker. I didn't let myself hesitate, reaching out and gripping firmly... And then he pulled. For a second, I froze, my brain trying to boot up something from my combat training, but he'd just pulled me into one of those weird one-armed back-patting hug things that guys do. I tried to turn any instinctive flailing into the appropriate gesture, but sweet jesus what the hell is wrong with you Assault.

(It was kind of stiff, is what I'm getting at.)

"Likewise," I said, trying to sound friendly and comfortable, and it came out weaker than I'd have liked. He hadn't stopped smiling, even as we separated.

Fuck diplomacy, I kind of wanted to punch him. If I'd had a power capable of actual violence, I can't say I wouldn't have.

"Ethan," Battery said, his name a dark warning, and he laughed. Which meant he had definitely done that to screw with me.

For her part, out of costume, Battery made me think of young teachers: no matter how much they love their job, they always seem a little frazzled. All the same, she was warm, and around Assault
she seemed to adopt a sort of fond embarrassment, as if she constantly asked herself how in the world they'd gotten where they were. He eased up the same way around her, too, seeming to relax into himself.

I know it's weird to say this about people more than twice my age, but it was pretty cute.

She looked towards me. "Please, come inside," she said. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water will be fine," I said, bringing my voice back to something more like equilibrium. I couldn't refuse their hospitality. I let my eyes wander as I walked inside and she vanished into the kitchen, taking in the place. There were a lot of pictures: Battery and Assault, them with friends (no heroes, I noted, likely deliberate) or Battery with an older man or an older woman. Her parents were divorced, I assumed. There were a few pictures of Assault and Battery with her mother, but there weren't any pictures that included both him and her father.

He was a detective, wasn't he? So it was bad blood over Assault's time as Madcap, then. Former villains didn't always get forgiveness.

"This place sort of reminds me of my own house," I said, which it did. It was a lot like our house back when Mom was still alive. It felt lived-in by people who loved each other, but who were also really busy: carefully laid out, warmly decorated, every placed trinket seeming to have a story, all with just enough dust to show that they didn't spend too much time with any of it. "It's not in the Boardwalk, Dad doesn't really have the money, but I think they might have had the same architect."

"Oh?" Assault peered at me. "I'd have thought you'd try to get your own place. You seem like an independent sort of kid."

"There's not really precedent for me," I said. "In a lot of ways, it was easiest to just handle my paycheck through the Wards system. I still get a Protectorate salary, but most of it's in a trust fund until I come of age, same as them." I shrugged. "Besides. Dad would worry."

I knew that I was still sort of at the point in my life where money was ethereal: it existed, and it was apparently important, but when it really mattered, other people spent it for me. It might always be that way, if I spent the rest of my life working with Cauldron. The adult milestone of financial independence had already been rendered completely irrelevant, and it always would be.

It was a surprisingly lonely thought.

Battery returned with two glasses of water and a beer. According to his profile, Assault was a teetotaler.

"So," I said, taking a place on one end of the couch. Assault and Battery took the other, thankfully in that order. I was glad for the buffer. "Are we starting with the big conversation?"

"I thought that'd be best," Battery said. "We'd spend the entire evening dancing around it, if we waited."

"So," Assault said cheerfully. "What's the real enemy? Is Godzilla gonna pop up to show the Endbringers how it's done?"

I considered him. On one hand, I could evade, like I had with Battery. On the other hand, I didn't think it'd work, because he'd happily ignore social protocol so he could keep asking. Starting out that way would probably weaken my position, and if I surprised him sufficiently, I could seize control of the conversation.
"Scion," I said baldly, and the room stopped dead. "He's the source of all naturally-occurring powers, and the cycle he started ends with him reclaiming all of the shards he dispersed and blowing up the planet. The upper limit for this happening is fifteen years from now, but it's possible it will happen as soon as five. And if it happens, it happens to every Earth—even if we could run to Earth Aleph, it wouldn't help. When that day comes, he'll be trying to kill all of them too."

The silence dragged on.

"As part of the process," I continued, "we're assigned shards by a precognitive selection process. The individual choice is designed to push us towards self-destructive behavior in order to maximize our use of the shard in conflicts, whether that be physical or--" I gestured at myself. "--social. That's why so many capes become villains, and that's why Cauldron gives out powers: we're circumventing that process, trying to give strength to those people who we're fairly certain won't be part of the problem."

"Wait," Assault said, holding up a hand. He wasn't smiling now. "If Scion gives out powers, then how in the world do you all make them?"

Seizing on an apparent weakness, trying to use that to bring my whole argument down? Not a bad tactic, true, but that was why I'd left such an obvious opening.

"Because originally there were two of these 'Entities,'" I replied. "Something went wrong during their arrival, and a particularly powerful weapon was sent out even as the creature crash-landed on an alternate Earth. A young girl Triggered with it, and with the power it provided, she was able to kill the second Scion... But in the process, it managed to cripple her power. She won't be able to save us from him, but she was the one who founded Cauldron." I tapped my chest. "As for the 'how'..."

Pause for effect.

"Well, you want to know why they want to make us fight? Because the shards are originally part of these Entities. When they take them back, they learn everything we did. Every clever trick you ever used, every time you cooperated with another cape, every time you fought against a different one—if we lose here, Scion gets all of that. And that means that when he moves to another world, he'll be that much more capable of defeating the capes there who stand against him. By the same token, though, that means we can take shards from the one we killed."

We were fairly sure the cycle required two Entities, so needless to say, I was bullshitting them... But 'we need to save our world and countless more' was a lot more heroic than 'we stop him or we all die.' I didn't think that they'd be able to notice a little half-lie like that, not when I'd just dropped so much on their heads.

And now I waited. I could see emotions crossing their faces every instant. After nearly half a minute, they half-turned towards each other. Maybe they read something there, because Assault turned to me again.

"So wait," he said, something more like his normal tone of voice restored to him. "You're saying that you made my wife drink alien corpse juice?"

Whatever I'd expected to come next, it hadn't been that.

"Ow!"

"You deserved that," I said, before she could. "Besides, she was doing it to stop you, so I'm not sure it's really our fault."
"The more pressing question is why no one knows about this," Battery said, seemingly determined to ignore him. "Let's assume we believe it--which you haven't earned, not yet." Naturally. "This all began some time ago, right? If the two came to Earth at roughly the same time, and Cauldron killed the second at that time... It's been over thirty years. You claim we're so close to the time limit, and you're only spreading this information now?"

"The upper echelons have known about it for some time," I said, with a light shrug. "How do you think I got my post? The Triumvirate are a part of Cauldron. They always have been, from the very beginning, and that includes Hero. I earned my place by helping Eidolon." I flipped open my work phone, moving to my contacts, and held it out. "I told him to expect a call. If you really need confirmation, do it--you'll probably find him more persuasive."

Assault took the phone without hesitation, hitting the button, and raised it to his ear. The other end picked up on the third ring, and there was a brief conversation.

Thirty seconds later, a portal opened to a perfectly-white room. Both of the other capes had shot to their feet the moment the portal opened, giving them a better view as a fully-costumed Eidolon stepped out.

"Good evening," he said mildly. He looked at me, smiling, as I took to my own feet. "You look well, Taylor. I heard you've been busy."

"Very." I held out a hand, and we shook briefly. "Thanks for coming on short notice, David."

"Oh my god she was telling the truth."

Assault actually physically fell onto his ass on the couch, which did a lot to make me forgive him for earlier.

"Well, technically we should have him display powers to ensure his identity, but--"

"I already considered that," Eidolon said, and it was easy to tell he was in a good mood; even with his face obscured, his cheer practically radiated off of him. He reached onto the table, picking up our glasses, and his node brightened, all three borrowed activating. "You should find these interesting, Administrator."

An ability to modify liquids, a Thinker ability dealing with chemical properties, and poison Tinkering.

"You know I'm not old enough to drink, right? And Assault doesn't drink."

He chuckled, handing me my glass; the liquid had gained a pale golden sheen. "Only very mildly alcoholic, and I can take it out of his. Besides, if you're old enough to save the world..."

He trailed off, tilting his head, and I shrugged. "True enough."

He handed off the other two glasses, then turned his palm, creating a perfect floating sphere of ice; a moment later, flames consumed it, and as it melted, telekinesis seized the water, sending it churning in circles. He caught it in a fourth glass he'd carried with him, drawing the first three powers back out and making his own drink.

I took an experimental sip of my own glass, and it was the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted.

"Unfortunately, I can't stay long," Eidolon said, glancing back towards the still-open door behind him before looking to Assault and Battery. "But Taylor has my trust, and whatever she's chosen to
tell you, you should believe. Cauldron gave me my own powers, and I'll keep trying to use them for
the world, until the day I'm no longer able to do so."

There was a continuing silence. He shifted his weight a bit, taking a sip from his own glass of
shining liquid. No one said anything. I cleared my throat.

"I think they believe me now, so, uh, mission accomplished. I'll try not to lean on you every time I
have to do this talk," I said sheepishly.

"You did me a considerable favor, and we're on the same side. It's nothing." He raised his glass. "To
the world."

"To tomorrow." We tapped them together with a soft ring, each of us taking a sip. Still amazing.
"Still, though, you spoke up for me before; that evened our accounts. Plus, you bought me lunch
before that. I owe you a favor."

"No, I--" He stopped abruptly, then shook his head; it was hard to see through the cowl and glow,
but he might have been smiling. "Sure. I'll think about it. I'll see you later, Taylor."

I raised my glass in goodbye, and he clinked his against it again; I tried not to laugh. Then he turned,
stepping back through the portal. I dropped back onto the couch as it closed behind him.

When I turned, both of them were staring at me.

"You're on a first-name basis with Eidolon."

I was trying not to think about that part too much myself. Dwelling on the details would only make
this all even weirder.

"We get along, I guess," I said, shrugging, and I couldn't help my smile. "He can be a little awkward,
but he's a good person."

"You were awkward right back at him," Assault said. "You match." He took a sip; both his
eyebrows went up, and he drank again. Then he turned to Battery. "Honey, can we move to
Houston? Or at least visit their New Years' parties?"

"You've got to be overreacting." She took a sip, then fell silent. A second drink, and her eyes fell to
the beer bottle in her hands. She took a longer drink, sighing in satisfaction, and then closed her eyes.
"...okay, sure, the strongest superhero is also the best bartender. Why not. That fits in well enough
with the sheer weirdness of today."

"Welcome to my life," I said. "I sit in a cafe one Sunday, thinking about finally giving up and joining
the Wards, and instead I got carried off to go meet Eidolon and maybe save the world. Making other
people take the Day In the Life of Taylor Hebert Tour is sort of fun."

"I see." Battery considered me as she took another drink, then looked to Assault.

"Not so much bigger a problem than the Endbringers, I guess," Assault said thoughtfully, eyes on his
glass. "Scion can take them on one-on-one, and nothing seems to hurt him, that's true. But nothing
seems to ever really hurt them either, right? Gonna make the next Endbringer fight weird as hell,
though."

That was completely, horrifically wrong, but if it made them feel better, I wouldn't disagree yet.
Battery turned back to me. "Not to be too blunt, but what does Cauldron want from us?"
"Support, mostly. I'm going to be reaching out to the Cauldron capes in the cities I visit. I want us to step out into the public eye eventually, and when we do, I want people I can point to, to say, 'This is what we've done for you.' The Triumvirate are great, but they're a lot stronger than we can usually manage, even with my ability to Tinker formulas." I took a sip. "It's already going to be troublesome enough managing supply and demand after the reveal without inflated expectations."

And as a shadowy conspiracy stepping out into the light, maybe we'd avoid pointing out that through those three, we'd already controlled the superhero side of the world for ages. That would leave us open to all kinds of blowback over the Protectorate's past actions, deserved and undeserved. So the Triumvirate's connection to Cauldron was also going to be another inconvenient fact we'd let quietly vanish.

If we could, anyway. Three can keep a secret when two are dead, and we were well past three... But the Path Contessa kept dedicated to secrecy was robust, and these two had each lived several kinds of secret life already. I'd just have to hope that her intervention wouldn't be required.

"Plus, public relations are just generally a problem. I'm trying to keep Armsmaster in my corner, but if I have other coworkers on my side, people who'll support me when it comes to traveling to other cities or when I'm trying to make organizational changes, then all this'll all go a lot easier. Being in public makes it hard to use Cauldron's influence openly, after all."

"Organizations shift positions slowly," Assault said, looking at me askance. "If we've got five years, I'm not sure the Protectorate's something you can change enough, even if you're useful and you've got backing. I mean, far as I know it's only been about four to five days, but I'm surprised the Youth Guard isn't already howling for your head."

Battery glanced his way. "The Protectorate's head, you mean?"

"Yeah, but she'd be the one getting kicked out. As good as hers, really."

"I think we're trying to destroy them from the shadows right now," I said, tilting my head. "The Youth Guard, that is. Protecting the young is nice and all, but... Imminent apocalypse. They shouldn't be a factor." A pause and a sip; I was already half-done with my glass. Dammit. "Of course, that still leaves everyone ELSE that'll complain about a fifteen year-old in the Protectorate, but I can't let that stop me. There's more I can do out in the open than sitting in Cauldron's lab, making one formula a day."

"That's really all you're asking." Assault went into an amateur theatre student's exaggerated portrayal of skepticism: leaning forward, head cocked, eyebrows raised, the rest of his expression very serious. "So you plan to save the world, and you just want us to not get in the way?"

"That's really all I should need." I leaned back. "Really, between the Triumvirate, our resources, and the occasional favor from our formula capes, we can handle most of the day-to-day. We're fine if we can stay the course, but if I can scout for useful anti-Scion powers, help clean up the villains, strengthen our next generation, and try to coordinate Tinkers, we'll be in much better shape five or fifteen years from now. If I'm someone established, someone that well-respected people are willing to listen to? All the better. That makes Brockton Bay the starting line. If I fail here, then the rest is a lot harder."

"Sounds reasonable," Assault said. He glanced at Battery. "I'm not against it, but...?"

"I don't know how much we can accomplish," Battery said. "But even ignoring your Cauldron ties, your goals are admirable and you seem surprisingly level-headed. I'll support you."
'Surprisingly.' I tried not to sigh.

Assault swatted her on the back of the head, and she turned towards him, indignant. "'Surprisingly'? Anyone with the dedication to try and work her support among the grunts for even a tiny edge doesn't need the ageism. Cut it out, Lex."

"I was referring more to the rashness of her plan, including her unprecedented position," Battery said, frowning at him. "It draws a lot of attention, attention a secret superpower-granting conspiracy shouldn't want." As moment later, she relented, turning towards me. "...but I do understand how those words could be misunderstood. I apologize."

"Uh, no problem," I said, trying not to show my surprise. "I appreciate it, though. Thank you, Battery, Assault."

"Alexis and Ethan," Assault said, very firmly. "The masks are off now, in a lot of ways. Let's use names."

"You're right," I said, smiling. "Names are important. Thank you, Alexis, Ethan."

"Naturally, Taylor." Alexia was the last of hers to finish her drink, standing up and taking all three to the kitchen. "Ethan, can you handle the vegetables?"

"What can I do?"

"You're a guest, we couldn't possibly--"

"--but you're also a busybody, so we should probably give you something anyway," Ethan interrupted smoothly. "Come on, kid, come do some prep work with me. Afterward? We'll figure something out."

The rest of the evening was pretty much the same as the first part, as applied to making dinner and making conversation instead of conspiracies and secrets.

It was a lot more fun than that makes it sound.

---

"Hey, Doctor."

Doctor Mother turned to look at me, eyebrows slightly raised, as I finished sorting out the order.

"I'm wondering if we should start offering a different sort of service with these."

We'd spent an evening earlier in the week making restriction mixes over and over, and by the tenth vial, I'd felt something click into place with my power the same way so much else had over the last week. It wasn't perfect, but I was beginning to understand what coded to which restriction, and after my fourth formula of the week, I'd come to realize that the interaction went both ways; just as the restriction affected the shard, the shard affected the restriction. An explosive power would react differently with an anti-organic restriction than a Thinker or Tinker power, and some types of Manton Effect seemed to be imposed on some powers even without adding a specific restriction. Shards and formulas weren't a language, they were conversations, carried out among equals.

And yet, as Administrator Coordination, seeing that system of give-and-take between the shards made it all clearer to me than focusing on any individual aspect. The shards weren't isolated systems, no, but there was a kind of music to the interplay, and if I knew what I wanted, I could find a way to
get there. It was just a matter of identifying the right materials, the right balance, and keeping a clear idea of the client.

Eva had asked about my increasing confidence, and I'd deflected. I felt comfortable around the other members of Cauldron, but I wasn't going to explain any of that to them, not until I'd succeeded at least a dozen times. Still, this was the first product of my new understanding, and it was exactly what I'd intended to make... Which was unfortunate. If it had been flawed in some way, I'd have an excuse to ignore the heavy unease in my gut.

I'd created a sort of resonant barrier, backed by Heir's equivalent of Aegis's Adaptation shard. With every attack it took, it would refine itself, shifting to better defend against the source at the cost of others. The best comparison was a kind of game-like point-buy system, where every point you spent on Impact Defense came out of Piercing, or Fire, or Ice... It didn't really make sense from a physics perspective, but I'd pretty much given up on trying to fit shards into the world I'd known. Sufficiently advanced biology is technology and sufficiently advanced technology is magic, and the Entities were really more of a crystal than anything organic anyway.

Our client had been inspired by Narwhal, it seemed, because he'd wanted to create a power like hers: a defensive barrier that could circumvent Manton Effect limitations, allowing it to become an equally powerful blade. That was what made this sort of power so useful for this order. If I could code the power correctly, then the same property that allowed it to alter and refine the shield would allow the sword to eventually pierce any one type of defense.

The Manton Effect restriction would be the problem, naturally, but the Adaptation shard would be useful here. I'd simply made something that would react with the other parts to make a more mutable restriction effect, something that would allow the mode to shift between eventually-unbreakable shield and eventually-unstoppable sword. The two modes wouldn't exist together, no, but each would become all the stronger for the dichotomy.

For all that the power seemed horrific--I'd seen the pictures of what Narwhal had managed to do to Endbringers before, humans wouldn't even slow her down--the client had good intentions. He had asked for a formula and Doctor Mother had asked him for the moon, and he hadn't hesitated. I'd been skeptical, so I'd asked Contessa for confirmation, and she'd said he really was what he seemed: he wouldn't abuse power. He really was a philanthropist, an advocate, the kind of person who had spent his life working for those less fortunate than himself. I could sympathize with the frustration that had driven him here, the drive to really try and make things better.

So why did I feel so uneasy?

It was an interesting power for a cape, where one opponent could only do so much, but it was worse than useless against Scion. On offense, if you blocked fire, he could just kill you with lasers instead; on defense, with all of the transformation shards on record, I didn't doubt the golden man could change his physical composition with a thought. This shard was a scalpel, and Scion was a Death Star.

So it didn't matter for our goal--we could spend the whole of it here and it'd make no difference in the final battle. The power itself wasn't a threat to the user or his allies, even if he clipped himself with the blade, because its mutability ensured that it'd take more than one careless blow to seriously harm someone. And if he somehow became a villain anyway, then Eidolon or Legend would find him relatively trivial.

Nothing should have been wrong. Even so, something inside me seemed to rebel at the thought of giving this power to this man. Try as I might, my mind hadn't stopped wandering the entire time I'd made it, like a dog straining at her leash, its eyes on a different set of shards.
"A different service, you say... Different in regards to the product offered?" She frowned. "Would there be some better method of empowering our clients?"

"Yes and no," I said, looking down at the vial, then back up at her. "It's just, well, I'm thinking of the Entities."

For a moment she looked at me, gears turning... And then she crossed her arms, looking at me more closely. "You're speaking of their host selection."

"Right." I looked down at the vial again, frowning. "From the moment I read his psych profile and his request, I've been uneasy. He chose this power because he wanted something strong, but that doesn't feel like a good enough reason for the power-matching. These shards are dead, inactive. They don't have proper power wells, but more than that, they don't choose hosts, and that's where all their will should rest. Rejection shouldn't be possible." I rocked back and forth on my feet, looking somewhere past her shoulder. "But I still feel like I can't give him this."

"That is a concern worth listening to, from a Thinker such as you." Hearing that helped, and I turned to meet Eva's eyes again. "All the same, if you could explain?"

"This is the fifth we've made, from last Sunday to today," I said, to a nod. "Thinking back, I think I felt the best about Still's, even if making my first formula made me nervous and the primary sample was dangerous." I bit my lip. "This is going to sound stupid and sentimental, but hear me out."

Another silent nod and expectant look. "She'd lost a lot, but she wanted to bounce back from that, to try and make something good of a stupid tragedy. She was trying to move forward."

"You're saying her power was appropriate."

"I'm saying that her power was what she needed," I replied, running a hand through my hair. "It's a power that forces her to move forward, to take blows and to keep going, to rely on other people, to commit to decisive action. The more firmly she holds to what she should be doing with her life, to what she needs to do to heal and to grow, the more power that shard will give her to reach her goals." I looked down at the completed formula again. "She's going to be a great cape, if she survives that long," I said, speaking with utter certainty. "I know it. The others weren't bad, but that was the best match I've seen yet."

"Is that so..." She was looking at me, head tilted. "Forgive me for saying this, Taylor, but you appear to be listening to your Thinker intuition. I know I certainly became glad I did not Trigger, once I heard more of them. We are given that which is worst for us--I should hardly wish to repeat that pattern here, when we may choose. If any shard had a part in the actual choosing, I would believe it was yours. If any vote was involved in the matching of hosts to shards, it would have been Coordination. You may prefer to do the exact opposite of what it suggests, in this context."

"I'm pretty sure it's my shard telling me this, you're right," I said. "But that's why I want to listen to it. Door, fragiles storage." I placed the vial down, then turned, facing her more fully. "You remember what else Tattletale said about Administration Coordination, don't you?"

She crossed her arm, tapping a hand against her forearm; her concern seemed to be growing. "You refer to her talk of your shard's 'defection.' I do trust you, Taylor, but Tattletale I find more suspect. The girl is a gadfly. I would be cautious of any conclusions drawn from her words alone. The talk of chosen Triggers, that I believe; it is sensible enough. But this?"

"That's true," I admitted. "But she also strikes me as the sort of person who draws the most enjoyment from uncomfortable truth. She might lie to get a rise out of me, but she'd find it more fun to tell the truth."
"Only so long as she had a sufficiently amusing truth to tell. And you must admit it was a rather flattering conclusion for her to draw, talk of additional Endbringers aside--it was an argument you would wish to believe. You remarked upon that yourself just earlier this week."

We were in kind of a stalemate.

I sighed, frustrated, scrubbing at my hair again. I didn't think I'd be able to reason my way into this, because what I was asking wasn't reasonable. I was going off of a gut intuition, based off information from two different dubious sources; I had no reason to trust Tattletale's bounds of logic, and I knew I shouldn't trust my shard. The conclusion I was drawing required both to be right, and the consequences could be awful. If nothing else, I'd be ignoring the wishes of a client who'd paid a lot of money.

But I didn't know that I could do anything else. I wouldn't ever be the type of person who would.

So I closed my eyes, thinking.

*Imagine powers. Imagine shards, choosing hosts. Imagine the man, seen through an Entity's eyes. Take what you've been given, the past; to a precognition shard, it's all the same, past and present and future. Extrapolate. Imagine past rippling out over future. Events change, situations change, but people remain the same.*

*Who was our client? At the end of the day, what moved him? What stopped him? What held him back? What weakness would the Entities have seized on, to twist him, to break him, to force him into fighting? What would make this man destroy himself?*

It was a disturbingly easy question... But largely because, somehow or another, I realized that I'd already answered it.

I swallowed back the sudden surge of bile, forcing myself to backtrack. That wasn't the only question that train of thought could answer, and it wasn't the only question he needed me to answer.

Then I opened my eyes, taking a deep breath, pushing back the pulsing headache at the front of my mind. I had one last thing to do today.

"Eva," I said. "I'm going to make a power. We've still got the shard he ordered, so let me at least try to make something better."

I picked up five vials and a tool and began to stride along the shelves, walking with purpose. I closed my eyes; I didn't need them to see, not with so many lights all around me.

"We're dealing with someone who's desperately searching for meaning," I called out, eyes resolutely ahead as I began to walk towards one particular reservoir. This time, I let my power loose. "Someone born capable and wealthy, someone who's spent his whole life feeling anxious and unworthy about both. He's never wanted for anything except for want. He'll become a hero, because he thinks it's something he owes the world. The psychological term is 'scrupulosity,' I think."

His story had come in a dry background investigation, a past outlined in news stories and bank statements and compiled testimonies, and I'd only met him briefly. He had no shard for me to analyze, and I'd certainly never hobnobbed with anyone of his distinction; my picture of the man was a mirage at best. Even so, I felt sure of the conclusions I'd drawn.

How much of creating a power to destroy someone would really carry over to the opposite? I didn't know, and it didn't matter. I'd do it anyway.
I didn't measure amounts, I didn't weigh balances, I didn't consider trade-offs or substitutes. Before, I had created an intricately-crafted watch, the craftsmanship as beautiful as the product; now, I was a tornado in a junkyard, sound and fury and unceasing motion.

"If I give him the sword and shield he asked for, it'll destroy him," I said. I scooped a vial through the first shard, then capped and pocketed it. "He views his life in terms of debt, and he doesn't think he can do that, not while it's all so broken. The problem is, with that power, he might succeed. For all that he's a sheltered rich brat, he has a kind of grit--you saw how he was willing to accept complete poverty, if it meant he'd get that little vial? If a villain has a fire power, he'll walk through the flames until he stops feeling pain; if they have a weapon, he'll break their sword on his skin. He won't die, not if he has time to learn, but he'll be an empty shell by the end all the same. It just fits the worst parts of him entirely too well."

I reached the second ingredient, pulling out another vial. A part of me had been a part of this over and over and over again, and for all that the tools and the forms were unfamiliar, the process was something I knew well.

"What he wants is to be someone else's strength. He wants to save people. To that end, he's overly fixated on standing in combat. Whether or not he knows it, he thinks his life has to end at someone else's hand, as if that'll be what finally settles the score."

I topped off the second vial and stoppered it. A moment later, I frowned, then turned it twice in my hand, listening to the gentle tinkle of alien crystals, before I nodded and moved on.

"I don't know what's broken in him, exactly, if he never realized that, even as a hero, he'll help even more people if he just stays alive. Someone distorted like that, it's hard to believe he wasn't chosen for one of us. If Heir's shards were in circulation, I think he'd have gotten something like that first formula I made."

Maybe he wouldn't have. It was possible he'd never run into anything bad enough to Trigger, but some of the emotion-based variant effects I'd seen implied strangely mild triggers. Maybe he'd have been too good as a hero, but it wasn't as if there weren't very good people among us. Some people were just lucky.

A third ingredient, filled a little less completely than the others.

"So I'm going to go in a complete opposite direction. I'm going to make a shard that no Entity would ever make, something completely useless for fighting... Something that we need more of, but more than that, something that he needs."

I didn't really need a restriction mix for this one, but I still skimmed it lightly. Something about the synergization effect, probably? Whatever.

I mixed the four together in the fifth, larger vial. Before, I'd stirred at a steady pace. This time, I added in little irregularities, and not just because my hands kept trembling.

Then I walked back to Doctor Mother, pressing the final product forward. I hadn't opened my eyes, and I couldn't have told you how I found my way back, even if you asked.

"There, done. It's a composite Tinker shard, focused on designs you can use medically," I said, closing her hand around it. "The effect isn't amazing by Tinker standards, let alone something more direct, because the Entities don't really DO healing except by accident... Bonesaw or Panacea are stronger than this, even if they can only treat one person at a time. Still, it's leaps and bounds above
anything anyone else can do." I let my hands fall in front of me, holding one with the other to keep them still. "That's the shard he needs, so give it to him, explain what it does, and refund some of his money if he asks. Tell him that that power is how he'll make a real difference." I shrugged. "Or just have Contessa do it, whatever."

There was a slight breath of air--an opened mouth without words to accompany it. Then, a moment later, she spoke.

"Do you not plan to attend?"

"God, no," I said weakly, managing to squeeze open an eye. The room was so damn bright. "Do I look like I'm up for that? I told you, one formula a day is my limit."

Eva looked at me a moment longer, and her caution slid into a slight smile. "True. Door, sleeping quarters." She rested a hand on my shoulder, walking me to the cot. "Rest, Taylor. I will be along to check on you, after this meeting... And Fortuna will never be far away, should you need her."

"Mmm," I said, face hitting the pillow.

I didn't dream.
The next morning, I woke up in my own bed, long after the sun rose.

My headache was gone, but I felt a bit groggy; it took ten blinks for my eyes to focus, and even after I put on my glasses, I felt as if I couldn't quite see properly... Or maybe it was just eyes no longer seemed very impressive. I hadn't known what was around me or what I was doing, as I'd worked yesterday, I'd simply known the next step and how to move my legs. How impressive did eyes or a thinking mind seem, compared to simply *knowing*?

That was very possibly the peak of my shard's intuition, and I had no interest in revisiting it, not so long as I had an alter--no, I wouldn't let myself be cornered on an open plain. The formula incident had shown me my upper limit in that aspect; I'd discover how far I could go in a fight, if I had to, and then I'd try to match that with my own ability. I wouldn't let myself be a mere vessel for my power, and I wouldn't let myself fall into any situation where I'd be tempted to think that necessary.

One more thing to thank Fortuna for.

I dressed, then made my way down the stairs. Dad was resting against the counter, newspaper raised, a cup beside him on the counter; two plates rested on the table. He looked up, and the part of me that was still a fifteen year-old girl winced.

Dad was not happy. Great.

Never admit anything. Apologize straight off and you concede the high ground to anyone willing to wield it against you.

"Breakfast smells great," I said, sliding into my seat. "Sorry if you had to wait for me."

"I did," he said mildly, putting the newspaper down, which was also a bad sign. When someone's angry, they can be outmaneuvered. Someone upset enough to keep a calm head is trouble. "Last night, too. What time did you get back?"

"I don't know." I admitted, taking a sip from my glass. Dry throat. "I only meant to take a nap, but I guess I must've been more tired than I thought. I'm pretty sure Contessa took me back... She didn't leave a note, then?"

He shook his head, and I tilted my head, meeting his eyes.

"Are you going to sit down, Dad? I'm starving."

"Taylor," he said. "It's too soon for you to be pushing yourself this hard. You've been coming home with a headache every day for the last week, and you've got bags under your eyes. You need more sleep."

"Do I?" I blinked, genuinely surprised, then frowned. I'd have to see if I could find some make-up for that. "I've felt fine, so I didn't notice, but I'll work on that... I can sleep in and fit my running into different parts of the day." Maybe at the end, after the daily formula? Runner's high might help with the headache, if it ever showed up. Apparently some people just didn't get runner's high, but it was probably just my still-lacking fitness. Plus, if I was running then, I could take a portal out somewhere, do some sight-seeing--

"Please don't tell me you're thinking about that as a cosmetic issue," Dad said. I think he was trying
to make it sound like a joke, but he didn't do a very good job of it.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I've felt alert enough, so I didn't think it was a problem, but sleep loss builds up—or so I've heard, anyway. I'd have worn down eventually, and it might have happened at a bad time. I'm just glad I know now." I smiled at him. "Thanks, Dad."

He sighed for some reason, moving to sit at the table. He dropped his arms in front of him, crossing them.

"Did you know your mother almost divorced me, once? But only once."

That caught me off-guard, and I looked up, meeting his eyes.

"I think that was your first genuine response all morning," he said. "Taylor, you don't need to act around me. I worry, but it's because I'm your dad. I'm not going to get in your way, and I'm not your enemy."

"I wasn't--" I stopped, because I couldn't honestly finish that sentence. I grimaced, taking a sip from my glass, then shook my head. "Dad, it's just--"

"You're in over your head, doing hard work," he said. "And you think that if you look weak then they'll take you apart. I know." He chuckled, and I looked up at him. "That's why I don't want to be just another one of those people. I don't want to promise, because you're my daughter, but--no, it's because you're my daughter, because you're too much like me." He sighed, squaring his shoulders and seeming to come to some resolution.

"So I'm not going to get in your way," he said, speaking more confidently. "Because even if your mother's parents really did love her, the moment I realized they'd never support the two of us together, I know I started seeing them as just an obstacle. That's something that's happened to me over, and over, and over." He reached forward, across the table, putting his hand on mine. "You're in over your head, Taylor, but I don't think I can make you stop. Your mother was the only one that could stop me, after all... So don't feel like you have to pretend around me. Give me that much, at least."

I breathed out. "I... don't know if I can promise that." I put my other hand on his. "I can't be just a kid, Dad, not even your kid. All this isn't something a kid can do."

"It isn't about being a child, Taylor," he said, but he was smiling. "You heard what I said earlier, didn't you? You're a Thinker, you should be able to connect the dots."

"Being a Thinker doesn't mean you're super-smart at everything, Dad," I said, and he laughed at me.

"Don't sound so petulant at work, no one will take you seriously."

I glowered at him, and he started laughing again. Jerk.

If I was 'too much like him,' if he was bringing it up in this context...

"I was born," I said slowly. "And the Docks were still doing a lot of business, back then. So you felt like you needed to work more, to support us."

A nod. "Your mother became my safety valve," he said. "Someone I trusted to tell me that I was pushing too far. I don't think I can do that for you, Taylor—I don't want my daughter working as hard as you want to, but if I was there myself, I know I'd be doing the same." A slight smile crossed his face, though there wasn't a trace of amusement in it. "Not that having a person as safety valve really
works, anyway. You've seen why."

I had.

"So, as just a request," he said, very gently, "I'm going to ask that you not work today. I notice you're in business casual, even on a Saturday. You need to rest."

I had to laugh, and he looked surprised. "I'm going on a lunch date," I said, and he froze. "He said he liked the suits, but I'm not working, so I figured I may as well dress halfway there."

"A date," he said, very slowly. He looked at me a long moment, then frowned. "One of the Wards? Taylor, I'm not interested in semantics. There's a reason it's called 'networking.'"

"It is an actual date." I patted his hand, withdrawing mine. "I've already advised him, and I don't think there's anything else he could tell me. I mean, it'd be useful if the Wards like me, don't get me wrong--" He actually rolled his eyes. "But that's not really the point of today. He asked, and I didn't see a reason to say 'no.'"

I really was working too much, if his concern for my welfare was entirely eclipsing any stereotypical fear for my virtue. After all the depictions of protective fathers in stories, I kind of expected literal fire-breathing.

"And the rest of the day?"

"I'm going to read," I said.

"Actual books?"

"Actual books. I'll leave for lunch, and then I'm going to hang out with Contessa for a while." Another frown. "We're playing video games. After that, I'm going to do something with my powers that I can only do once a day, but it'll only take about an hour or so."

"That's what gives you the headaches?" I nodded.

"If that's all I'm using them for today, it shouldn't be too bad."

He sighed. "Not quite a day off, but close enough," he said, then looked at our plates. "Food's getting cold. Let's go ahead and eat."

"Dad." He looked up. "Thanks. I know I'm kind of bad at the whole 'obedient daughter' thing--"

"And I'm bad at being a good dad. I know." He shrugged, and it was a lot like the one I used when I was feeling particularly graceless. "Let's at least try to meet each other halfway, okay?"

"Okay."

Breakfast was nice.

---

"Hey, Taylor, over here!"

The boy behind Clockblocker's mask waved from a seat; he already had two cups and two plates in front of him.

"Sorry, took the luxury of ordering for you, because I'm starving," he said. "Figured that was less
rude than just chowing down alone. They've got this great chicken-cheese melt thing this month... You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

"Haven't tried it yet, but it sounds great. Thank you, Dennis." I sank onto the chair with a gentle 'whuff' of air, closing my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, he'd raised his eyebrows.

"You could've at least pretended to ask my real name first. I mean, it's easy to find out, but still."

"I thought you were 'into the whole woman-in-charge' thing," I echoed, and that won me a laugh. "Besides, knowing everything is basically my job now."

"Point." Dennis eyed me, up and down; I wasn't wearing a full suit today, just a blouse in light gray and long charcoal slacks. "You okay? You look kind of worn out."

"I am," I admitted, taking a sip of my tea. The warmth made me feel a little more alive. "Yesterday was just particularly rough, that's all. I'm done meeting hero teams for the week, after talking to your seniors the other day, but I've still got my hands full learning everything I've got to know, doing all my training requirements, and trying to build my connections. Plus, self-defense practice."

"Oh, boy," Clockblocker said. "They expecting you to meet some minimum level of prowess, what with your rank? That's gotta be tough, considering the service time difference."

"Not exactly," I said. "It's just, intuitive Thinkers at my level sometimes develop that intuition to a kind of precognition. So I'm fighting an actual combat precog that holds back enough that I could just barely beat her, if I could see the future. Which also means that every time I do a little bit better, she just kicks my ass harder. It's like fighting a living speed bag. ...a speed bag that hates you."

I probably should have started more gently than 'fighting Contessa,' but I'd been thrown in the deep end everywhere else. Moderation is for people that don't have to kill Endbringers.

"Can't imagine you'll ever actually be on the front lines," he said speculatively. "But I guess you don't always get the choice."

"Yeah." I closed my eyes. "I'm a strong Thinker. I unmask capes just by existing, and I'm trying to make things better. Puts a target on my back." I took another sip of my tea, then a first bite of my sandwich. It really was good. "Mannequin should be on that list. I figure the Nine might come after me some day, and hey, once they do, that's a good excuse to take them down. Just need to make sure I can survive an S-class long enough to get rescued."

I'd spent half a day thinking about the S-class threats once, just to make sure there weren't any low-hanging fruit. Most of them, like the Blasphemies, didn't seem especially complicated, they just required massive force; the Endbringers were at the top end of that list. Sleeper and the Ash Beast were on that part of the list, but they had their own little sub-section: 'predictable and avoidable,' and therefore best left alone (at least until we ran out of other S-classes).

But then there was the Slaughterhouse Nine. Jack Slash, the leader, who had the power to project bladed weapons; Bonesaw, the Biotinker; the Siberian, a flight-durability-superstrength Alexandria Package who had brought the Quadrumvirate down to three; Mannequin, a sustainability Tinker twisted by the Simurgh, who hunted anyone trying to improve the world; Shatterbird, whose song animated and weaponized glass, who had destroyed Dubai in an instant; Crawler, a Changer who permanently adapted around anything that didn't kill him; and three more rotating members.

The Siberian and Crawler weren't enemies we could kill, not easily. The rest? Mostly human. We could kill them, and we had, hence their high turnover rate.
And yet, Jack Slash had been doing this for ages. Why hadn't anyone gotten a lucky shot? More than that, what made him the leader? By all accounts, Shatterbird was vain, violent and easily provoked—I'd have expected her to try for the spot. The Siberian, meanwhile, hadn't ever even been hurt, and she'd managed to hurt Alexandria, the only other 'invincible' hero; if she'd taken the lead, no one could have said no. And yet he lived and yet he led.

Ignore the rest of the world, and the fact still remained that Contessa hadn't simply opened a portal and shot him in the face. He killed hundreds of civilians and a few dozen capes every year—what value was there in leaving him alive, when the S9 might fall apart without him? But she hadn't simply killed him, which, in light of Cauldron's greater goal, suggested she couldn't. If his power a) let him keep control of all those psychopaths and b) evade Contessa, then he had to have some sort of wide-range mind-reading or powerful precognition, something that'd always let him make the right choices. He was a Blaster, but more importantly, he was also a Thinker.

(Which was irritating. Why hadn't I also gotten some minor combat power, something better than being a good shot? Even if he was smart enough to use it well, that Thinker power of his couldn't be weak.)

I'd asked her about how her power interacted with blindspots, in order to sound out just how safe I was under her watchful eye, and it seemed that if she was asking the right questions, they never surprised her. If they were in the way of a Path, she always knew, well in advance, and the question dedicated to me was unambiguous. Contessa couldn't kill him, no, but she could save me from any Path that would put me in his way.

In light of his power, I could see Cauldron deciding to leave the S9 to the world—I didn't like it, but I could understand it. But Mannequin's tendencies were well-known, and even with my Tinker aspects hidden, I was still well within in his wheelhouse. And the sooner the bastards were dead, the better. I wasn't opposed to quietly forcing Cauldron's hand, especially if Contessa couldn't set up steps to keep Jack away. She might delay it, but if he set his mind on it, he'd find his way to me sooner or later, and I had to be ready for that day. As a bonus, if I was right about Jack, we might be able to use that anti-precognition power against Scion.

People might die—but people would always die, so long as Jack Slash was alive. With all the power in my hands and with all the pain in the world, I couldn't keep pretending my city was special.

"I'm getting the impression we should stop talking about work now," Dennis said. I opened my eyes to see him resting his cheek on one propped-up fist, seeming to fight a smile. "Because the more I hear you talk about your plans, the more I realize you're completely insane."

"So I hear," I said. "I can understand if you're not interested in hearing about that sort of thing."

"I'm starting to think that I am interested, and that's the problem."

He managed to startle a laugh out of me, and he looked about as proud as I'd ever seen someone.

Deflection aside, he was surprisingly reasonable; most people would cringe back from such casual mention of a horror show like the Nine. I appreciated that.

"So," he said. "What do you do with your time, when you're not trying to save the world?"

"Read books," I said. "I run long-distance now, and I'm starting to enjoy it, but that started as part of the world-saving thing. I'm playing a few video games now, but that's, uh, also kind of the world-saving thing."
"Oh?" He grinned, leaning forward. "Part of some clever plan to recruit Uber and Leet to the side of justice?"

I took another bite of my sandwich, chewed, swallowed, appreciated, drank a bit of tea. Dennis started eating his own sandwich, keeping an eye on me. Then I nodded. "Yeah, actually." Dennis choked, giving me a dirty look, and I took another bite to hide my smile. He'd mostly cleared his airway by the time I finished chewing. "Uber'll be a good teacher, and with the right sort of support, Leet is the strongest Tinker in the world. Doesn't matter if the second machine blows up if the first one does its job--and if you know which ones will blow up? Even better."

Dragon would probably be good for that, but the Tinker Initiative was on hold until I was cleared to travel.

"I'll keep an eye on the newspapers. So, books," he said, very firmly. "Genre?"

"Fantasy, mostly," I said. "Low fantasy, the stuff where you've got people in the small towns, or king and court, or armies, the ones where wizards are mysterious and no one's flinging magic around. I just like the idea of all the different worlds, seeing what's different and what's the same."

Even more, lately. My view of all the worlds was something I'd seen several times in my dreams since, and it hadn't lost any of its wonder.

"Yeah, I'm more the urban fantasy type myself, the ones we get from Aleph," Clockblocker said. "Where you've got maybe one wizard or werewolf for every ten thousand people, or there's some shadowy conspiracy keeping magic in the shadows, and you've got vampire PIs or beleaguered wizards-for-hire or poor college kids trying to learn spells and pay rent between classes. There's similarities to the low cape concentration they've got, so they're pretty good at it." He made a face. "Better than the Bet equivalent, anyway."

"If I bring up Maggie Holt here, I look like an amateur, right?"

"That's a good series even if you're not a filthy casual. Which you still are, of course," he said graciously. "I'll get you a book list, which will doubtlessly be wasted on your plebian tastes." He swirled a stirring stick around in his tea. "Dean and I swap books back and forth a bit, but he's the only one... The rest of 'em are only into games or sports." He leaned forward and spoke in an exaggerated whisper, hand against his mouth. "Our bad luck, ending up in the jock job, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Says the person who can actually fight." I took a sip of my tea, shaking my head. "It always comes back to the job, doesn't it? I'm pretty sure we're too young for that cliche. Isn't that some middle-aged officeworker issue?"

"Our job is kind of a part of everything else in the world," Dennis said, expression uncommonly serious. "So it's natural that everything reminds us of it."

"True."

Me more than almost anyone, since my job was to ensure there was still an 'everything.'

"Still, let's do our level best to avoid the topic a little longer," he said. "So, any interesting books in your genre lately?"

"Well--"

We kept talking, trading back and forth. It was funny. Before, I'd thought an hour might be too much time, but by the end, I wished I'd set aside more.
It wasn't useful at all, not like I'd expected, but it was a little like having friends again. I knew Cauldron didn't count, couldn't count, not so long as we needed each other.

"Well, dear lady," Dennis said, taking my hand and lifting to his mouth in a grand gesture. He grinned at me, even as I drew it back again. He was just making fun of me, so I very definitely did not need to freak out about it. Not even a little. "That was a thoroughly enjoyable lunch, even after I factor in the grilling I will doubtlessly receive from my dear companions. If ever you should again so grace me with your presence, I would be delighted."

I flicked him in the forehead, and he staggered back like he'd been shot, a hand to his chest.

"I can at least keep my lunch period free, this time next week," I said, and his eyes lit up. It was nice, knowing I'd put that look on his face.

"I'm all for it, then." He raised a hand, expression relaxing; the smile was smaller, less of a performance than those wide jokester grins of his. "I'll see you then, Taylor."

I mirrored his gesture. "Until then, Dennis. Take care of yourself."

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"Shouldn't you heal?"

Contessa's eyes flicked towards me as she tapped her thumbs against the controller's sides, watching the four meters tick up. It reached the end, and the character's turn came up; she cast another attack spell, then moved to the next character, who was still on the verge of dying.

She made her selection.

"...wait, what the hell was that?"

"Desperation attack," she said, by way of explanation, even as the battle abruptly ended. "Happens rarely at low HP."

I snorted, my lips curling. "Did you arrange all of that on purpose?"

A small smile. "'Path: End This Fight In An Interesting Way.'"

"'End'? Not 'Win'?"

"Even for a climactic boss, that wasn't a terribly difficult enemy," Contessa said, eyes returning to the screen. "It would have taken something quite interesting to lose."

"True." She handed me back the controller. "I think I've read about this part? We're about to cross the point of no return. This World of Ruin concept coming up sounds interesting, if a little too familiar. I mean, the World of Balance, where everything pretty much works, evil empire aside..."

"We did just kill some sort of fantasy Endbringer. A four-legged Behemoth equivalent, Flare and all." A slight frown. "...it's certainly much closer than the actual in-game monster of the same name. Thankfully, the real one can't summon meteors."

I hadn't seen either of them yet, so I'd have to take her word on it.

(You knew it was an Aleph game because it still had a 'Behemoth.' That bit of mythology had sort of been ruined for us.)
"Still, we're unlikely to see true peace in our time," Contessa said, eyes dropping to her hands. "I don't imagine that Scion's deaths will stop the Triggers... It may even make them worse, if unrestricted shards are released onto the world. Even if I survive up to and through the final battle, there's nothing I can do to stop the wrong person from getting the wrong power."

"True. The reward for work well-done is more work." I shrug. "If we defeat Scion, then on the present timeline, I'll be thirty at the most. I don't intend to stop there."

A nod, but no reply.

As we watched the cutscene, Contessa's light dimmed. I glanced sideways, looking at Fortuna, whose eyes were still on her hands.

"Just thinking," she said. "That Desperation Attack mechanic doesn't always happen... It's not reliable, not explained, and it's something most people won't ever see. A unique mechanic, unique assets, a special technique for every character, all virtually wasted. It's a bit of a shame."

"I thought it was cool," I said. "And there's some kid in this situation who was taken by complete surprise, and it made his day." I smiled at the screen. "You know, I'd never played this game, but I did once run across this compilation of dumb fake secrets, just this list of increasingly improbable stuff you could supposedly unlock. I think it's because of things like Desperation Attacks--there's a real sense of wonder to actual secrets."

"There's a cursed shield somewhere in the game," Fortuna said, and I glanced her way. "Equipping it cripples you, but if you fight 255 battles with it, it becomes the strongest thing in the game." A small smile. "And a cursed ring with a similar name and its own downsides, which you can't purify at all."

I laughed. "No wonder cursed items popped up so often in that list."

We watched in silence as the rest of the events played out. The cutscene ended, and the time began to tick down.

"Speaking of secrets," Fortuna said. "I'm wondering if you can figure this one out on your own. It's not impossible... Not quite."

A secret. I couldn't go back, there weren't any sparkling objects and there was no room for any hidden walls, I doubted it'd be in the fights...

I defeated the miniboss (barely worthy of the title), and still didn't know. What had happened? What could I possibly do, on this small stretch of land? I opened my menu, eyebrows creasing, and then it hit me.

"Someone left the party earlier," I murmured. "And he's still on the island. So if I just get on the ship... I'd be leaving him to die?" My eyebrows went up. "Wow. They actually did that? He really just dies here if you let him?"

"He can't exactly fly."

"Yeah, but stuff can happen without it being on camera, or without the player taking part. This is sort of like making a plot point out of the fact that no one ever seems to go to the bathroom."

"Fair enough." Her eyes were on the screen. "All the same, sometimes the best thing you can do is wait," Fortuna said. "The random number generator shuffles over time in most games. And here, too, you get something better for keeping calm. Rushing on ahead is often useful, but it isn't always the answer."
Contessa was calm, implacable, and utterly self-assured in every situation, from dinner to Mario Kart. Fortuna... wasn't quite. She had a distinct tendency to lapse into fortune cookie platitudes, and her well of borrowed mystique had run dry pretty quickly. (Also, she was awful at Mario Kart.)

If Contessa had said that, I would have wracked my brain for analogies to our current situation. With Fortuna, I could just discreetly roll my eyes and try not to laugh.

"Don't worry, I already know I need to get more sleep." She looked skeptical. "Really. Anyway, there we go," I said. Fate successfully changed. "Time to go!"

"You should save when you're able," Contessa said. I glanced her way. "It's worth seeing the bad ending to an upcoming event, and it's probably the canon way for things to go." She smiled at me. "But I hardly think you're the kind of person to let that be, not when you could have averted it."

"Of course not."

Contessa, Fortuna and I whiled away a little more time together.
I slept in that Monday; I'd moved my runs to later on, and I needed to be well-rested for my morning meeting.

By the time eight-thirty rolled around, I'd dressed in a combat-ready suit, slipped on my assigned armband communicator, and headed off to work. When I entered one of the Rig's meeting rooms, Armsmaster and Velocity were waiting, already inside and costumed.

"You're here," Armsmaster said, rising. Velocity looked back and forth between us, head tilting.

"Wait, aren't we teleporting off for a cross-training exercise? Where's everyone else?"

"We are," I said. "We just told you to meet with us fifteen minutes earlier than them. It took a bit of doing, but we made a breakthrough on your problem. Your Breaker field's dimensions are incredibly tight... But Armsmaster is very good at designing compact."

"This is the first of many," Armsmaster said, pulling out two gloves. They were red leather, matched with the rest of Velocity's outfit. The racing stripes of the costume were each present, branching off to trace down to the tips of his fingers... But there were two clear spheres at the origin of the stripes on those gloves, raised ever-so-slightly off the material, and the stripes of the two gloves were each different colors. As he raised them, you could see the color shift and flow inside.

He tapped the gem on the top of the glove with a blue stripe, and the fingertips protruded outward; the leather parted, revealing thin needle points.

"Contact injectors," I said, Velocity looking towards me. "The size constraints are an issue, but it's within the bounds of your field. Try one on--trust me, it'll be fine."

Velocity pulled off a glove, even as Armsmaster retracted the fingertips. Velocity slipped it on, tapping the gem... And then gingerly accelerated through a punch. As he finished the motion, he stared at his hand in silence, then repeated the movement, faster this time.

"The blue is an anesthetic," Armsmaster said, as Velocity's hand fell to his side. "The orange is a highly potent irritant, which will function even if unable to penetrate the skin. Upon contact with all five fingers of either hand, the needles will automatically inject a fixed dose, and each drug will neutralize the other if necessary. Combined with the force-dampening of your field, they should do no permanent harm. Each glove has only two doses apiece due to size restrictions, unfortunately."

I had a few doses of each myself in similar contact syringes, just in case we needed to neutralize them on short notice, and so did he. I'd been taught to use them, much to my regret; Armsmaster was thorough.

"The other pieces," he said, as Velocity fell into his chair, "will provide compact armor, flight, and an in-arm projectile cannon, the last of which should let you hit like a Brute in melee." Adding his
punching speed to a fired round, letting it escape the field with its full force and mass, using his Breaker field to absorb the recoil... Armsmaster had presented nearly all of the components the moment we'd sat down, and all I'd done was provide the information he needed to refine it. Robin's refusal to test the exact limits of his field must have really chafed.

"We intend to elevate you to a full Alexandria package. With Kid Win's assistance, the final suit will be modular, something we can fine-tune to the mission."

"There's a chance that the other team will be able to sense us, maybe even hear us," I said. "We wanted you to know ahead of time. Your ability to quickly take out targets will be really important... And if they cheated and looked us up, you'll be one hell of a surprise."

Armsmaster and I indulged in smug smirks, a little more on the villainous side of the scale. A moment later, that smile faded him his lips, and he looked at me askance. "Ideally we'd test later than this, once the standard suit was assembled, but..."

"Sorry, it was a bit selfish of me to ask," I said with a shrug. "The slot opened up, and I really want to see what I can do in an actual fight... My schedule won't always be this flexible. I hope you're not too upset, Velocity."

"No, no," he said, waving his hands. "Apparently I'm going to move from 'hero' to 'superhero,' so I'm not going to start complaining about the speed."

"Thanks."

The others soon began to filter into the room. Following along after them, a silvery box in his hands, was Kid Win.

"Hey, Administrator," the Tinker said, ducking his head in a quick greeting. "Sorry, meant to get here sooner. I already got Tinker authorization approval, but I wanted to do one last check on these."

"You made it before we left." I smiled at him. "That's really all I can ask."

"Yeah." He set the box down, opening it to reveal two strange silver guns. Compared to normal guns, they were substantially wider, but made of a lighter material; I'd tried the prototypes, and somehow the weight distribution worked out to feel like a normal one. I didn't get it, but they worked, and that was all you could really ask of Tinkertech.

The top of each was a smooth cylinder, and as he picked one up, he removed a catch, opening it up and showing the removal process. He set it back and replaced the catch, and it spun in place, clicking softly. I didn't need sights if I used my power, so it didn't have any.

"Blue cylinder is tranquilizers, Armsmaster's formula," Chris said. "Black are actual bullets, low-caliber; you said you wanted capacity more than anything." I nodded, and he replaced the pistol in the box. "Thirty shots apiece, and two additional ammo cylinders of each. You'll need a second after you reload for the gun to realign--fire before that and it may jam. That's fixable, but I need to refine the design first. Be gentle with these prototypes, okay?"

"Got it," I said. "Thanks, Chris. I really appreciate the effort." I gave the guns one last look, then holstered both of them. "Especially since I'm hoping they won't see much use."

He waved it off. "Good practice," he said. "Hearing what my specialty is really helped... And, well, you were good to a friend. I try to keep things even."

The date with Dennis?
"I appreciate the sentiment, even if I think it's undeserved." I snorted in quick amusement, shaking my head. "And let's end it there before this descends into a humility contest, okay? I'll sit down for an interview if you want feedback afterward."

He nodded, quick and jerky, and turned towards the door. "I'll see you later, Taylor. Good luck with the fight."

"I'll do my best."

'Do my best not to need luck,' that is, but it'd be rude to say that out loud.

As he stepped out, I drew and holstered the guns a few times each, feeling the balance. They still felt a lot like the ones I'd trained with.

"One last bit of prep work on my end," I said, looking up. "Dauntless. You know how I asked you to hold off on using your charge for the day?" He nodded. "Can you charge these?"

He tilted his head, staring at me blankly. And then his eyes widened. "Have you discovered a way for someone else to use my items?"

"Of course not," I said. "Your charging is actually more like installing circuitry, and you're their battery that runs the resulting system. I mean, theoretically there's a way to cannibalize the reshaping energy, but it's not like your charges are free--wouldn't be worth it anyway." I tapped the left stem of my glasses. "I've been training, and I fight better blindfolded. My aim's very good when I'm targeting something with a shard, and I want to see if I get a similar benefit from a weapon with a shard." I shrugged one shoulder, lips twitching in a wry smile. "Plus, I might lose them somehow, you never know."

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "Reasonable enough," he said, with a slight smile. "I can spare the twenty hours, if it's just once."

I flipped them in my hands, holding out the grips, and he took one in each hand. He closed his eyes, focusing, and crackling blue lightning surrounded his hands. It flowed into the guns, and... nothing happened, at least on the surface.

To my senses, there was now a tiny pair of glowing lights added to the great invisible web. I had a feeling it was related to the process that created second-generation shards, but that was all I knew, and it was likely all I needed to know.

The label of those two tiny twinned stars wasn't one at all, yet--more like an empty space on the spine of a book, waiting for the filling of its pages.

He mirrored my earlier gesture, holding them out to me. I took the guns back and pulled the cartridge out of the one on the right, then closed my eyes. I tossed the unloaded gun up and down, catching it once, then twice, then three times. "They feel alive, now," I said, opening my eyes looking up at him. "Thanks, Dauntless. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome."

"Seeing capes is fine," Assault said, "but if you're going blind, are you going to be bumping into walls?"

"Not if there's a cape near me. It's part of my senses," I said. "You'd react if you saw me about to run into a wall, right?" He nodded. "I can see that and use it. It's a little rough, but it's good enough."
I looked to Armsmaster, who nodded.

"If that's all, then..." He took a breath, and as he began to speak, I busied myself with putting on and adjusting my holsters.

"In short, as you know, we're scheduled for one of our twice-annual cross-Protectorate spars. We don't know our opponents and we don't know the location; we're traveling by teleporter, and our opponents will do the same." A round of nods, and he looked towards me. "We'll be separated by the length of the chosen arena. There's a number of locations we use, so I can't brief you on the site, but in all other respects, we're simulating an operation. We'll have time and distance to use powers to surveil the situation."

Good. I'd hoped as much.

"Nice not being the new guy this time," Triumph said, grinning. "I've been assured that win or lose, we're not going to be punished." He looked at Armsmaster surreptitiously, then amended that. "...by anyone higher up, anyway. No stress," he said, almost as if he was convincing himself.

"Yeah, sure, no paycuts, but... We managed to lose the last one," Assault said, with an exaggerated sigh. He broke into a stage whisper, hand raised between the side of his mouth and our Tinker. "Armsy was insufferable for a few weeks after that."

"To be fair," Miss Militia said, voice deceptively mild, "we should have won that fight."

"If a dozen tiny things had all gone right, yes," Battery said. She took a breath, seeming to restrain herself, before turning to me. "But they have high expectations of us, it seems, with the level of villain activity in Brockton Bay. We tend to be assigned difficult fights in these. Not New York, Los Angeles or Houston, naturally--" (Yeah, the Triumvirate were sort of out of anyone's weight class) "--but we're against more powerful teams, or in more restrictive conditions."

A high difficulty job wasn't anything new for me, but honestly, I'd have liked to be able to throw the fight. This sort of combat operation wasn't what I wanted to do with my time, not with so many bigger problems ahead of us, but I suspected that doing anything but my very best would cause problems.

...well, and to be honest, I'd always hated to lose.

I paused a moment, tilting my head; someone had just appeared inside my range. Mover: Earth-Referenced Space-Time Bounded Time-Locked Transportation, Energy-Variation Aggression. A teleporter that moved regions of space, then? Thankfully, Manton protections kept you from killing yourself with it. Good for mass transit, and if you had a gas mask...

Spending a week working on formulas and almost as long working through cross-sections of Heir had done a lot for my speed of recognition. More than that... Ever since the day I'd found out about the Entities, it was like I'd turned a key. Before that day, I couldn't have made a formula on auto-pilot, and I was pretty sure I couldn't avoid walking into walls just by keeping an eye on nearby capes. Figuring out the exact details of each of the villains in the city without wiki pages, down to range and restrictions, had taken me hours of work.

This cape? I'd figured it out in five seconds. Sure, it wasn't entirely unambiguous, but that sort of drastic change couldn't possibly be a function of experience alone. That wasn't a great realization, especially in light of the idea that shards had minds.

"Right." I forced myself to focus back on the situation at hand. "So with the advantage of distance,
I'll be briefing you on what our opponents can do, long before we actually meet them. It'll be a more abbreviated version of the villain breakdown you got last week. But, in light of possible enemy powers--" I raised a hand. "If I do this, that means that what I'm saying is a lie, or at least not completely true. If I use the word 'cavalry,' then that's an audio version of the same. Everyone got that?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"As for why... The enemy doesn't know just how much I know about powers, and most Thinkers don't have my level of precision. I want to preserve some element of surprise if they can overhear us or see us from far away." I looked towards Armsmaster. "Or if they can hack our communications channels once we separate out."

He shook his head. "Not an issue." He spoke with absolute confidence. "We're using a modified version of the Endbringer comms system, with all of those modifications going towards security--and Dragon personally oversees the system during each of these sessions, to ensure that villains can't gather information here. Short of the Dragonslayers or other explicitly anti-communications Tinkers or powers, I wouldn't be concerned, and she can still trump a number of those."

"Good to know." I breathed easier. "On a similar note, Armsmaster, I'd like permission to immediately declare a particular enforcement level of the Master-Stranger Protocol, if the enemy team merits it. Depending on their composition, the situation may necessitate an immediate elevation before I can brief you all."

He considered me, then nodded. "Granted. Use it wisely, please."

"Thank you."

There was a knock on the door, courtesy of the teleporter I'd seen.

"Strider," a male voice called out.

"Enter," Armsmaster responded, and the door opened.

Strider wore blue-and-black, face covered by a domino mask, with a square-billed hat pulled low over his eyes; combined with the golden buttons of his uniform, his cape costume was somewhere between 'train conductor' and 'gentleman thief.' He pulled it off.

"I know all of you, don't I?" His eyes scanned the room, then stopped on me. "Ah, new one." He smiled, stepping forward and holding out a hand. "Strider. Independent Vegas cape, contracted to take you to and from your fight."

He even had the sort of voice you'd expect from the costume, a bold baritone... And I'd have to ask where he got the gloves, because they managed to incorporate brass knuckles in a way that made them look stylish.

"Administrator. It's good to meet you, Strider. Thank you for your assistance, here and with the Endbringers." I took his hand, and we shook firmly. As my hand fell, I looked at him. "You're kind of unlucky," I murmured to myself. He blinked, and I shook my head. "Sorry, said that out loud. Thinker thing," I said, waving it aside. "Nothing you need to worry about, I promise."

He'd come really, really close to being a time traveler. Sure, it would have been expensive, but he had a living shard--chances are that he would have been a bit tired, at the most. We'd seen a time trapper, but time travelers weren't around, to the best of my knowledge.
I was pretty sure he'd gotten very nearly a whole shard, so at least Scion probably wouldn't pull that trick out of his hat.

"Now you've got me curious," he grumbled good-naturedly, one hand absentmindedly adjusting the hat. "But I'll let it go." He looked over the group. "Everyone here geared up and ready?" A chorus of agreements later, he nodded. "Then circle around, if you would. Easier to take off and land that way."

We took positions around him.

"Then here we go."

We were abruptly somewhere else.

I staggered, and Battery put a hand on my shoulders, steadying me.

"Ugh."

I shook my head, even as Strider vanished again and the web adjusted. With Cauldron's doors, I had a sense of before and after, so I could gradually adjust, but just appearing somewhere else, with all of the new information that involved? I really didn't want to do that again.

There were a lot of Thinkers in this city, weren't there? Huh. Interesting. And... Huh, the walls had ears in this town. Not here, wherever 'here' was, but in most of the surrounding city. I'd have to keep that in mind if we debriefed here.

Judging by the difference in the listening ears inside and out, we were in some sort of artificial space, and towards its edge. Probably a square? Interesting.

"Right, sorry about that." I straightened up, looking around once. "Fine now."

We were in a sort of artificial city. All around us were rising stone rectangles of various heights and dimensions; with them devoid of all decorations, the place seemed suddenly, disturbingly alien. I pulled out a compass, checking...

"So the streets align with the cardinal directions? Useful. Explains the grid."

I closed my eyes, slipping a long black headband around my eyes. I clinched it in place, then focused on details.

There, about ten blocks away to our cardinal north, were eight lights. I did a quick overview of each, ignoring details to focus on the idea, the same sort of eyeglasses-off hazy perspective I used to get an idea of which parts in a great tub of Entity-stuff were all the same shard. There was a feeling like a shifting gear, a change in perspective, and the lights blurred out until it was almost as if they'd formed a single small-scale Entity.

I looked over the gestalt, and I didn't like what I saw.

"Master-Stranger Protocol," I said tersely. "I'm calling Master 5 Stranger 9 on this--if someone goes dark, assume that they're compromised or may not be what they seem, and all communications go through the private channel." I turned my head towards Armsmaster. "With your permission, I'd like to assume full command, to better direct the fight. If we don't end this fast, it's going to be ugly."

His shard brightened a moment. He took a breath, and then breathed out; a moment later, I heard a low grunt. "Understood."
"Thank you." I looked forward, readjusting my focus, and brought the team back out to individuals. "Time to put the 'brief' in 'briefing.' Eight total, to match our eight, directly north of us, about the length of ten Brockton Bay city blocks. First, codename 'Branch.' Cloner Master." I'd have liked to use another name, but I doubt they'd know the Latin; wouldn't do any good to use a codename only I'd remember. "Can create a number of copies rather quickly, all of which have elevated physical abilities, and they can change to mirror the appearances of others during their creation. Won't imitate tech, so our comms are safe." I held up a hand. "Shouldn't imitate any of the gear we have, either. Good thing, what with throwing weapons."

He was also a Cauldron cape, and one of the few I'd seen out in the wild. So were a few others in the team.

At least Assault's throwing slugs were probably off the table anyway--I'd seen a video of them punching through buildings, let alone enemy Brutes. True, Branch's clones wouldn't be nearly so strong, but a well-thrown baseball can still kill you.

There were several clones, already formed. Two of their members had secondary lights, labels blurred out by the greater one all around them. I couldn't see the labels, as concealed as they were by their own powers. I'd have to assume they were surprises, courtesy of Branch.

"Second, codename 'Snatcher.' Possessor Master." Another Cauldron cape... Interesting. I was pretty sure I'd seen the components for that one, actually. "We're going to need a costume change here, folks. Everyone take out your extra domino masks." For my own part, I hadn't taken my mask; instead, I just adjusted my headband, tilting it sideways like a kind of eye patch, and opened my right eye for demonstration, before replacing it. "Changes a victim's eye color to mirror his, and he's got a physical change with his trigger--eyes are a dark pink. Unmistakable." I raised my hand. "Not sure of effect range, so assume it's far, and I can't be sure whether I can see whether or not it's happened to someone."

I raised my other hand, setting my arms about an arm's length apart, then held up three fingers. I'd have to hope they'd get the pantomime.

"Third, codename 'Dark.' Shaker-Trump." I was pretty sure this was the first time I'd seen a shard piece reused in a different power, outside of the second-gens. "Remember Grue in Brockton Bay? Sort of like that, with a weaker effect on a larger scale. She darkens the sky in an entire area, creating a short period of localized dusk. It creates a sort of ceiling on other powers, so your high-end won't be as strong as you remember. It might make you slower, weaker, less tough, affect how tiring your powers are or how often you can use them, you get the idea. It'll affect everyone, but they know how it affects them, and you need to be aware of the visibility change. Against a tricky team like this, a little less light might keep you from noticing something important."

I'd kind of hoped that they'd try to use Dark to hide their powers, as soon as they heard me start to detail them... It would have been nice for a team configured like this unholy nightmare to be staffed by idiots, at least for now. No such luck.

"Fourth, codename 'Beast.' Brute. General physical enhancement, especially his senses." I held up a hand. "Hearing this far would probably deafen him in normal life, so he probably can't hear us. Still, be aware of it."

Senses like that fell under Thinking, and an aspect of his power allowed him to selectively tune out distractions, so we weren't going to be that lucky. Having to fight a Master-Stranger nightmare with unreliable communications was going to suck... I could do it, of course, but I didn't think this would be a neat win.
"Fifth, codename 'Facet.' Trump. Can plant crystals that grow and alter physics. Assume any place she's been might be trapped and that the crystals will do bad things to you, especially when combined with..."

"Sixth, codename 'Quake.' Terrakinetic Shaker. Can alter the ground within a wide range. Can't alter the ground directly under your feet, though." I held up a hand. "Thankfully, she shouldn't be able to use the earth to sense us coming." I put down the hand. "Range is about three blocks."

I'd taught Clockblocker a way to use his self-excluded Manton restriction to check how far his power could extend, but I had a feeling this was more like one of Vista's tricks: after all, if a power only failed to work where people were, then that was as good as sonar.

"Seventh, codename 'Impact.' Brute." Some of these Cauldron-granted powers were just strange... If I'd come here two weeks ago, I'd have taken ten times as long to figure them out. "Think an inverse Night--the more attention he gets, the stronger he gets, and the more his attacks disorient you." I raised a hand. "Not a priority. He's not going to decide this fight."

He wouldn't, no, but only while we remained in control. He was their strongest muscle in a team without much of that, and that made him a uniquely dangerous part of it.

"Finally, eighth, codename 'Cowboy.'" It'd be slightly awkward if they were a girl, yeah, but I wasn't going to say 'cowperson.' That sounded like an entirely different sort of power. "Alters projectile properties. He can make them faster or slower, make them curve, have them bounce off of surfaces... Cowboy is the other muscle of the team. Actually better to engage in the open, because you're less likely to be surprised--but thinking that you know what this power will do is dangerous. Careful."

I turned around, facing the enemy. They weren't moving, not yet.

"We're facing a magic trick, or maybe a shell game," I said. "Beast gives them intel, Quake, Facet, and Dark make it harder for you to know what's going on, Branch and Snatcher make the identity of ally and enemy unclear, and then Impact and Cowboy use that chaos to clean up." I glanced back over my shoulder, for all that I couldn't see the heroes behind me. "Our advantage lies in straight fights, and with what we know, we should be able to get to one. So long as we play this smart, we win. Their goal is to keep us from doing that."

I looked forward again.

"We're going to split into two teams," I said. "A, B, V, you're first. You're our mobile strike team."

It wasn't an atypical position for them. Velocity tended to play scout, restricting himself to distractions or to eliminating Tinkers or Tinkers without armor or additional toughness. Today, however, he had four doses that could let him play trump card, and I intended to use that. Assault and Battery, meanwhile, tended to stick together: Assault's power let Battery get around her charging restriction and let him make use of openings, while her strength made up for the indirect nature of his power.

"Heavy team is everyone else. We're going to play hammer-and-anvil today, and you're the anvil." I turned back around, raising a hand. "Strike team, your job is to harass them. Their abilities excel in controlling the pace of the fight, so we're going to take that pace away from them. You'll drive them back towards us, and Heavy team will take them out." I lowered the hand. "Likely threats..." I made a thoughtful sound, even as I raised both arms, taking two shambling steps forward.

If anyone could draw a connection between a bad zombie imitation and a ghost, it was Assault; I'd made the same sort of dumb joke he would have, and he in turn would be the best at getting that info
out discreetly. I wasn't so anyone on Armsmaster's side of things would get it, but I really didn't want any of those three to get taken.

"...Quake and Facet's traps, obviously," I said, without missing a beat. "Be aware that there may be pit traps and that crystals will still work if buried, so if it seems strange, play cautious. The watchword today is 'you can't con an honest man'--a trickster only gets you when you think you've already outwitted him."

We were up against a team I fully expected to humiliate nearly anyone else, at least in the first fight--the double blinding of the teams would nearly always work in their favor, because with Beast, any loose lips would give them an asymmetrical information advantage. Every single member of their team had some nasty trick if you didn't already know what they did, and they had the experience advantage with ambushes. If you weren't an order of magnitude above their raw power, then one mistake might end things.

So, with an eye on the listening ear, I'd given them orders in reverse: the Strike team needed to take targets down, while the Heavy team bought time against whoever the other team sent to harass them. With whoever their quick strike team was out of the picture, we'd fall upon them from both sides and end it.

"The rest, we'll improvise," I said. "They're simply too tricky a team to do anything else, at least for now." I clapped my hands. "I'll do my best to direct you as the situation changes, so please try to trust and obey. Finally, remember: the Protocol's in effect up to M5S9. Don't trust everything you see, and remember, if someone goes dark and then reappears, you're authorized to eliminate them on sight UNLESS you're sure of my identity and I verify theirs; the presence of Beast compromises identity passwords. Don't use them."

The fact that they could hear everything I said meant I couldn't keep them blind, but it did give me certain opportunities. Now, would they wait for our approach, or aim to take initiative... The second? The second.

"They're splitting," I said. "They're approximately six blocks away, moving to the east-southeast and west-southwest. Team one, Branch, Beast, Facet, Quake--" I held up a hand, then brought up my other, flashing four fingers twice--eight additional clones, for muscle. "Team two, Snatcher, Dark, Impact, Cowboy." I gestured at our strike team, then at everyone else. "You've got team one, you've got team two. Circle around and take their back." I held up a hand. "We'll come along after and help you clean up. With one of them out of the way, the second will fall easily."

They were doing just what I'd mentioned doing... Flanking, playing hammer-and-anvil. Was that a message, or were they just doing the generally intelligent thing? Didn't matter.

Beast, Facet, and Quake were the ones with sensory powers (at least, if the crystals were as versatile as I expected). I wanted them occupied, to impair their coordination--but, more importantly, I wanted our smaller team kept away from Dark. All three members of that group were vulnerable to even a low-grade power nullifier, and none of their targets had the ability to take them out of the fight quickly. Our heavies weren't so impacted.

If that was the division of the fight, I was confident that we'd win.

A fact that the enemy would be aware of, with what they'd likely gleaned of my power--they knew that any confrontation on my terms was a confrontation that I'd win. Therefore...

Before the strike team came closer than a block or two to their target, they began to move rapidly.
"There we go," I muttered, just to fuck with our enemy's heads, and pulled my blindfold back entirely over both eyes. "Heavy team, continue onward at full speed and engage. Strike team, advance rapidly to the east-southeast and meet up with me--your designated targets are approaching to attack our flank. Disregard previous instructions, I'll verify my identity via personal password after rejoining."

I could buy time if I had to... Not for very long, but I didn't have to, not with our strike team on the move. They'd gone after the low-hanging fruit I'd offered, so their next trick would be a snatch-and-replace on me, courtesy of Branch. I just had to keep that from happening.

As my team passed out of sight, the enemy came out from behind a building. I raised the tranquilizer gun, sighting--

And then rock began to fall from a nearby building, the whole of it toppling down just a bit behind me. Facet threw two crystals, and though I tried to shoot them out of the air, two of Branch's clones jumped forward to block the bullets.

Quake's work. Normal buildings wouldn't be stone, or at least just stone; I'd expected them to at least respect the implicit simulation. True, it was likely that they had things set-up through the city, and this was their home territory, I could see some fudging, but that wouldn't have worked on me, because--

Whatever. Fairness aside, physics still applied; rocks wouldn't respect the fact this wasn't representative of a real combat situation. As I did, the crystal's effect solidified, and the ground lost traction.

My momentum took my feet from under me, and I was forced to slide forward. Even as I hit the ground, I fired, using one gun for clones and one for people; I took out two of the five clones, but the capes were canny and I could only move so fast. I tried shooting my gun to change my trajectory, but Kid Win was too good, the weapon had too little kickback.

Before I hit a building, a gap opened up; Facet threw in a crystal after me, and as I entered the building, the crystal sealed it closed. I raised my gun, firing at the crystal, and... nothing happened. Either Branch had protected the crystal with that clone just in case, or they'd done it so I'd feel disappointed when I got trapped in here and it didn't work. Either way, I resolved to punch him, sooner or later. I focused, examining the crystal sealing the gap, and my heart sank.

Situation: stuck in a building with a crystal that, apparently, prevents the transmission of sound. I fired at a wall, which told me two things: one, I wasn't breaking through the wall with just my guns, and two, the crystal worked.

Clever. They'd still nearly broken the rules to do it, mind, but they'd removed me from play with impressive precision.

Tools: myself, my power, my communicator, my guns, four auto-injector vials (two each of anesthetic and itching solution). Obstacles: reinforced stone walls, silencing crystal, time. Location: artificial building with no doors and no windows, made up of stone way too thick to shoot through, let alone break with my bare hands.

So, in short, I was screwed. I shot at the stone, just in case, and didn't do much more than dent the stone. And yet, they were still the only possible tool I had available.

I lifted the guns, frowning. They still felt alive to the touch, the pseudo-shards clearly visible to my
power's sight.

Creation of pseudo-shards for a purpose... A sort of variation on whatever process created new shards. My power's more succinct descriptions called Dauntless's shard 'Empowerment.' As far as I could tell, it followed a modified Tinker script, containing a number of preexisting designs; it then chose from those designs based on what it was used on, mirroring the intent of the object chosen for empowerment. A gun would become a gun, a shield a shield, a sword a sword, so long as there was some correspondence that allowed the shard to choose, but all of the mechanisms would change. The pseudo-shard became a sort of specialized circuit, taking in Dauntless's energy to execute a program.

I'd talked earlier about cannibalizing that energy, about taking the energy that created automatically-executing 'circuits' and using it directly. If there was any opportunity now in that process, it was in the aspect of the shard that directed, that took all of Empowerment's energy and directed it towards a purpose. That was the sort of purpose my Coordination shard applied to; if they had taken a part of my shard, if it had been combined with Empowerment to create a formula--

[Lifebringer/Lightbearer]

I staggered, one hand rising to my head.

glowing blue lightning, flowing from the fingertips, embracing lifeless forms

Lifebringer.

shining, rising, to become animated and unrelenting

Lightbearer.

she stood amidst an army of arms and armor, shrouded in light--

My headache returned with a vengeance, and I staggered; I managed to control my sudden collapse, falling painfully on one knee. My eyes seemed useless, unfocused, my thoughts still dwelling on the shining army my imagination had conjured--no. Not my imagination.

spinning, circling, endlessly refining

It was a feeling like the time I'd seen a formula Trigger, and like all the times since, my memories retained through each awakening with Contessa's help. Memories, somehow dormant inside my shard--but somehow, this time I'd recalled them, even without a clear impetus. A product of all the other ones I'd produced, maybe?

But it'd given me memories all the same, and I was sure they were true ones.

"A beautiful formula," I murmured. The Entities hadn't known what to do with Empowerment, hadn't had any set purpose in mind for a shard that created and programmed mutable sub-shards, so they'd combined it with Coordination and sent it out in the world. Coordination had read other shards and Empowerment had mimicked their forms, imitating their properties on a vastly smaller scale. They hadn't put a charging restriction on it like they had with Dauntless, and that had been their mistake: she had begun with nearly nothing, and the Lifebringer still clawed her way up to the place of the very strongest.

It hadn't been enough, not against the Entities, but she'd made a damn good effort. In the end, they'd stolen all of the Lifebringer's work, embedded the safer designs in Empowerment, and turned it into a Tinker shard. The Lightbearer hadn't been in their predictions, and they weren't taking that chance again.
Coordination remembered her... Just her, I thought. And so, I suspected, would Empowerment.

I reached out to the things Empowerment had made. If Empowerment was a programming shard, then I was working with a monitor, the restrictions on my shard denying me both mouse and keyboard... But Empowerment was meant to be mutable, and it remembered listening to Coordination.

...how did I communicate, exactly? I focused, paying attention to the web of lights and the part of myself I used to change perspectives. At first, nothing happened--and then I could see faint waves of light. I had the feeling it was something like the shard equivalent of wordless babble, sound without meaning, but all I wanted was sound.

Because when I reached out to the tiny seeds of pure potential residing in the Tinkertech-like shards in my guns, they roused, very slowly. Not to any useful purpose, no, but they listened.

I didn't need to program. I just needed to nudge them, ever so slightly, to shift schematics. The two guns had been Empowered at the same time, and so they were linked, almost like conjoined twins. I only reached out to one half.

I spoke 'sound' onto the web. The shard flickered in something that felt oddly like confusion, for all that it shouldn't have had a mind. The label wavered, and I sent out louder 'sound'; it changed more concretely, and I sent out something still louder, at which point it changed.

The gun was no longer very slightly more durable. It instead glowed faintly. Progress! So I did it again, and the gun became very faintly positively charged. Not exactly useful, unless I was going to try to attract lightning.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no--I cycled through, and the shard began to call out effects it couldn't really plausibly fuel. Which was good, because I needed something destructive.

And then it hit upon the Arclance, somewhere in its memory. The circuits shifted, the energy within aimed to energize oneself, become light, and take the single shortest path. The other half became its battery--it wasn't half the energy source Dauntless was, and half of the effect of the shard would lie in its sudden, catastrophic failure, but it might just complete the effect. If it didn't work, it didn't work--I probably wouldn't die. And if there was any risk I would, that was that Contessa was there for, right?

Speaking of Dauntless... How were they doing, anyway? I looked on how Dauntless's half of the fight was going, I frowned. Really? I'd expected better from that team.

Not my problem yet, though.

I turned, raising the guns, aiming very carefully, and nudged the part of that circuit pertaining to the 'trigger.' Trained to listen to me, the shard... And then I threw them away, throwing up my arms and turning my head.

Even behind a blindfold, behind closed eyes and raised arms, and looking to the side, the crackling discharge of my imitation Arclance nearly blinded me. A roaring torrent of energy escaped the guns, punching through several stone walls. It didn't stop until it punched through one particular imitation light--the one that was supposed to look like me.

The feedback also melted both of my guns to useless slag, because I hadn't made them durable enough to withstand it. No plan's perfect.

I threw myself out of the building before Quake could react. "Vel! 10 o'clock, behind, glove!"
Velocity got it very quickly, to his credit—he lunged forward and twisted around a clone, tapping one particular version of Branch with five fingers. The real one dropped like a stone.

Unfortunately, his clones didn't follow suit. They did, however, turn towards me—all eight of them. They were grouped, two by two, mixed throughout the melee, coordinating to create openings and spread chaos. In the next moment, they began to dash towards me.

They'd dropped everything, so they couldn't be independently intelligent... Were they just following some desperate last instruction, even while Branch was unconscious? Annoying.

Still, it was an opportunity. "A, Bat, get Quake and Facet! Vel, on me!"

Quake clapped (her? I had a feeling it was a her) hands, and in the next moment, a few walls came up, cutting off Velocity's shortest paths back. Crystals flew, warping the space, but I stopped paying attention. I had my own problems.

I continued to run towards the others, and the first of the clones soon reached me. It was superhuman in every way, faster and stronger than any human, but without Branch behind the wheel, it wasn't smarter than any of us; if anything, it was something like the fast zombies of the newer stories, a particularly deadly human animal.

Every time they planned to move, a little light flickered in their shard. Just as the time to identify a shard had gone from hours to seconds, so too had my judgment of aggression improved: a part of me read the intent to harm and the vector of the light and reacted, moving with instinctual knowledge and with all of the movements Contessa had begun to beat into me. Even without seeing his swinging arm, I was able to sway around the blow, pushing past. As he whirled on me, I advanced towards the second, repeating the trick—but this time, I jabbed my elbow into his back, sending him stumbling forward into the first.

They lacked natural coordination or any sense of ally or enemy; they wouldn't attack each other, but that was only because they couldn't perceive each other as anything but obstacles. 'Zombies' really was the right word. That meant that little disruptions, little unpredictable pushes, were enough to send them stumbling over each other.

Velocity appeared and caught number three in the back of the head with a jumping kick; his Breaker field made him feather-light, so even at his speed, it didn't do much more than send it stumbling. Still, that let him get a foothold on its back, and he shoved off. Mid-jump, he resumed his full speed and weight, dropping like a stone onto the first, riding it down even as he attacked the second.

For my part, I didn't waste the opening; even as the third zombie was shoved down, I was punching upwards, catching it on the chin. Velocity was gone by the time it was knocked up and back, landing on number four.

Velocity was beside me again as I reached five and six, who'd been side by side. I dodged their first blows, and as I did, Velocity slipped through, feather-light blows raining down to keep each off-balance. They ignored him, the attacks seemingly too ineffective to draw attention (or else, I assumed, they'd fight the rain and wind), but it kept them off-balance, buying a little more time.

It didn't have to last long.

"Incoming!"

Velocity threw himself to the side before Battery crashed down like a glowing meteor, simply crushing both clones. Before she could turn, large metal ball bearings caught the last two, courtesy of
Assault's acceleration abilities.

"All down," I said, raising my blindfold and blinking at the bright light. "Good job, all."

"Not bad yourself. They got you with the old switcheroo, huh?" Assault looked over my shoulder, eyebrows rising. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd abruptly remembered how I escaped. "Wait, did you use one of Dauntless's--?"

"Used an unpatched access port, logged into an old dummied-out Administrator account, and jerry-rigged it to imitate a low-budget Arclance," I said. "I can probably use a few other one-off effects, like his shield, but..." I ticked off fingers. "My little access trick only works if it's barely empowered, I need another piece to use as a working battery, and it'll wreck the medium every time. Kind of useless, considering how Dauntless gets more and more powerful... I'm not usually that desperate." All that time and effort on the guns, and I hadn't fired more than a dozen shots. Kid Win probably wasn't going to be happy. "Speaking of desperate--"

"Let me guess," Velocity said, sighing. "The other team lost."

"Oh, this is way worse than that," I said, and Battery groaned.

"Dauntless got Snatched, didn't he," she said. "And then they took out the rest of the team."

"Oh, fuck me, really? They couldn't do a little better than that?"

"To be fair, damn hard to tell who does what when no one on their side's in a costume. I've still got no idea which one's the one with super-hearing." I heard Assault cross his arms. "That's gotta be against the spirit of this thing."

"I'd say the same about your Thinker," Beast said, and I shrugged.

"For once, you're up against someone who can beat you the first go-round," I said, looking back over my shoulder. "I know that's new, and you have my full sympathies." I looked back at the others. "Right, the cavalry's not coming, so I'm going to brief you, and then we're going to go take him and the others down. I'd rather not do this in earshot of another team," I said, "but with Beast here--"

"Leonid," the man said laconically. "And 'Snatcher' is Pretender--"

I snapped my fingers.

"Telling you to shut up is wasting our time, and you're not allowed to get in the way," I said. I'd have just tranquilized him, if I still had the gun. "Anyway, a few reminders: Dauntless's boots give him a small degree of passive super speed and let him teleport. Exact range is within about two blocks, and there's a slight cooldown--think of it as a degrading battery, and the more he stresses it, the worse the cooldown period becomes until the next time he imbues it. Starting interval is two seconds, and he's up to about four as of now; after about every three teleports, it'll lengthen by another second. Pretender won't know this, because he just got Dauntless and his power's knowledge-granting doesn't extend to the tools. All he knows is whether or not he can teleport, not how long the interval is, so take advantage."

I could read a little from Facet's crystals, enough to get a general idea of what they could do--and now that I'd spent time up close and personal, it wasn't difficult to tell what those two hidden lights were, especially with one on each team.

A round of nods.
"His Arclance partially pierces defenses, and that includes both of your powers," I said, pointing at Battery and Velocity. "It can extend to the length of several blocks, and it can widen as he swings until it's about as big as one of these buildings. Like the teleport, that shorts it out and restricts it to normal usage; it'll be about five seconds between slashes. You're all speedsters and I'm a low-budget precog, so it's not TOO bad. He can also use it to blind you with a flash, but the build-up takes a moment and it's directional, sort of like a superpowered flashlight. If his weapon looks unusually bright, get behind a building, but keep that teleport in mind. The flash has a similar cooldown and it works off the same battery. Finally, he's got a shield--like the others, it's got a building cooldown, but it's a lot more generous. Figure that you'll only ever have a second's window at the most."

"That's enough, with all of us here," Assault said. I could almost see him grinning.

"Assuming he doesn't just teleport away the moment you corner him," I said, deflating his good cheer. "Especially with Cowboy and Dark on the field. Speaking of which, Dark. Pretender's control is going to weaken, just a bit, the moment Dark uses that power, so his reactions are going to get sluggish. That's another window, yeah, but it's a window where all three of you are going to be weaker and slower, so long as your powers are being dampened. Against a Snatched Dauntless, that's a leveled field--but it isn't going to affect the powers Cowboy or Impact have all that much."

"We're probably screwed, aren't we." Velocity's words should have sounded depressed, but they came out oddly pensive. "You're weaponless, half our team is down, our strongest fighter's been turned against us... B's our only heavy firepower, and Pretender can just teleport away any time."

"Yeah, we're in this pretty deep, but..." I shrugged. "We haven't lost yet." I chuckled, despite myself, and held up a hand. "Besides... You've got one shot left, Velocity. Take out Dauntless and we've already won."

For a moment, I could tell he was surprised, his eyebrows climbing--and then he laughed, too. He'd gotten the message.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"Come on," I said. "Unless I miss my guess, they've moved away and started renovating... Creating a more convenient battlefield for themselves against us. They won't move until we're in sight."

As we walked away, Assault looked towards me.

"Sure the cavalry's not coming? Because I've gotta say, we're definitely the underdogs. It'd be nice if one of ours got away."

"No more need for the code now, Assault," I said. "Two members of their team had secondary lights, and I can see Facet's crystals... From what I can make out, I'm guessing they're being used as flexible, utterly unhackable communicators. Beast can't tell the other team what he hears without invalidating the results, not now that he's been removed from the game--"

"--but there's nothing that says he can't let them overhear, if we're in range." Assault laughed quietly. "Bastards. Nice job using that, at least."

"Naturally."

"So," Battery prompted. "What part of that was a lie?"

"Dauntless's shield recovers faster than the rest of his gear," I said, "because it has fewer safeties. If you force him to use it too often, it can overheat for a little while... At least a few minutes. I'd say that blocking five strong attacks in a minute might do it."
Honestly, if Team Brockton Bay had never realized that, then Dauntless had done a damn good job using it. Must've made the most of his time as a Ward elsewhere.

"Got it," Velocity said. "I've also still got both doses of my itching solution, for what it's worth."

"Either way, let's go ahead and double our chances." I pulled a contact syringe out of my pocket, handing it to Assault. "Touch to skin and it'll do the rest, that's an anesthetic. Try to save it for the big guy, but if you put down someone else with it, I won't complain."

"Got it."

"Good," I said. "I've got a few more syringes, but I'm just human, you know... About the only thing I can do now is make myself a nuisance. I'm counting on all of you."

"You're very good at that, at least."

"You're an ass."

"That's my name, yeah!"

"...I walked right into that, didn't I."

"That's just part of being on this team, Administrator. Eventually you'll learn not to."

"Um. ...thanks for the vote of confidence?"
As we walked, crossing the blocks between our team and our targets, I let myself sink into thought.

What were our team's relative advantages? Speed and power. All of them were fast; Battery had standard superhuman strength, Assault could launch himself and anything he touched with a surprising amount of force, and Velocity's new equipment allowed him to take out anyone he could touch (so long as he had ammo left).

Combine that with my information advantage, and for once, the team we were up against had found themselves on the wrong end of the horror movie cliche. They'd lost everyone that would give them any advance warning; we knew everything they could do, could come at any moment and from any angle, and a single moment of carelessness could take any of them out of the fight for good.

The regular grid of the imitation city didn't allow for parks or parking lots—it was all gray rectangles of varying length, width, and height. There wasn't a single open, flat area in the whole of the playing field, no place that would allow them to win this fight. With range, Cowboy could make the most of his projectile properties; with space, Impact could maximize the number of watching eyes; with time, Dark would enable them to react to us.

So they'd flattened four buildings and placed themselves in the center, back-to-back-to-back-to-back--Pretender's back to Dark's, Impact's to Cowboy's. In a normal battlefield, the cost in blood and treasure would have been catastrophic, especially for a decision outside of combat, but I was sure they'd argue it was permissible here; if there had been a park, they would have run to the park.

We hadn't been given guidance on acceptable damage to the simulation city, only told that we'd have to justify our decisions, which did seem like the most realistic way to handle it. Powers were simply too varied for anything else.

All of that was true. Their actions made sense, provided they were confident in their ability to argue this. And yet--

I'd just thought it, hadn't I? 'If there had been a park, they would have run to the park.' They weren't coming after us. If events had lead to an out-and-out eight-on-eight cape fight, and they were the heroes, wouldn't they have to be more aggressive than this? Sheltering in place was a valid strategy if you were just trying to win a fight against a team like ours, but it'd be a dismal failure of their responsibilities in any real situation. Villains tended to go for the low-hanging fruit. Why go hunting down heroes when they could just go rob a bank?

Unless--

"Administrator?" There was a sudden hand on my shoulder, shaking me from my thoughts. All around me, the lights were bright, tense. A Thinker falling into deep thought was definitely reason for concern, I supposed. "Something up?"

"...it's not pleasant, but it's nothing we need to act on immediately." I grimaced, shaking my head. "If nothing else, I'm absolutely sure they won't be moving from their current spot." I narrowed my eyes. "And if that's the scenario they're working under... Then we need to approach this differently."

I called them close, and I began to lay out a battle plan.

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We couldn't surprise the enemy; they'd seen to that.

The solution, then, was to follow their lead and discard surprise entirely. They'd escalated their strategy, and we'd follow suit.

Once again, we split up.

"They're in position," I murmured into my communicator. As Battery's shard brightened and then began to gradually dim, I gestured. "Now."

Quake would be able to take down a building, I was sure--Earthquakes do it well enough, even without direct terrakinesis. She'd simply exploited the fact of its construction to do so more quickly.

Similarly, a full building, with foundation and supports and anti-earthquake measures, might have taken longer to topple... But our enemies weren't exactly going anywhere. So I judged it justified when Battery jumped, applying superhuman strength in a way that didn't quite mesh with physics, to pull of a trick we probably couldn't have otherwise managed:

She simply shoved, and the building let out a great crack. With the building in her grip, she was able to release her charge for a moment, to build it up again... And she shoved once more, and it toppled...to ride it down, right into the midst of their group.

Pretender was on the opposite end of their square formation. Rearranging, having him turn to shield against our attack, took time--time enough to deny them any other course of action. If they broke and run, we could pivot to an ambush, and Dauntless was their only source of shielding. Trying to break it with the Arclance would just split the giant wall of stone, it wouldn't save the others; he had to stay put.

Therefore, the moment I'd sensed Battery was beginning the attack, I'd told Assault to move.

He began to bounce from wall to wall, alternating between buildings, using each touch to build his speed. As Dauntless began to commit, as he turned, Assault came into view from Impact's side. The Brute called out, and Cowboy turned--but couldn't fire in time.

Assault had touched down just in front of one of the collections of rubble that had been buildings. He began to rapidly touch the stones, accelerating each of them until they flew forward. Their team's two sources of muscle could break the stones, but they couldn't help losing sight--couldn't help the way that the stones covered up Assault's line of view, the way they shattered into clouds of powder as they broke against Cowboy's bullets and Impact's fist.

Assault was behind the wall of flying stones, Battery was still on the building, I had my eyes closed, and each and every one of Impact's teammates was looking somewhere else. Without a single eye on him, he briefly became barely superhuman.

That's when Velocity came from behind their two groups. Dark was the only member with free hands--and the moment they brought down the night, one side or the other might fall. Dark was unable to act.

Pretender protected them, but the moment the wall had been repelled, he saw Velocity's approach; the body-snatcher who had taken Dauntless had to teleport away, lest it all end immediately. Velocity took down Dark and Cowboy instead, thanks to his two doses of itching solution, and Assault and Battery were in the middle of the group the next moment. Impact fell to good old-fashioned violence.

Apparently one dose of the anesthetic syringe solution was enough to neutralize two itching doses, so at least Dark and Cowboy weren't affected that long.
There was a pause in the melee, to allow the 'dead' to evacuate the field.

"All right," I said, emerging into the center. "Four on one." We turned, taking our own square at the center. "Want to just give up, Pretender?"

Pretender walked into view from a high building, still controlling Dauntless. He raised the Arclance, and as he did, I read the flow of charge through the artificial shard.

"Slash!"

We scattered as the Arclance grew; the slash scored deeply into the pavement, and as it receded, he began to point. The Arclance expanded, stabbing at my position, but with so much range between us, it wasn't so difficult to dodge.

"A, Bat!"

She moved to take down the building, even as Assault began to fling stones again. That sent both of them away from me.

"Teleport on me!"

Pretender appeared behind me, Arclance already midway through an attack. I knew exactly where it was in relationship to me, and so dodging it still wasn't difficult. Velocity began to tense, preparing to approach, to help defend me--

"NO!"

--which was what Pretender wanted. A moment's warning would be enough to change hosts, and he could defuse Velocity's last shot against me, taking the two of us out of the fight. After that, with Velocity's speed, he'd be free to take Dauntless again.

Assault and Battery were good, yes, but that good? I wasn't sure.

Velocity froze, thankfully; one thoughtless action had very nearly let our enemy end the fight. Whatever Pretender's flaws, a lack of strategic acumen wasn't one of them.

I palmed a syringe. I danced around another thrust, turning on my heel and dashing forward. His shield's light began to brighten, and then stopped.

That was what saved him from Battery's charge, approaching in the next half-second. The sheer force of impact made the shield ring like a gong, and a moment later, he had to skip backward, dodging another thrown stone from Assault. I used that opening, darting in, all but daring him to take me over instead.

He didn't; instead, he simply teleported away.

His possession was a sort of linear beam, and so long as he didn't miss, it would recharge very quickly. It might take him a moment to adjust to a new body, but the same was true of his released victims, and the actual possession was damn fast. That was what made Pretender such a frightening melee combatant.

You could tell he was a formula cape. Any normal power would have had a hell of a lot more restrictions than this.

He appeared on the other end of the opened courtyard, far from us.
Without some sort of alley, Assault couldn't make full use of his speed, and Velocity was a gamble, so Battery rushed forward. If she was going on a straight line, charging her power wasn't a problem, even on the move. She was a natural choice.

Unfortunately, that made her approach obvious.

"SLA--NO! LIGHT!"

He'd feinted, seeming to shunt the Arclance's charge from one function to another, and that meant I didn't call it quite quickly enough.

Battery had superhuman speed, but the beam was bright enough to blind, even in peripheral vision. She turned, but at such close range, with the speeds she was moving, she didn't turn quite quickly enough.

The moment's distraction was enough; she was tapped with the Arclance, and she was out.

At least he'd kept the light restrained. She'd be seeing spots in her vision for some time, but she wouldn't need healing.

He teleported again. On a building...?

"On me! My twelve!"

He slashed the Arclance down. He was repeating our trick, then?

The building was cut in half, down at a diagonal; he extended the Arclance a moment later, adding a push, to send it toppling down on us.

"Back at him," I murmured to Assault, in the time we had. "Then Vel."

They nodded. I couldn't see it, but I was pretty sure it happened.

As the building fell, Assault stood, one hand braced against the ground. As it reached us, he slapped a hand onto it.

Assault could only impart so much force with each touch. If it had been a real building, with all of the weight, all of the internal furniture and all of its individual floors, odds are that that force wouldn't have been enough. That was why he usually stuck to moving himself, allies or small objects, instead of just flinging cars or buildings.

Still, it was enough to suspend the building for just a moment, enough to cancel out the force of its falling and add just a little more.

On one side, I rose, propping it up, and on the other side, Velocity mirrored me. For a moment, we held up the great slice of stone, relying on the little bit of additional upward force Assault had been able to provide.

That moment was enough for Assault's power to recharge.

Then the great chunk of building flew like a shot. It hit what remained of its other still-standing half, beginning to spin wildly towards Pretender. He couldn't teleport again, not so soon; he shielded in place. He had to.

With the building blocking his view, Pretender didn't have much more than a moment to react before Velocity came screaming at him (in both senses of the word). With the Breaker field making him
feather-light, the five-fingered touch did very little damage, but it still pierced the skin.

"Got him," I said, and Assault cheered. But that celebration didn't last long. "No, wait--incoming!"

However potent the he anesthetic had still taken a moment to work. We'd gotten Dauntless, and he was down... But Pretender wasn't out of this, not quite yet.

Velocity's single flaw was his lack of real offense, especially now that he was out of drug doses. While possessed by Pretender, he'd abruptly lost that problem.

Assault didn't have much more than a moment's warning before Pretender was on him. In the next moment, he switched bodies, and Velocity was sent flying down the street. Then the possessed Assault touched pavement, launching himself at me.

If he'd bothered to try landing a punch on me first, while he still controlled Velocity, it might have worked. As is, I read the brightening of his shard in the moment between possession and launch, and I'd already twisted myself to the side.

He arced past, missing me by narrow margins--and then I ducked low. Pretender--the real Pretender--flew past me, and as he landed, I darted forward, silver syringe catching him squarely between the shoulder blades.

He toppled, and I caught him.

"Password," Assault called, from the other end of the area.

I brought up my blindfold, showing him my normal eyes. He relaxed, and so did I.

We'd won.

---

We sat in a briefing room, courtesy of Protectorate Las Vegas--who, it seemed, had been our hosts for the day. We'd all be going back by teleporter soon after this; no time for sightseeing, not with our return ticket already booked.

The tables were arranged in a square, with one side missing. On the left, our team; on the right, the Las Vegas Protectorate.

Between us, alone in the middle of one of the perpendicular tables, sat Alexandria.

"As you are all aware," she said, "this cross-training program is my personal project. I am the one who decides the team match-ups, and I am the one who decides what was and was not acceptable. Should you object with any decision I make, you are reminded that these exercises are purely for your benefit. We cannot promise that we will not consider the profiling implications of particularly questionable decisions, but you will remember that you consented to continual psychological monitoring as a condition of Protectorate employment. Mere victory or defeat in these matches will not affect your salary or professional advancement. The results may be used to suggest changes to team composition, but all such changes of station will be purely voluntary--above all, we value the ability of each team to function smoothly as a unit. Do you all understand?"

The hero in black and dark gray looked between us as she rattled off the speech, speaking with the ease of practice and frequent repetition. Our voices rose in a chorus of agreement, and she nodded.

"Good. First, we will begin by viewing the footage."
It hadn't even been an hour since the end, and yet the recording had been cut with extraordinary grace. They cut between my explanations and Vegas's reactions, and I hadn't missed the way they'd exchanged grim looks as Leonid had relayed my words. When our two teams had split up, they'd started with Armsmaster's team, showing the shell game Vegas had used to hide Pretender in plain sight; once they'd captured Dauntless, clever usage of teleports had taken the team apart.

Vegas was very good at playing defensively, it seemed, at buying time until the plan came together. My team might have played it safe the moment they'd seen they were up against three instead of four, and Cowboy--no, wait, Spur--might have intercepted most of Miss Militia's attacks, but they'd still managed to win four-on-four without more than minor injuries.

Seeing the fierceness in their defense just made me feel worse. As I thought... They'd fought us, but their eyes hadn't been on us.

Then they'd cut to my half of things.

"Holy shit!"

I have to admit, my exit from the building they caged me in was badass; with my eyes hidden as they were, I hadn't been able to see the lightning, only imagine it. Triumph's reaction was pretty gratifying.

"Did you seriously--!?"

"Hey," I said, waving a hand. "Can we just fast-forward to the part where--"

Then I stopped, because the edited video fast-forwarded itself, cutting to my explanation of what I did.

"--right, that," I said, belatedly. "Thanks, whoever made this." Everyone looked back to me, so I shrugged. "Very impressive-looking, yes, but actually sort of dumb and wasteful. I'm not looking forward to telling Kid Win that I already broke the guns he made me."

The edited video rewound itself, so we saw me bust out of a building again, blue lightning tearing through my doppelganger.

From there, it was pretty straight-forward; once that fight ended, they cut to the remnants of Vegas. Our sneak attack came as an avalanche (pun intended) of sound and violence, highlighting the way their team dwindled down to one, the way that Pretender had very nearly taken us all out himself.

I'd watched Satyrical--the hero I'd called 'Branch'--out of the corner of my eye the whole time. It didn't end up mattering. When I twisted just around Pretender's desperate final attack, shining silver lancing out of a sleeve to catch him in the back, very nearly their entire team's lights shifted, brightening just a little.

They were good at hiding it, when it came to body language, but my power couldn't possibly miss the signs of suppressed aggression and remembered fear.

"That would be the video," Alexandria said, as it wound down. All eyes returned to her. "We'll begin by taking a moment to discuss your decisions, and as always, we'll begin in order of ascending property damage. Brockton Bay, you're first."

Armsmaster cleared his throat.

"Before that," I said, cutting in, and everyone looked my way; for my part, I was looking at
Satyrical, their team leader. "I want to confirm something. Vegas, your strategy..." I took a deep breath. "...you were fighting like we were an S-class threat, weren't you?"

Satyrical raised his eyebrows, then chuckled, shaking his head. "You're sharp, aren't you," he said. "Yeah. There's a relevant bit of history you should probably know--"

I'd done the appropriate research, back when I was looking into Jack Slash.

"The Slaughterhouse Nine, in 2003."

For a moment, there was silence. Then Satyrical closed his eyes.

"Yeah. We were Wards, newbie Protectorate, or small-time villains then... But all of us were there. We remember."

From what I'd read about that time, it was a time anyone there would have been hard-pressed to forget. The sheer length of their existence and the consistency of their goals had made the Nine a reliable sort of disaster, and over time, the Nine and the Endbringers had numbed all of us to tragedy. Not everyone would know the attack or the date.

But it had still been one of their worst. With the Nine, that said something.

"I thought it was strange that you were sheltering in place, for the second part of the fight," I said, speaking in the sudden silence. "A villain needs to be stopped before they commit crimes, whether that be theft or assault. Against a Thinker like me, though, I could pick my battles... Why would I ever even come after Vegas, when your powers would let you know? Mere theft could be more easily accomplished somewhere else. In that situation, someone like me--"

"--would only be there if they were after someone specific," Pretender said, finishing the sentence. His voice was tight and strained. "And if they kept coming after us even after we stopped pursuit, then it'd be do-or-die. We'd call in favors, use every single trump card we had, activate some of the surprises we've put throughout the city... We'd have to."

"When you're up against an S-class, then damage to the city isn't what matters most." Armsmaster sighed, looking older than I'd seen him. "They need to be stopped, as soon as possible, with as much force as needed. No matter what you do, people will die, and the longer it goes on the worse it'll get."

"I'm damn glad you're a hero," Satyrical said, eyes on me. "Because that power of yours, against ours..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "And when you dodged my clones, or at the end, with Pretender? For a second, I thought that syringe of yours was a knife, and I don't think I was the only one. The way you moved... If you went and told me you were Jack Slash's bastard daughter, I wouldn't blink twice."

"Sat," Ravine hissed.

"No offense taken," I said, shaking my head. I sighed. "I can't offer an excuse for the lightning discharge, other than knowing that none of us were in the way," I said. "But when I told my team to drop the building at the start of the second fight, I did it because I was sure that Vegas was in an S-class mentality--in other words, that they'd stopped thinking about the damage they did. The moment the fight started, they'd keep coming at us until they were down or we were, no matter what."

"Making them a lot like an S-class themselves," Armsmaster finished, and I nodded.

"In that light," Alexandria said, "the actions of both parties are acceptable--that is what you all intend
to say?"

I nodded, and Satyrical did the same.

"If you both agree that that was the scenario in play," Alexandria said, "then your degree of restraint was admirable." She crossed her arms. "If the question of your mindset has been answered," she said, "then let's discuss your mistakes."

---

After that debriefing, we had a second one in Brockton Bay, just for the team. Meetings were a large part of my job, and even I was tired out by the end.

Afterward, Armsmaster and I had stuck around. I'd wanted to talk to him; it seemed he'd had the same thing in mind.

"I'm quite sure I only authorized you those syringes in order to neutralize Velocity's doses."

He'd left the helmet off today.

"I'm assuming there's all kinds of apology paperwork I need to fill out?"

"No," he said. "There's apology paperwork that I need to fill out, because those contact syringes aren't authorized for mid-combat use. In light of your use of them for exactly that purpose, giving them out without that authorization implies poor judgment on my part."

I winced. "Sorry." Despite myself, though, I tilted my head, looking at him more closely. "Though, that said..." Okay, I could see him not securing that allowance, because the testing would likely have to be exhaustive. I'd heard as much about Velocity's glove, in our e-mails back and forth, despite all his grumbling about the tech being 'perfectly safe.' "Did you really think I wouldn't use them in a fight, if I had to?"

"Officially, you understand," he said, voice stern, "I can't answer that question." If you looked very closely, you'd see a slight smile cross his lips. "I do thank you, however. It seems a first-time win against the Las Vegas team is extraordinarily rare."

"Not surprised." I rubbed at my eyes, leaning back in my chair. "Honestly, though, any fight that ends with just two of us standing isn't a good one. In a real situation, that'd be a dismal failure." Of course, in a real situation, I'd have had Armsmaster prepare some more specialized gadgets, and maybe bring in an extra Mover for the team... But wishes and horses. "I had to get entirely too lucky, too. I'm not usually that good at dodging."

"Don't minimize your accomplishments." I opened my eyes to see Armsmaster examining me. "Clockblocker mentioned that you've been fighting a precognitive?"

I nodded. "Shadowy conspiracy member. The one that recruited me, actually. You'll probably meet her sooner or later."

"I see." He crossed his arms, leaning on the table. "You also used one of Dauntless's empowered tools to escape their trap. Was your report on the what and why fully accurate?"

"Yeah." Unfortunately. "For complicated reasons, our shards have a special relationship. I might ask him for something I can burn for a one-time shield, just in case, but it's not anything I can rely on."

He closed his eyes, thinking, and we fell into our own thoughts; as a Tinker and a Thinker, and with
our positions in mind, we had plenty to occupy us. It was nearly a minute before I spoke up again.

"Hey, Colin." He opened his eyes, half-turning towards me. "Do me a favor? Do what you can to downplay my performance, if anyone higher-up asks. Don't lie," I said, as his brow furrowed. "Just... don't praise me too much. I don't want this to be a big thing, that wasn't the point."

"Not trying to prove yourself, for once?" His smile was more open now, almost teasing.

"For once." I laughed, rubbing the back of my head. "Our shards are all tuned to aggression, and they're all meant to be used in combat... So yeah, as predicted, I can fight a little like a short-term precog against capes. It's not much, just strong enough to get me out of the way a little sooner, but enough to use. I can not die long enough to buy time--that's all I needed to know. Actual battlefield command isn't something I plan to do, at least until the Endbringers. It's not where I can do the most good."

"I thought you said your priority was cleaning the villains out of the city," he said, voice oddly flat.

"A priority," I corrected. "But not my priority. Why do you think I eliminated Coil? Why do you think I wanted you to prioritize Velocity's syringe gloves?" I knew the limitations of Brockton Bay's team better than anyone. "Coil and Lung--those were the villains in the city that you couldn't touch, thanks to those powers of theirs." I stretched back in my chair, yawning. "I might do some work in the shadows, aggravate some villains, provoke something you can use to put them behind bars--but you don't need me here to do the actual capturing. It might happen a little sooner with me directing you all, but Brockton Bay is already safely in hand. I'm comfortable leaving it to you now."

"I see." He sighed. "I would have expected you to have more of an attachment to your hometown. By all accounts, your father is a rather tireless advocate for his people in the unions. It's hard to have that without a very real passion."

"His passion is for people, not things or places," I said. I stood up, walking to one of the windows; we were high enough in the Rig that you could see the sun starting to set, out on the horizon. The inter-team competition had taken care of my exercise needs, but I'd still have to start making the day's formula soon. "I started working for my mother and me, and now he's doing it for the people who helped him get past hard times." Like Mom's death. "That's one more thing I inherited from him."

I looked back at him out of the corner of my eye.

"On the day I became a full member of my organization," I said, before my eyes returned to the city, "I was shown just how vast our world is, Colin. There are this world's billions, yes, but there are also the billions living in all of the other thousands of worlds. Most alternate realities are empty of people, one way or another, but the point remains."

I turned, leaving my back to the window.

"I'm not here to save this city. It already has a champion," I said. "I've seen enough of you, Colin, to understand that you really do care. Your climb to leadership, your all-nighters, your assembly of such a powerful team--you're doing everything you can to advance, yes, but it's because you're driven to be a real hero. You want that enough to accept even the obviously-suspicious child, so long as she'll be useful to your city." I put my hands in my pockets. "That's why I can trust you, Colin, and that's why I trust you'll understand when I say that there aren't many people like you. Most people aren't willing to throw everything they have into the fight, you know--and that's why the people of their cities need me more."

"People will die every single day that the villains remain at large."
"And so they will," I replied, looking back over my shoulder. "So they do, in every single city." I shook my head, turning forward again. "The problems of a city aren't born only in that city. The ABB started somewhere else; Faultline profits from outside conflict and brings her mercs back here; Gesellschaft will prop up the Empire until the Empire becomes irrelevant. The world is a great system, Colin, a cycle of violence and never-ending escalation. Crime, the deliberate distribution of powers, the Endbringers... All of our problems reinforce the others and make each and every one more difficult to deal with."

And so I aimed to strengthen us city by city, to strengthen our heroes and eliminate those that conventional heroes couldn't touch. So I aimed to act as a counterweight to the Entities, to give out powers that would build us up instead of tearing us down. So I aimed to kill Scion and all of his pets, to stop the slow unraveling of our greater civilization.

And even once our superpowered problems were dealt with, we'd still have hunger, thirst, and all of the other problems of scarcity. I'd have work to do until the day I died.

"Saving Brockton Bay won't mean anything, not so long as the world itself is broken; it'll simply create a vacuum that other villains will fill, in time. This city can't be special to me, Colin, not when so much is at stake. I won't let other people die for my lack of perspective."

"I can't commit to your plans," he said. "Not yet. Not while the fight still needs to be fought here."

"I'm not asking you to," I said, closing my eyes. "You and Kid Win need to focus on Velocity. Forge him into this city's sword, someone who can fight on the level of the Triumvirate--I know you can do it. He'll be needed, here and afterward." I opened my eyes. "And in the meantime, I'll do what I must do. The world can't wait much longer."

I left.

Armsmaster didn't follow me out.
If Emily Piggot had her way, every single member of the Protectorate or PRT, no matter their position in their bureaucracies, would start off as a PRT officer.

The most common response to her saying so was laughter, which was at least better than confusion. They interpreted it as humorous exasperation, a wish that all of the people who kept getting in the way of the job would take their turn in the parahuman trenches. The less friendly ones also laughed, but they were laughing at her—at the idea of overweight, out-of-shape, unhealthy Director Piggy as hardened PRT veteran. It might be true, but that didn't keep them from thinking it ridiculous now.

Let them laugh. Every so often, she would find someone who didn't, someone who understood. Glenn Chambers understood. So did some of her fellow Directors—and, most importantly, did Chief Director Costa-Brown. Among the parahumans, the only one she'd found who agreed was Alexandria. (Not that the original Alexandria Package could have turned her power off to serve.) All the same, the people that understood protocol were worth their weight in steel.

Emily Piggot had stood on the front lines. She had fought against genuine monsters with nothing but low-budget Tinkertech, a set of squadmates and her own wits. She had rolled the dice again and again, facing off against complete unknowns to neutralize them, or at least bring back the information that would let the Protectorate parahumans finish the job. And in the end, when she'd faced off against Nilbog and the dice had come up snake eyes, she'd healed so far as she was able and then she had returned to service. She may have traded in her uniform for a suit, but she was still a soldier.

Procedure wasn't obstruction, protocol wasn't a burden, and tradition wasn't a weight. In a world where one in a hundred thousand could simply shrug off tank shells, a still smaller fragment could turn their power against the frail human mind, and a much larger group could deceive weak human eyes and ears. The role of the PRT was to understand the means by which the Protectorate could be turned against its purpose, to see the signs of it happening, and, should it be necessary, to stand between the parahumans and the people.

Procedure was a shield, protocol was a sword, and tradition kept any wayward captain from upsetting the ship... And in all the time the PRT had existed, its finest weapon was the Master-Stranger Protocol. That weapon's only flaw was that it had to be carried out by human beings, and human beings were generally stupid.

The case of Taylor Hebert was proving to be an unfortunately illustrative example.

"--at which point she requested that I do what I could to downplay her ability as a combat leader, stating that she had little interest in field work."

"A level of ability you rate highly, I take it." A sharp, firm nod. "A secondary power?"

Colin Wallis shook his head. He was standing; he always stood during these meetings. She wondered whether he disliked sitting or whether he simply liked looking down on her.

"Yes and no," he said. "I would term her a Master 0--she has no power related to command, but the range of her power gives her a peerless level of access to battlefield awareness. Enemy parahumans can't surprise her, traps don't work, and with her knowledge of power interactions, she seems to see through most strategic maneuvers the moment she sees the way the enemy organizes. Furthermore, with her range and the Protectorate's resources, her description of Coil is appropriate: she only ever has to start a fight if she already knows she'll win it. She's quite capable, if a little too eager to seize
"Are you certain that's the extent of it?" His eyes narrowed, just a little—he had never liked being challenged. "By all reports, she's made favorable impressions quite quickly... Even an invite to eat dinner with Assault and Battery. You rarely interact with other parahumans your own age so often, let alone someone of hers." Even with the Wards, he usually left those duties to Miss Militia, preferring to focus on matters with the villains, or with bureaucratic matters that would enable them to do that.

He paused, just long enough to show he was considering her words, before replying with a low grunt. "'Our shards are all tuned to aggression, and they're all intended to be used in combat.' There was no doubt in her words." Piggot's eyebrows rose despite herself. "I believe she knows things about the nature and origin of our powers. Furthermore, judging from her talk of how triggers affect us, I believe that her knowledge of what powers do may include knowledge of those who carry them. That may be a part of her ability to outmaneuver capes, on the battlefield and otherwise."

"In other words," Piggot said, closing her eyes, "it's not that she can use a power against you... But rather, it's that she knows more about you than you suspect." She opened her eyes again. "We once discussed her given rating of Thinker 9-Trump 3: do you still believe the rating was excessive? Should she be given a Master rating, if only to keep our staff on their toes?"

Armsmaster seriously considered the question, to his credit. "Perhaps." He crossed his arms. "Nothing any of us have done is uncharacteristic, and Gallant has been serving as Observer during her extended surveillance period, as per MSP guidance. And as you pointed out, I did explicitly act against her wishes. She seems most strongly driven by a sense of duty; her intentions are good, at the very least. And if she possesses a more direct anti-cape Master capability, then her connections suggest that she already controls--or at least strongly influences--the Triumvirate." A soft, humorless chuckle. "In which case, Director, the worst has already come to pass."

"All hail our new fifteen year-old parahuman overlord," Piggot said, with an equal lack of humor. "You believe we should avoid alienating her."

"We should," Armsmaster said. "Not least because she doesn't need us. Brockton Bay has an unusual level of villain activity, which makes it an ideal ground for her to prove her value... But it also means that this is the city where her ability to sense powers is most valuable. She could choose any number of other cities. To hear her tell it, she's already discreetly eliminated the villain Coil with the use of greater Protectorate resources. A week ago, we didn't even know what his power was."

Her eyebrows rose. "Is that so. And this wasn't reported?"

"I believe her reasoning was that Coil was a villain she could make disappear... But more than that, that his power made him nearly impossible for us to eliminate, under our typical restrictions. It appears the operation was sanctioned directly by the Triumvirate, too, making the reporting issue rather moot."

She grimaced, acknowledging the point. It was entirely believable, unfortunately; Alexandria would have approved that sort of operation, so long as she dictated when and where. She had a respect for protocol, but also a darkly ruthless streak--not unlike a more mature Armsmaster, in that way. And Legend tended to follow her lead.

The fact Alexandria hadn't done any such thing before, to the best of Piggot's knowledge, indicated only that that knowledge was flawed--that no one had cared to report it to the PRT before now. This could be more typical than she knew; what happened once could happen again.
That fact slotted neatly into the world in a way that chilled her blood. The PRT existed to restrain the parahumans, and current evidence suggested it had been failing, catastrophically, for years now.

"All the same, it offers an opportunity." Armsmaster crossed his arms. "Under his guise, we may take actions to provoke villain action, at which point they can be defeated and removed from the board. We can control the pace, and we can take them down on our terms--that's a power we didn't have before."

"It's a power we didn't have before," Piggot said, voice deceptively mild, "because we serve the law."

"And the law exists to serve the people," Armsmaster replied without missing a beat. "Director, every day we do nothing, the villains entrench further, digging into the heart of our city and our citizens. They play off of each other. Dragon believes that certain elements of observed cash flow imply that Empire 88 may control Medhall, and they just rolled out more aggressive rehabilitation services. Do you realize what that means?"

Of course she did, but she let him go on. It wouldn't do to antagonize the man, no matter how insufferable he might be.

"The Merchants are addicting more and more of our youth, the unfortunate and the vulnerable, and the Empire are planning to use that weakness to enlarge their base. On another front, the ABB provides an excuse for Empire to draw on greater Geschellschaft resources--they grow more and more aggressive as they respond to each other. Continuing to react like this does nothing to solve the larger issues." He shook his head. "We have to commit, Director, and win the battle while the battle can be won. We have an effective new weapon, and we should make the most of it. Before too long, she'll move on, and we won't be able to bring her back here."

She watched him, not bothering to hide her examination. Armsmaster had always been intensely pragmatic; it was one of his best qualities, even as it was one of his greatest weaknesses. He was behaving with unusual rashness... But that atypical behavior was in and of itself typical of him, due to that aforementioned pragmatism. He seized opportunities.

Still, he had his weaknesses--his blind spots, his illusions of common ground. Many people had the same flaw, and that was what made the Protocol so very important. He thought that she would condone the rulebreaking, because he believed that she was also short-sighted enough to place this single city above all other considerations. She had grown out of that weakness the first time she'd seen a city fall and the walls of a Quarantine Zone rise.

That sense of perspective was, most likely, all that she and Hebert had in common.

As Armsmaster had pointed out, if they had been compromised, it went all the way to the top... And yet, somehow, the idea that she was not a high-level Master might be more disturbing. The thought of a fifteen year-old girl wielding enough power to draw the notice of the Triumvirate, strong enough to merit such a flagrant violation of the norms, suggested that her Thinker 9-Trump 3 rating might be understated. That same power, if demonstrated, might win over Armsmaster.

And if a minute application of that power made others enjoy her company more than most, well, who would complain?

Either way, the result was the same: Emily Piggot had lost support both above and below, and the longer she waited, the weaker her position would grow. Hebert had already shown a willingness to go above her head, to direct resources beyond Brockton Bay; in time, she might become entirely unable to restrain the girl. And what would Hebert do then, if she acted so boldly now?
No small amount of power remained to any Director that remained even nominally in charge, simply
due to the abnormality of the situation. Was eliminating Hebert worth the loss of her career? Were
those above and below sufficiently impaired in judgment, by the subtle influences of a power or the
simple lure of power, to merit a self-destructive removal of the girl?

Finances weren't a concern; even should she be blacklisted, she had enough to get by. The question
was where the greatest good lay, the direction where duty most strongly pointed. The precedent this
set would weaken the Master-Stranger protocol, would make it easier for capes to circumvent the
lengthy training and testing that screened for dangerous influences, that sheltered the core of their
power from powers that might co-opt it. Perhaps Hebert was entirely benevolent, but would the next
parahuman to follow in her footsteps be so altruistic?

Piggot didn't think so... But Glenn had allowed the girl, had given her advice--had not helped as
much as he could, perhaps, but he hadn't stood in her way. He, more than anyone, would know the
PR impact of her newfound status, and if once she had shown she could dodge the obvious pitfalls,
he'd judged that it was better to assist her than to remove her before the fallout came. If she removed
the girl now, she would be going against the implicit advice of a man who had given her more than
enough respect.

She tried not to grit her teeth. She failed.

The goddamned Triumvirate had helped to establish the protocols. They should have known better.

"Fine," she said shortly. "The meeting this Tuesday will go ahead as planned."

He nodded, turning on his heel. "I'll see that she's informed."

She'd said everything that needed saying, but she hadn't dismissed him. That man remained as
aggravating as ever.

When the door closed, she raised a hand, fingers massaging her forehead. It didn't help with the
growing headache.

She turned back to her computer, just as the PRT's video conference app sent her a notification. She
brought it up, and was immediately greeted with the familiar face of Chief Director Costa-Brown.
Hispanic, the kind of forty that could pass for twenty, with dark skin and long straight black hair...
But more than that, she had a steel in her spine and in her bearing, the kind that spoke of a refined
and rested strength.

Rebecca Costa-Brown was the only person that Piggot had ever met that might be worthy, in both
mind and mindset, of the PRT's top position.

"Chief Director," Piggot said, by way of greeting.

"Director Piggot," Costa-Brown said. "I wish to speak about your newest Protectorate member."

Piggot smiled, a sharp-edged thing. "To be frank, it seems she's already escaped my authority in all
but name."

"I suspected so," Costa-Brown said, with a heavy sigh. "For all that the PRT maintains nominal
control over parahuman affairs, the Protectorate handles its own staffing, and sometimes that's
enough. I apologize for my inability to prevent this situation."

Piggot leaned forward. "You agree, then, that Hebert poses a problem?"
"Theoretically." She folded her hands in front of her. "The greatest impact, obviously, lies in the weakening of the Master-Stranger Protocol. Those that inspire unusual behavior flag the Protocol most strongly... And therefore, every strange exception we allow weakens our future screening."

It was nice to be so clearly understood.

"Yes. PR is a concern regardless, particularly with the Youth Guard, but--"

Costa-Brown shook her head slightly, and Piggot stopped short. "You haven't seen the news today, I take it? The Youth Guard has overstepped itself," she said. "It seems a Ward removed from duty due to concerns following 2009's Simurgh attack was in fact railroaded out of his post by a series of Youth Guard campaigns, due in large part to his young age. A PRT investigation committee and full psychological examination concur--he's perfectly mentally sound, and his power is quite useful. Were it not for those events, he would likely already be full Protectorate, and have saved a number of lives besides. He's suing the Youth Guard for damages, and we believe this will inspire a number of other similar cases."

"Will the cases succeed?"

"Possibly. They've genuinely overreached their bounds on several occasions, even without malicious intent... And there are a number of cases that could be swung against them, should the public opinion sour."

Piggot grimaced. "Taking the air out of the room. If it's shown that the Youth Guard has been removing useful parahumans from service for years... It won't turn the tide by itself, no, but it will strengthen her position. Sufficient results might do the rest." She looked up. "This timing can't be a coincidence."

"I don't believe so. The Protectorate may have taken action, possibly on her behalf, possibly as an excuse to remove an annoying impediment."

"Or this was an ace kept up their sleeve, and now's the time they've chosen to play it." The Youth Guard was far too capable to make such an obvious misstep--the fact they were still around was proof enough of that. Unfortunately, that argument wouldn't exactly hold up in court.

"Perhaps. Still, the point remains..." Costa-Brown leaned forward. "If you act now, you may remove her, but you will strengthen the Youth Guard. Should they overcome this and be further emboldened, they will further lower the number of Wards who advance to full-fledged heroism--and furthermore, the fact that the Protectorate took such substantial action suggests that her removal may invite institutional retaliation from the very top levels of that organization."

She hadn't enjoyed thinking through the implications. It was still much more disquieting to hear someone as level-headed as Costa-Brown echo her thoughts.

"On the other hand, should you wait, you may find removing her to be impractical. From reports, it seemed she is already generally well-liked?"

"Yes. Their exercise against the Vegas team the other day was a particular success, in part because she's overcome Velocity's inability to carry additional equipment. On a personal level, she seems to have made a strong positive impression with Armymaster and a personal connection both Assault and Battery." A pause, a slight furrowed brow as she looked through her papers. "...in addition to one date with Clockblocker, of the Wards. They had lunch, it seems." She looked up. "She has a preexisting animosity with Shadow Stalker as well."
You'd have expected a girl who invited comparisons to Jack Slash to be much less loved. But that was what made him dangerous, wasn't it? He was always, always underestimated.

"In each case," Costa-Brown said, a faint frown on her lips, "she has made particular allies of those particularly well-liked, in addition to Armssmaster. Shadow Stalker may be perceived as a common enemy and leveraged..." A tilt of her head. "You believe she possesses a degree of social Thinking?"

"Armssmaster states that he has been given reason to believe so, at least so far as parahumans are concerned." The other woman nodded.

"No great concern, should she become a useful fixture. The question is whether she will." She clasped her hands in front of her. "What have your people discerned of her nature, thus far?"

"She is exceedingly focused," Piggot said, eyes drifting down to her notes, even though she could have recited them from memory. "Both of her consultations thus far were conducted professionally and extremely thoroughly, particularly in the e-mails she sent afterward. When present at the Protectorate facilities, she moves through her training material at an extraordinary speed... Which makes it all the stranger that she spends relatively little time on it. On a typical workday, she dedicates approximately four hours to required training, spends an hour or two working with Armssmaster or other Protectorate members, completes a physical workout, and then leaves... A six to seven-hour workday, typically, including a working lunch. She has no official duties at present during the MSP observation period, provided she completes her training requirements within two weeks, so it's allowable but irregular."

"From what I've read of her, particularly those briefings, I would assume it involves acquiring additional information about the city's rogues, villains, and recent triggers," Costa-Brown said, and Piggot looked up. "Discerning their range of activity, such that when Armssmaster contacts her regarding their activity, she will have a tangible result present. She appears to prefer overpreparation to any other approach."

"That is possible," Piggot admitted. "We haven't had her followed during this period, in part because of her power, in part because we believe she would react vehemently was any such tailing discovered. Her treatment of Shadow Stalker implies a strong vindictive streak, at least when she believes such behavior is justified."

"Trigger Event," Costa-Brown said shortly. "Remember the relevant psychological literature, especially when one considers that the event in question could be considered a murder attempt--from her perspective, at least. I would not expect that behavior to be typical in any other circumstance, not without significant and deliberate provocation." She paused, then continued, almost grudgingly. "...mind, any such after-hours tailing may be considered such provocation. It would be notably beyond the bounds of normal MSP observation."

"Also true." The Chief Director always played the devil's advocate; it could be aggravating, but it was always useful. "Regardless, I expect that it would be best if I am to present myself as her ally, if only on the surface. Any obstruction will have to have considerable institutional justification." Piggot tapped her fingers against her arm. "Otherwise, she appears optimistic, generally warm-humored, and broadly psychologically stable for a child her age. She exhibits the standard Thinker-Tinker flaws of sporadic tunnel vision, excessive self-belief, and general tendency to seize command, but is unusually capable of leading in live combat--I believe she had no experience with such during her first exercise, but she did well enough to overcome a particularly gifted MS-oriented team."

"Largely positive." A frown. "Given time to develop, she may indeed be capable... And we would pay a heavy price for her removal. Doubtlessly as planned." Costa-Brown sighed, seeming to fall into thought.
"My greater concern at the moment is that she appears to be enabling Armsmaster's worst traits." Piggot spoke up, and Costa-Brown leaned forward, giving Piggot her full attention. "It seems she has somehow discreetly utilized Protectorate resources in order to remove the villain Coil. He believes this is an opportunity to covertly incite villain action, at which point they may be justifiably removed."

Costa-Brown pinched her nose. "Excellent," she said, voice weary. "I agree with the endgoal, yes, but I'll thank them not to complicate our work." She looked up. "I'll examine the matter and see if there was a paper trail left behind. If not, then officially speaking, we'll ignore it. Revealing this without good reason would make our position worse, not better--officially sanctioned vigilantism is trouble, regardless of its origin, and we would be judged for being unable to prevent it." She watched Piggot, eyebrows raised, waiting for the nod.

For a moment, Piggot hesitated. She knew the Chief Director was smart enough to read between the lines, to realize that this indicated much larger problems... But Piggot had already realized that any such reveal would be one of mutually assured destruction. What would revealing the sheer scale of their own incompetence do? How could the Protectorate recover from the evidence of such large-scale lawbreaking? The people would reject the organization, and they would lose a powerful force of order--or, even worse, they would approve, and the parahumans would be entirely unshackled.

After all, if the Protectorate had always been this way, if they had always overreached, but only to remove the villains--then, why, wasn't that the secret agent ideal? And in every such story, the obstructive bureaucrat, who insisted on crossing the i and dotting the t even as good men and women died, was always the villain. It would be entirely too easy a narrative, and with parahuman powers, the story would be all the more easy to present; with the right usage of Thinkers, it would be much simpler to identify and neaten up any loose thread that might unravel the narrative.

They were long past the point where daylight would solve all issues. If the PRT and the Protectorate were to heal from this, it would have to be in the dark... They would have to be the watchful eye and the extended arm, to see and obstruct any more abuses of their power.

Emily Piggot knew that, and she had known, ever since the idea started keeping her awake at night. She had just hoped she was wrong. She had hoped this day would never come.

She nodded.

"Good. Bring that up with Hebert; if she knows you know, she'll be much more cautious about doing the same in future. Regardless of her influence on Armsmaster, his report of such activity on her part is a good sign that Master-Stranger concerns are within acceptable boundaries." She paused, speaking more dryly. "And that he isn't developing ambition beyond his place."

"If only the same was true of Hebert."

Costa-Brown's lips pursed. "Based on that last tidbit alone," she said, "the problem isn't her striving beyond her place, but rather her entirely accurate knowledge of it. She may be more well-connected, and the Protectorate more actively involved, than we ever suspected." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't make yourself her enemy, but don't allow her to act unchecked either. Do you believe yourself capable of that balance, Director Piggot?"

That was and had always been her job; she knew that balancing act well, now.

Piggot saluted crisply, and Costa-Brown's face relaxed into a smile.

"Good. Do you have any other concerns?"
"None at this time. Thank you, Chief Director."

"This is my job," Costa-Brown said, still smiling. "So I thank you for doing yours, Emily."

"Likewise, Rebecca. Until next time."

The video conference ended, and Piggot sighed, closing her eyes.

She gave herself a moment to breathe, to stop thinking, to relax. It made her keenly aware of the ruin of her body, all of the passive pain, all of the fitness she had lost to hospital and illness. She didn't need to know why she still fought for humanity, not when her body reminded her with every straining breath in and out.

So she opened her eyes and logged into her computer, bringing up an e-mail client.

First, the message to Hebert, officially confirming the meeting. Second, messages to Gallant and others, announcing the end of the MSP observation period. Third, discreet feelers to the well-informed, to discover just how far the rot had seeped through their organizations. She couldn't burn it all out, not now and not alone, but she could always prepare the fuel and the torches.

Emily Piggot would continue to serve.
Black Swan 3.1

Cauldron had made its move to destroy the Youth Guard--or, more accurately, deployed a weapon they'd already prepared.

The signs were obvious, if you thought to look and if you knew someone was capable of it. The Youth Guard advocated for Wards as more than weapons, yes, but they were advocates, almost in the legal sense: they didn't actively engage, they just protected those that asked for help. They were the modern counterparts of the people who had brought children out of factories and tapered down work hours.

Overstepping that role, 'protecting' children by smothering them, stealing would-be heroes from the world--that story played into already existing narratives. The Youth Guard stepped on a lot of toes, proudly so, and there were more than a few who'd delight in taking them down a peg.

It wasn't perfect, but it didn't need to be; with Contessa on Cauldron's side, the possible became inevitable. I would have one less obstacle in my way, but more than that, elevated properly, the trial might call the entire Wards-Protecorate division into question. It might provide just the opening for exceptional Wards-age capes to advance, faster than ever--people like Tattletale.

And all I'd had to do to enable all of that good was destroy the Wards' union. I'd wonder what Dad would say, if I didn't already know.

It would be rebuilt; I'd make sure of that sooner or later. I'd have more than enough power once I was established.

For now, though, I needed to prepare. Tomorrow, I had a meeting with the head of the Brockton Bay PRT.

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I disliked Emily Piggot from the very first moment I met her.

It wasn't her appearance, at least. She was overweight, but it was hard to notice with her presence, a kind of quiet confidence in herself and her work. I wasn't really a fan of the bleached blond hair, and I've never really gotten why people wear their hair in buns, but neither of those would make someone bring my shoulders up around my ears like she did.

It was probably something about those pale grey eyes of hers. They were cold, for lack of a better descriptor, cold enough to set me instantly on edge. The moment I met those eyes, I concluded she was probably an enemy. The moment after that, I thought about why, and I found a dozen little facts lurking at the edge of my awareness:

She hadn't ever explained why we couldn't meet yet. When she'd called this meeting, it'd been over e-mail. It'd been weeks since I'd joined, and I hadn't even heard her voice.

She hadn't risen to greet me. She was sitting, looking up at me, positioning us as boss and employee--not equals. That meant I couldn't prompt her to rise and shake my hand, not without being the rude one.

She'd invited Armstrong here along with me, and for all that he was an ally, he was wearing his helmet. The lie detector was in play.
--on, and on, and on. None of them were compelling in isolation. Together, however...

I shifted my mindset, moving to something more oriented for confrontation, even as I did my best not to let that show. I sat down, and I let myself think about the documents I'd read of her, the transcripts I'd watched, her choice of careers and of words. I imagined myself walking through the aisles of countless crystal spirits, searching for the two types of formula that would unmake her... One that would let her unravel, and one that would knit her back together stronger.

*At the end of the day, who was Emily Piggot?*

One answer came easily to mind, my power walking well-worn paths: her power would weaken people in proportion to her own strength. It'd force people onto 'equal' ground, onto a territory she knew better, a territory she was already prepared for. It was the kind of 'fair' that isn't fair at all... And it'd keep her from ever growing stronger, in any real sense.

There's something to be said for that as a tactic, but she had turned it into a way of life.

I had a feeling that even if I hadn't been here like this, come not to bring peace but a sword, Emily Piggot and I still wouldn't ever be friends.

"Director," I said with a smile, leaning forward in my chair. "It's an honor to finally meet you." I chuckled, meeting her eyes with the friendliest expression I could manage. "Our schedules never seemed to meet up before."

"That was the excuse, yes," she said, folding her hands together in front of her. She wasn't even pretending to smile, expression stolidly all-business. Her voice was almost apologetic, almost, the kind that always followed any 'sorry' with a spoken or unspoken 'but.' I'd had years to develop a burning hatred of that tone.

"In truth, as a Thinker of unclear ability and mindset, you were undergoing an extensive Master-Stranger Protocol observation period. While your meeting with Armsmaster was necessary, my role is to make the final determination as to the risk presented by parahumans such as you. As such, I couldn't get involved before you were judged safe."

So that was why I had so many classes to attend: busywork. I couldn't say I didn't understand, not after realizing what Vegas could do.

("such as you." What exactly about me had triggered the extended MSP observation period? Though it wasn't as though I had any shortage of red flags.)

"I see," I said. I didn't cross my arms, didn't show any signs of my discomfort. Neither of us looked away from the other; we were still in a staring contest, for all that we'd kept on blinking. "I assume I'm cleared, then? I don't have any ability of the sort, and I wouldn't use it as I did. I can't afford distrust, not with my goals."

"You've been officially raised to a Master 1, in addition to your previous ratings," she said, and that was the first time she got a reaction out of me: I flinched. I couldn't help it. "On two dimensions. By the Daniels scale, you're a battlefield command Thinker; your level of parahuman insight and field awareness makes you a naturally gifted action leader. By the Levinson scale, your Thinker power appears to give you an intuitive understanding of other parahumans, though I suspect even you do not know the full extent of that ability."

Daniels and Levinson were trade talk, technical language... It was parahuman history at a depth and breadth our classes didn't cover. I'd have been flattered that she so clearly expected me to understand,
if she hadn't just confirmed my suspicions.

You see, a problem with classifying powers is that people don't get to pick their own, and most capes don't get outing during their Trigger. Make people too afraid of any type of power, start spreading too much suspicion about any classification, and you create a stigma. Just like we had stopped quarantining all Simurgh victims, we'd adopted a certain soft touch with some classifications. 'Projection creation' really had more in common with Blaster powers than animal control or enhancement, but if you grouped them together, then no one would fear that every Master could control people. If people were less afraid of Masters, then we'd have fewer Masters pushed into hiding and, eventually, crime.

It's easy to dismiss public relations, right up until you realize that poor messaging on a large-scale will kill as surely as a bullet, and at least people recognize the barrel of a gun.

The Daniels-Levinson divide came down to the details of what went where. There were a number of differences, obviously, but the doctor and the director had each won some battles... But if you asked me, the big one was Masters and Thinkers.

You see, Director Daniels had wanted to classify what Doctor Levinson considered social Thinking under Master powers, if a lower-level variant. If animal enhancement is Master, if projection command is Master, then surely the ability to effectively direct people should fall under the same umbrella? But, Levinson said, leadership was a relatively benign power, and if the ability to control others was feared, surely the ability to manipulate them was just as frightening?

It was a matter of priorities. For better or for worse, there were a lot more Thinkers than Masters, and leadership seemed a nice, safe addition to their umbrella.

Levinson had won the battle and, eventually, the war: despite all best intentions, people still feared Masters, and Thinkers were less feared than laughed at. Even professional heroes almost never met a Contessa, only a Hunch, the kind of Thinker who'd only be able to tell you that going left at a branch seemed 'purple.' Tattletales were one in a million, and they generally kept their cards close to the vest.

If Daniels had won that argument, we wouldn't have ever referred to PRT Security Directive 32 as 'the Master-Stranger Protocol.' Officially naming those categories the bogeymen of our world had only made things worse for the people with those powers.

That was why there was nothing that'd damage me more, as a Cape Thinker, then to be labeled even a low-level Cape Master. And if they realized that the power was more general still, that I could glean some insight into even the unpowered...

The Director had already taken steps to see me regarded with suspicion, above and beyond the abnormalities in my situation. She was forcing my hand--but was that the end or the means?

"I see," I said, closing my eyes. "I thought I might have something like that... It seems to be part of my combat prediction." I opened my eyes, meeting hers again. "I assume you were able to prove it somehow during the observation period?"

"Yes." She didn't clarify. Damn. "We would predict that it is exerted only within your power's radius, as it is a subset of that power's influence."

"I see," I said. Time to move to the next step; this was a formal sort of duel, and I had to observe the formalities at every stage. "But with all due respect, I'd like to ask that you revert my rating to its previous state." I shook my head. "It plays into several troublesome stereotypes regarding Thinking,
to say nothing of the duplication with regards to my Thinker aspect under both Daniels and Levinson. Most importantly..." I folded my hands in my lap, mirroring something of her stance. "...being on record as a Master, even if only on paper, will make my job immeasurably more difficult."

In other words, 'I know what you're doing, Director, and I don't appreciate it.'

A risky play, yes, but I suspected her strategy relied on me being unaware of the ill intent underneath her actions: so long as she could always wave it away as a requirement of PRT classification doctrine, I might not challenge her. But I just had.

So what was her Plan B?

"Is that so," she said. Her voice was colder now; she'd understood the message for what it was. "Please, do explain."

"Ma'am," I said. I paused. She'd anticipated this response, and she'd mentioned my parahuman perception to make me uncertain. It might have even worked, if not for what I could still do. I had won so many negotiating victories in my time at the Protectorate so far--but they were all against and among capes. Armsmaster was here, but Armsmaster was silent. It was Emily Piggot the mundane human who opposed me, and for once, that was worse. Every little seed of doubt she planted would weaken my hand here.

She was good, I'd give her that.

"Ma'am," I continued, "at the risk of belaboring the point, I'm a fifteen year-old Thinker. Glenn was right when he told me that it would be easy for me to fall into certain narratives. Thinkers are expected to be brilliant, to know more than anyone, and it's not unheard of for them to quickly rise to prominence in any field. It's just as common that they overextend themselves, exceed their capability, and fail--which, I'll note, that people already expect, because I'm very young for my position. That's a problem, but it's something I can manage. 'Don't fail, ever,' isn't an easy constraint to work with, but it's theoretically possible."

I leaned forward.

"But a fifteen year-old Master, Director? Protectorate earlier than anyone on record, working a job no one else has, with powers that correspond to capes? Director, you're not stupid. You know how that looks."

"Hence the low rating," she said, unruffled. "A Master 1 is--"

"Director," I interrupted, voice rising despite myself, "You could put me down as a Master negative and it wouldn't matter, not so long as you'd put the idea in their heads!" I sighed, short and sharp. "They'll be afraid, Director, even if they won't admit it. They'll consider treating me as a vastly higher Master rank, 'just in case'; they'll convince themselves that caution and duty require it. They'll wonder just how much I know, what I've managed to hide from you, or they'll go the other way, and wonder just what it means that I was sent to their city. You'll be poisoning the well."

"I understand your concerns," she said. Her voice was warmer now, but her eyes hadn't changed, not at all. "But you must understand the purpose of protocol." She leaned forward, even as I sat upright again. "Abilities such as yours, which stand on the edges of multiple classifications in multiple systems, must be classified strictly every time if they are to be classified at all. This is the same reason you are classified as a Trump, when so many variable Shakers are not--because your power is one that deals directly with parahumans in a way that few ever do. Would you prefer that I rescind that
classification, too?"

No, because being a Trump (even on a technicality) was admittedly sort of badass, and that carried a

certain reputational value. The connection to 'trump card' was entirely intentional. Still...

She paused, watching me, and I nodded tersely. She nodded back (another one of her stupid little

power games completed), then continued.

"Is that so? I see. Still, I'm afraid I cannot comply. For every low-level Thinker or Master that we

creatively classify for good reasons, we decrease our awareness of future holders who are less

benign. The Master-Stranger Protocol is a shield and a sword, Administrator, and it must be

maintained accordingly." She sighed, sounding almost genuinely regretful. "I cannot endanger the

people I protect, Miss Hebert, by compromising the protocols that protect them--not for you, not for

anyone or anything. Please understand."

She really was good--in part because even mid-fight, I had to acknowledge that it seemed an honest

sentiment.

"In which case," I said, "if your purpose really is just to educate, then place it under my already-

existing Thinker umbrella, where it belongs. Its rating is easily high enough to withstand the

expansion." I unfolded my hands, tapping my knees. "This isn't a matter of substance, Director, 

because my power is the same regardless. I am a Thinker 9, and we both know what a 9 means. 

Anyone that takes the scale seriously should already know to respect what my power is capable of."

PRT field manual, category '9': 'assume extreme complications, with standard tactics not applying, or

the power in question having an additional factor that exaggerates its effect. Capes and PRT should

evacuate where possible, and should only engage when a specific mission and strategy has been

outlined. Major countermeasures should take effect.' For a Thinker specifically, facing a nine dictated

regional coordination with the head offices of both the Protectorate and PRT.

9 was about the point where, given the right resources, someone might be able to build a team up to

S-Class threat. The Vegas team wouldn't have been surprised to hear I was on that level, even as

'only' a Thinker--Jack was proof enough that we Thinkers weren't harmless, even if they didn't know

the truth of him.

"This isn't a matter of substance, Director," I continued. "This is a matter of perception."

She shook her head, still utterly unshaken. She'd made up her mind long before I entered, and I

suspected that she'd already prepared for all my counterarguments. I hadn't surprised her even once.

"Your ability allows you a degree of mental influence that is especially powerful when others are

unaware of it. That best falls under the Master umbrella."

'Education countermeasures should only apply to active or potential enemies,' I almost pointed out...

But for all that I knew her game and she had likely realized that, we were still dancing along that

cliff. The knives weren't out yet, and I didn't want to be the one to cross the line between innuendo

and open opposition. There was a degree of counting coup to this dance.

"At which point every exceptional orator in human history becomes a Master," I said instead. "Every

student of human psychology a Thinker. The point of the classification system, Director, is that it

describes the means, not the ultimate result. I learn--I am a Thinker. The ratings need to be

determined by what powers accomplish, or else they mean nothing at all."

Her eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly, a tell I doubt she even realized. She'd laid a trap for me, just as

I'd expected.
There was a 0 rating, a very technical sort of thing, used to mark the boundaries between some powers; if a power allowed us to accomplish something as a side-effect, but only so well as an especially gifted human, then sometimes a 0 was used.

If I'd stated that a Master 0 rating would be more appropriate, she'd have been all too willing to accept, and then her ends would be accomplished all the same—and I couldn't well object to my own suggestion, could I? That would make me look unreasonable, in a way she might be able to weaponize.

The knives weren't out yet, no, but both of us had our hands on the hip sheath.

"My decision is final," she said, that undertone of regret still present in her voice. I went still, because I recognized that. Next, she'd say—"I'm sorry, Miss Hebert, but there's nothing I can do. Please understand."

The shock of bitter laughter that escaped at that surprised even me, but once I started, I couldn't seem to stop. The two older adults in the room looked back and forth, eyes passing between me and each other, seeming at a loss.

Almost thirty seconds passed before my dark humor burnt away, revealing the old embers of a cold, black anger.

"This is nostalgic," I said, voice sharp, not bothering to hide my emotions. "Sitting in front of an older female administrator, her younger male counterpart silent to one side, listening to people explain why continuing the system as-is means I have to get hurt. Even the same words, Director. 'I'm sorry, Miss Hebert,'" I said, biting off the phrase. "'but there's nothing I can do. Please understand.'"

For a moment, you'd have thought I'd struck her. And I had, in a way.

"Miss Hebert--" She faltered as she repeated the phrase, falling silent.

I'd just made this personal, on a level she wasn't willing or able to follow—on a level she couldn't, not with what had happened under her watch. I'd broken the unspoken rules of this conversation, and she had no way to respond, not without pointing out that I was acting like a child... And those were fighting words, coming from someone that had allowed such a 'child' to be abused. A surprisingly nasty conversational gambit, for something I'd done on accident.

She'd consider it intentional, a trap I'd sprung the moment I began to laugh, and she'd hate me for using this against her. Even so, I couldn't take it back now.

"It was a lie," I said, not raising my voice. The anger had returned to resolution, just as it had the day I'd emerged with Coordination at my side. "Every single time people say they have no choice, that something awful needs to happen, it is always a lie. You always have a choice. There is always something to be done, so long as you have the resolve to fight. Not always immediate, not always clean, not always decisive, but always something." My eyes narrowed. "Those years, the locker, didn't make me hate Sophia Hess, Director. Not really. If they had, I'd have a different power, something smaller than this." I leaned forward, my eyes still locked on hers. "What that time taught me is that behind every Sophia Hess is a system, a clock of a thousand cogs. For every ill-fated fragment ground beneath the wheels, there are a thousand others, each thinking that it wasn't their fault. They say they've done all that's expected of them, and whether or not they'll admit it, that matters more than the screams."

She said nothing, eyes on mine.
"My real enemy isn't a person, Director, nor will it ever be. The real enemy is an idea. Behind every evil we allow is the thought that 'nothing can be done,' which really just means 'I can't be blamed for letting this happen.' You can be, and you should. Inaction is always a choice. If you have power and you choose not to use it, then that's your choice. And if you decide that no one can be trusted with power, not yourself, not others... Then that's a choice, too, and the blood of the newly-powerless is still on your hands."

She was the product of a system built to endure, to buy us time against all the evils that superpowers brought until the goods could grow to compensate. In that sort of situation, caution is the watchword; destruction is easy, creation is hard, and it's always better to lose time than lives, let alone infrastructure.

She'd carried that philosophy far, far past what we'd ever intended. She didn't trust others, because appearances were deceiving; she didn't trust herself, because humans were frail and stupid. She held herself as no exception to the basic rules of the world, and for once, that did more harm than good.

The only thing that would buy her trust was time, and anyone that tried to rush their way through the system was suspect by definition. She would do her best to keep me back, to contain my changes, to buy time for time to tell.

All of that was almost reasonable, so long as you had time. We'd left the realm of 'reasonable' the moment two alien gods decided to scatter themselves across our sky.

"I see," she said. "You say I plan to perpetuate an evil--very well, then. I know you think of yourself as one intolerant of evils." Her eyes narrowed openly, now; we were both past pretending. "So what will you do, Administrator?"

"I will do what I must," I answered. "I'll escalate this as far and as wide as I need to. You will not sabotage me with one word and one number, Director. I won't allow it."

For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of triumph, deep within those steely eyes.

"Colin told me about Coil," she said, seemingly apropos of nothing.

For a moment, I didn't understand. Then I did.

Despite myself, I looked to the side. All I could see was the tight line of his mouth, body stock-still.

"You used greater Protectorate resources," Director Piggot continued, "to remove him. Because he could not be removed, not with his power, not with our restrictions. A laudable goal, in the short term."

My head fell, my shoulders slumping. She probably thought it was exhaustion, frustration, or defeat. It wasn't, all I had room for, in that moment, was relief.

She'd heard a partial truth, because he hadn't said a thing about my alluded-to conspiracy. True, with my ties to the Triumvirate, acting against Coil could very well be accomplished with some sort of Protectorate black ops group... That explanation was plausible enough that she wouldn't look much deeper.

Emily Piggot wouldn't cooperate with Cauldron; in fact, she would likely oppose us. That couldn't be allowed, not from a person at her position. And if she couldn't possibly be persuaded...

I'd been spared the responsibility of removing her, it seemed, at least for today.
"All the same," she continued, "that cannot be allowed to continue. The past informs the future, Administrator, and the PRT can't allow unlawful, unrestricted action by those under our watch. That will be the end of this, Taylor. You will understand."

She'd dropped the request, had she?

With the relief out of the way, anger was free to return.

Arrogant fool. She knew nothing. Nothing of what was at stake, nothing of what remained to do, nothing of what I could do to her. Removing her from the board would be almost pitifully easy; removing her without crushing her utterly would only be slightly more difficult.

And I wanted to do it, because she'd surrendered the protection of ignorance or innocence. She knew what she was doing, what I could do for all of us. She knew there would be a cost to my restraint... She had simply allowed fear to decide her path. She was afraid, and all of the reasons to let lives slip through her fingers, that had to be the most contemptible.

But I was better than that. I had to be better than that. I wouldn't betray the dream I'd seen through Coordination's eyes.

To be honest, I didn't even know why this was happening; she'd backed me into a corner, but I just couldn't see the sense in it. True, she had meant to discreetly obstruct, to offer an official explanation at every turn; no matter what I offered, she would deflect every reasonable alternative, to say she never had a choice. That plan had gone to hell the moment I'd seen her--and she'd had to know, with all of her paranoia, that my power might be capable of detecting her enmity.

What was her Plan B, then, if I continued to push? To stand in my way, to force a confrontation that would inevitably result in one of us being destroyed? It didn't make sense, not with the resources she'd already seen me use. Did she really think that I'd rush like this if I had any other choice? That'd I run roughshod over traditions and patterns, placing all the traditionalists against me, unless it was the only way forward?

--no. No, she hadn't ever seriously considered that. For better or for worse, she still seemed to see me as a spoiled child, to see my actions as a haste born of impatience alone. For all that there were a thousand different possible apocalypses hanging over our head every day we lived with powers, she'd never seriously considered an imminent end to the world.

(No one ever did. Why was that?)

I could use that... Especially when she'd handed me such a potent tool, without my even having to ask for it.

*I'd have to hope it was enough. I was committed, now.* (Though I'd have preferred a word with fewer connections to the deluded or insane.)

I took a deep breath. I straightened up.

"Director," I said, "it's good that you brought Armsmaster here." I let myself smile, even as I turned to the side, looking towards Colin's hidden eyes. "Listen closely, and Colin, pay close attention to that lie detector of yours." I turned back to her, leaning forward, and I let my smile lapse. "You're focused on the long term, Director, when we don't *have* a long term. Generally speaking, our predictions place the nearly unavoidable end of human civilization somewhere between five and fifteen years from now. It will happen, and if it doesn't, it'll be because we stopped it."

She froze. For a moment, I thought her breath had stopped. At last, she turned to Armsmaster,
equally frozen; he thawed enough to nod, jerkily, and she turned back to me.

"What in the world could cause an apocalypse on such a certain timeline?"

"You don't get to know," I said, and I let myself take a little petty satisfaction in that. "Even what I just told you is classified at a level that isn't officially recognized. To be frank, I'd really rather you not know, but... Well. Here we are." I stood up. "Now you'll understand what I mean when I say I don't have time to play bullshit political games. I found out what I came here to find out, so I'm done with this, and I'm done with you. And in light of that..."

I turned towards the door.

"The Master classification won't stick, Emily," I said. "No matter what you do. If you really did report it, then I suspect it is already removed; if it was just a ploy to make me reveal my hand, then consider it shown. Either way, you won't accomplish what you want with me. If you want to do anything else by being here, then don't interfere with me or mine." I looked briefly back over my shoulder. "You do good work by all accounts, Director, so I suggest you find some other hill to die on."

And then I left before she could reply.

More flies with honey than vinegar--but my words wouldn't be what convinced her, really. Words never are.

But if something happened... Well, with those words stuck in her mind, I might make an opportunity later. I could only hope.

I doubted that I'd find many better wielders of the resonant barrier-sword.

---

Armsmaster found me in an empty meeting room, not long after I'd left.

I had my eyes closed, eyes on the web of lights. It calmed me, centered me, made me feel more like myself. When he shut the door behind me and I opened my eyes, I'd already pruned off all my unproductive impulses.

That meant I could decide, with calm mind and reasoned judgment, to be angry.

"Explain yourself," I said.

He reached up, removing his helmet, and set it on the table. He sat down himself, a moment later, putting himself on the same side of the long rectangular table.

"Is it true?" He said instead, eyes on mine. "Do we really have that little time left?"

Of course that would be his priority. God forbid he start with 'sorry,' if only for the sake of appearances.

It was hard to stay mad at the idiot, but I still had to sigh--for his future, if nothing else. As the sound escaped, my mind seemed to slip down a gear.

Colin Wallis was going to die alone. I really could not see that man ever getting into a relationship.

"Yes," I said. "Where do you think Endbringers came from?"
"I see," he said. "It certainly explains why you seem to be in such a hurry." He closed his eyes, then bowed forward, head low. "I apologize... It seems I've acted foolishly."

"I'd have told you, if you'd asked any of the right questions," I said. He looked up. "Like I said, you're important to the plan. Tinker devices may not be the endgame of my plan, but they'll pave the path to the first Endbringer victory, and that needs to happen before anything else. You're valuable enough that I'm willing to be a little more honest about things." I huffed out a breath, shaking my head. "Before this idiotic stunt of yours, I'd even have felt relatively good about full disclosure."

His mouth twisted in a line.

"You already figured it out, didn't you? That Thinker ability of yours is quite something, it seems."

*Only against enemies.*

"It wasn't that difficult. I realized most of it by the time you got here. Seeing your responses now just made me absolutely sure."

Colin was a simple man, and he had simple priorities. Even when he played political games, he thought in straight lines.

First problem: I didn't want to help with the city's crime. Therefore, I needed a reason.

Second problem: my connections to the Triumvirate, and my position, were suspicious. There needed to be some reasonable explanation for my advancement beyond 'capable.' Connections to secret black ops branches made more sense.

Third problem: Director Piggot was not going to trust me, no matter what I did--there would be an incident sooner or later, be it on my terms or hers. Therefore, I needed to know about my enemy before she could do too much damage.

"You wanted to exhaust my options," I said. "To push for a situation where Piggot would force me to act more overtly. With the Triumvirate's hands tied by the need to act discreetly and without other institutional support, my best option will be to clear out Brockton Bay, to give myself a concrete accomplishment that would be impressive even on a regional scale... Which will also fulfill your own desires, and enable you to cooperate with me without abandoning your responsibilities here."

It was certainly a solution worthy of an Efficiency Tinker. I could respect that and what it implied about him, even if I found the implementation annoying.

He thought in straight lines, but he was still clever enough to fool Piggot, who never trusted anyone or anything, including herself--because if she had seen through this, she'd have had the sense to be more careful.

After all, this plan implicitly assumed I would win any fight she started.

"Director Piggot will never clear you to travel, not as you wish," Colin said. "But there are certainly Directors who would be willing to accept a promising transfer." He frowned, eyes falling to the floor. "But now I understand your impatience. Even a city this size is a small prize, in light of the greater stakes."

"It is," I said. "But you, Velocity, Dauntless, and the rest are much larger ones." He looked up. "And in light of my unfortunate, if highly satisfying, antagonization of Director Piggot--" (his lips quirked upwards, seemingly despite themselves) "--it won't hurt to have a larger-scale accomplishment on my side."
"Or to soothe my ego," he said, and I laughed.

"Naturally. So I'll give you a little of my time... What I can spare, at least." I stood up, facing the window; he did the same. "You have until the next Endbringer attack," I said. "Or the next two weeks, if they're ahead of schedule, or until I win. Going off of the pattern, they'll almost certainly strike within the next month." I glanced to the side, meeting his eyes. "You've got a passion, and I don't want to break its back. For you, I'll put my all into this--and I expect you to follow suit, in the days that follow after."

"Of course."

"Good." I held out a hand. "Partners?"

"Partners."

He took my hand, and I shook it.

"Good."

Then, at the moment his shard's light was most relaxed, I shifted my body. Even with combat training like Armsmaster's, there's only so much you can do when the other person has leverage and surprise on their side.

It's true that it was hard to stay angry at him, but many important things are difficult to do.

I pulled him down, banging his breastplate against my braced shoulder; it took the breath out of him for just a moment, and I took that time to place my mouth at his ear.

"I'll let this go once, but you won't get my forgiveness twice--not now that you know what's at stake."

I shifted myself sideways, pulling down, my free hand on his back. He stumbled forward, and with one push I'd have knocked him to the ground--but I didn't.

I let go and turned away, calling out as I headed toward the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Colin. You need to start working on the rest of Velocity's suit."

He was the kind of person who'd notice my timing. Then he would realize, after I left, that this meant I'd known about the depth of my Thinker aspect long before Piggot told me--or else that I'd learned very fast. From there, he'd realize that I might realize if he ever tried to go behind my back again... And that I'd already warned him I was watching.

He wouldn't be afraid, but I didn't want him to be. Before, I'd wanted him to underestimate me, just a little. Now I needed that to end, and introducing uncertainty was the first step.

I stepped out of view, entered a portal... And once it closed behind me, I winced, rubbing my shoulder.

"Fuck that stings," I murmured.

"Language, young lady," Number Man said, a smile on his lips, even as he stood up from one of the office chairs I'd left in front of my desk. (White, like everything else Cauldron-standard.) "Should I go get ice? I'm feeling quite thirsty, myself."

"If you don't mind," I said. "Shouldn't be much more than an unpleasant bruise, but I'd like to make
sure it doesn't get in the way. Don't worry about getting me anything to drink."

"Right."

He wasn't more than a minute or two, a cup of water in one hand, extending a ziplock bag of ice. I took it, thanked him, and rested it on my shoulder.

He gestured toward my shoulder with his mug as he settled into his seat. "Any interesting story behind that?"

"Making a point to a hero who had been an idiot," I said. "Unfortunately, only one of us was wearing armor."

He examined me, head tilting slightly. "You tripped him? Generally one tries to move out of the way before trees and fools fall down."

"Not moving was part of the point of the maneuver, but... I'll work on a better plan, next time."

"A wise course of action." James tapped his fingers against the rim of his cup. "I assume the 'idiot' did something to complicate your meeting with the local PRT Director?"

"Told her that I'd already removed an annoying villain," I said, and his eyebrows rose. "Passing it off as 'greater Protectorate resources,' so Cauldron's secret is safe... And it wasn't entirely inaccurate, considering," I said, to his soft chuckle. "He was playing power games for the sake of the city. I'm willing to go along for a time, but Piggot will do her best to get in the way of that and any further actions. Unfortunately, I'm probably going to have to ask Contessa to keep an eye open."

"That may not be necessary." He took a slow sip of his water, just to draw things out, and chuckled again at my exasperated look. "Rebecca will likely be able to handle the matter herself."

My brow furrowed. Rebecca...? As in, Rebecca Costa-Brown, Chief of the PRT? "What, is she a part of all of this?"

Being part of a superpowered conspiracy sort of seemed problematic, considering her job description. Having her in our corner would be useful, don't get me wrong, but...

"Oh? I was under the impression names were important to you." His smile was almost teasing now as he put the cup down. "Rebecca Costa-Brown," he said. "You also know her as Alexandria."

For a moment, my brain simply refused to process that information. They couldn't do that. They wouldn't. That was just... What was even the point, when Contessa could recruit anyone--And then my anger returned abruptly, in an instant of perfect understanding.

"That conniving--" I took a deep breath, breath catching in an angry snarl, before I forced myself to shut up. When I could talk again, I looked up. "Thank you, James. I thought this was strange--Piggot just didn't seem to have enough of an end goal. Now I understand. She wasn't playing an actor on our stage, she was someone's weapon. And now it's rather obvious who set her in my path." I tapped my fingers on my desk, thinking. "She was going that far because she knew she had a more powerful backer, I suspected that, I just didn't know why Chief Director Costa-Brown would so directly oppose me."

"And you wouldn't think to ask," Number Man said, tilting his head. "Nor, I suspect, would you think to 'trouble' us with your problems, normally."
"No, I wouldn't," I murmured. "She had my number, didn't she? If she has her own plans for our public face... I did consult both Doctor Mother and Contessa, true, but they may not have committed to one plan. I can't be sure they'd say what I need to know." I frowned. "Or she may trust them not to interfere, if it comes down to a clash between us? So long as we don't do the cause harm in the process."

I'd have thought to sound out the Director first, likely through Legend and Alexandria. And if she had prepared that field correctly, if she had manipulated the facts, counting on my pride...Normally, I'd just have asked Contessa for assistance with certain end goals. Keep this fact out of the database, keep Piggot from badmouthing me--little, direct usages of her power, so as to keep myself from becoming too reliant on it. It was a desire she seemed willing enough to accommodate, for all that I'd never explained it to her.

Alexandria might have suspected that much of me, just from general Thinker traits. I did fit the profile well enough.

But what was her endgame? How would she talk to me in a way that wouldn't simply make me reach for Cauldron's resources? What did she have planned to defeat me, exactly? ...didn't matter, at the moment. Alexandria was smart, and I wouldn't outwit her without time to really think about it.

"I still need to figure this out," I said, tapping my fingers against my crossed arms. "But knowing the root cause of this incident simplifies things. Thank you very much, James."

"No need," he said, shaking his head. "I simply happened to be here when you were in a mood to vent, and I've chosen to leave this organization's direction to all of you. I've no intention of choosing sides." He smiled slightly, picking up a clipboard from an empty chair and tapping it against his knee. "So let's ignore my inadvertent interference, hmm?"

"Let's," I said, eyes on the clipboard. It had to be his. "And on that note, let's get to your business." I looked up. "Your text said that you had a breakthrough?"

"Potential breakthrough," he said. "I couched it in very careful language."

"You're the type of person who does," I said, "and yet you let yourself sound almost excited. Coming from you, that text very nearly broke out the emoticons." I adjusted the ice against my shoulder; I had my eyes on the web, so the actual physical sensation was muted, but I'd have to come back to my body eventually. Best to treat it kindly in the meantime. "Go ahead, lay it on me."

He leaned forward, attempting to place the clipboard on my head. I warded him off, single free arm raised protectively.

"Hey!"

"You did say--"

"That is the single most dad-joke thing I have seen or heard in ages, and you should be ashamed," I said, but I couldn't help smiling. "Get to it already, Number Man."

"As you wish," he said, hiding his own smile as he settled back into his chair. "You recall the details I've had you fill out, concerning each shard we inspected in those cross-sections?"

"Labels, description, level of power, role in an Entity's hands, interactions with other shards," I rattled off, eyes on the clipboard again. I looked up. "I'm pretty sure the last two are a bust, just because I don't know enough about them. A vision of the end product and a cell-by-cell understanding don't do much for something that large--I can guess, but I'm still firing blind. It's a
conversation, not a creature, and I've paid attention to maybe a thousandth of it."

Number Man shook his head. "With statistics," he said, slipping into a professor's diction, "rarely are individual incidents significant; outliers tell you little unless your concern is maximum and minimum range. Instead, you search for patterns. Those items are not useful individual data points, true. Together, however, and over a wide range..." He tapped the clipboard with a thumb. "I've spoken with Doctor Mother, and we've extracted a few samples of regions more distant than our current comprehensive search. With the data we've gleaned thus far, treating each of your ratings and purposes as dynamic ranges, I've made predictions about how each sample will fall within the resultant system. It's a spherical cow abstraction, mind, but the results appear to be roughly self-consistent."

That was what I had meant earlier in the conversation: Number Man's 'roughly self-consistent' was anyone else's 'publication-worthy results.'

I leaned forward, and he drew the clipboard back. "I've shown Eva already, for a second opinion," he said, chiding. "But I can't bias you now, not if we're to properly test. Still, if these predictions of mine are accurate," he said with good cheer, "then I believe we may be able to expand these predictions still further. That's important. Even at our current pace, it could very possibly take three more years to catalog the entirety of Heir, let alone make use of it."

That made sense, I supposed, when I saw how little had been mined from it— even considering the more tentative pace of Cauldron's past experimentation, they'd barely scraped the surface. I supposed he hadn't wanted to tell me that, not when it showed how much work was ahead of us.

That illustrated the difference in our attitudes: for me, knowing that we'd barely touched the surface of the alien was my primary source of hope. True, it meant Scion was scarier, but we were already fighting the equivalent of countless worlds, and I'd gotten a greater appreciation for his sheer strength recently. Multiplying the-limit-approaching-infinity by still larger numbers changed nothing.

"But with this pattern... You think we'll be able to establish a more nuanced search," I said slowly. "And as we establish our predictions--"

"It is entirely too early to judge," he said, holding up a hand. "Still, I'm optimistic."

"Well, no reason to draw this out," I said. I stood up, picking a white coat off a rack and moving towards the door. "Let's go do science."

"Applied statistics."

"Statisticians don't get to wear lab coats, James."

"A potent argument, Taylor. I yield."
I sent Alexandria an e-mail that evening.

The next day, I showed up unannounced in Rebecca Costa-Brown's office--an office in an entirely different city, far from Brockton Bay.

"Taylor Hebert," the Chief Director of the PRT said, hands crossed in front of her. "I assume you're here about Director Piggot?"

"Only indirectly," I said. I took a chair, flipping it so its back faced her, and sat down and crossed my arms on the top. "I want to know why you're fucking with me, Alexandria."

She didn't react. I don't mean that it was subdued, I mean that there was nothing, not in her face or her shard. I'd given myself away already, then?

"I'm pushing back," she said. "There are delicate games afoot, Administrator, and you're upsetting several."

"With the full consent of Cauldron."

"Each of us is the authority in our sphere," she countered. "And the Triumvirate's is the Protectorate and PRT. You're meddling outside your scope."

"Don't group Eidolon in that," I said. "He'd spend all his time pulling kittens out of trees, if that was all there was to do. He wants to be a hero; the rest is details."

"You're quibbling." She folded her hands together on the desk. "The point," she said, "is that it isn't your place to interfere with our system, not without our consent or overwatch."

"You've bought time excellently," I said. "I appreciate that. But we need to change tactics if we're to finish the job."

"Quite possibly," Alexandria said. "And I already suspected that was the motive behind your rash behavior. But even so, the point remains: this is a conversation we should have had, you and I, long before you decided to start acting so boldly."

"A point," I said, "that you could have made with a simple phone call or e-mail."

"Which you would not have taken seriously." Alexandria shook her head. "No. I've met your type, Taylor, over and over again. I understand something of how you think."

I eyed her, thinking. Where exactly was our disconnect here?

"Okay, then," I said. "Give me your endgame. Assume I take my toys and go home; what then? Tell me how you kill an Endbringer, let alone Scion--and 'Eidolon' isn't an answer."

Her eyes narrowed. "We share the same plan," she said. "The right powers--"

She stopped. I looked at her a moment longer, and then I rubbed my forehead with one hand. On one hand, this was a relief. On the other...

Dammit. I'd hoped that she'd talked to Doctor Mother and Contessa and Number Man, that this was some more reasoned insurgency against unknowingly poor ideas. Instead, it was another goddamn
coordination problem, courtesy of some idiot who thought I was a rash child, and I had enough of those when I was dealing with just the rest of the world. I'd hoped I wouldn't have to deal with them inside Cauldron, by dint of us having common goals and all being willing to just talk to one another.

It seemed some things were just habit, after all these years.

"In some ways," I grumbled to myself, "it's really a shame that you four were Cauldron's big initial success."

"Is that so."

I looked up, blinking; the tight lines of her eyes told me that she was agitated, for some reason, and I could read a little hostility in her shard. What the hell was her problem?

I took a moment, retracing my steps, then choked on my words; it was all I could do to keep from breaking out into laughter. "Oh, okay, wow, that really didn't come out like I'd meant it," I said. The misunderstanding was just absurd enough to dispel my annoyance. "Thinker distraction. Look, it's like this," I said, leaning forward. "When you first got your powers, where did you think you landed on the scale of the possible? All four of you."

She was frowning. "Eidolon is the top tier of power, obviously," she said. "Hero, as a Tinker, was hard to judge. But Legend and I... We're strong compared to natural Triggers, yes, but we never considered ourselves more than mid-range across the realm of the possible. Are you really claiming that there is so little room to optimize?"

It was nice to talk to someone who could keep up with a little basic implication.

"Unfortunately. Engineering is all about trade-offs, even in this realm. We can only ever afford one Eidolon. You and Legend are, in terms of power, the practical limit of what we can do. The 'why' is a little complicated." I stood up, walking to one of the walls; there was a whiteboard there, filled with a few scattered notes without context. "Do you need any of this?"

"Perfect memory," she said. "It's a decoration."

"I know," I said, rolling my eyes while I was still looking away. "I was being polite." I erased the board, then drew a large cluster of many small circles at the upper left. "I need to explain a few things about powers," I said. "You should've heard already how Heir--the dead Entity--crashed into the ground." I drew an arrow down, then redrew the circle Entity, crashing into the ground; I filled the air around it with scattered dots. "When it crashed, it scattered shards... Maybe one-ten-thousandth of it was knocked loose. The Entities are multidimensional beings, so the projection of any one shard into one dimension is pretty small. That's why they can attach themselves to humans."

I drew another circle, off to the side, and then surrounded it with dots.

"It took me a while to realize exactly which shards were accessible to Eidolon," I said, tapping the single circle with the butt of the marker. "I got a brief glimpse at his power well, and it just wasn't deep enough to be an entire Entity. Cauldron hasn't removed nearly enough to impact that, either." Then I tapped the crash landing drawing once, for emphasis. "As it turns out, the answer is here. The crash landing jolted shards free, and Eidolon's Administrator shard followed the path of least resistance in establishing its connections. He can't access the dead Entity, which is why we're not finding dead zones where he's drained shards dry. We don't have to worry about interfering with him, or vice versa."

"That makes little sense." I looked back over my shoulder to see Alexandria staring intently at the
"We did consider that perhaps he only had access to a part of the Entity, and that fits your data as well as any other explanation. After all, whatever mechanism his power uses to find and link to shards, it makes little sense that it could connect to dust specks and miss the mountain."

"It's not that it missed it, exactly." I drew a file folder, and next to it, I drew a filing cabinet. I tapped each of them once with the butt of my marker. "Which of these takes you more energy to open?"

"Ah," she said slowly, nodding to herself. "The free shards are, by the mechanisms of his shard, less expensive to access... And outside the Entity, he lacks the amplifier and battery shards that would allow him to act with impunity. If it doesn't establish permanent links, but instead reaches out each and every time... The shard isn't optimized for such usage, after all." She rested a hand on her chin. "And this is also why Eidolon's powers run dry so quickly, isn't it? They're unmoderated weapons with no supplying battery. And this is why we will only ever have one Eidolon... He can only wield so many powers at once, and only for so long. Compared to individual parahumans, it's incredibly inefficient."

"But that's fine so long as he's accessing shards we can't get to anyway," I said, capping the marker. "Right."

And I wouldn't want to be the one to tell Eidolon that his power was too expensive for us to use.

"And all natural Triggers are moderated," Alexandria said, eyes resting on empty space. "To make them last longer."

"They don't have to be," I interjected, and she glanced back towards me. "Lung's Escalation, for example, is nearly as unrestricted as some of the formula shards. It depends on the role of the bearer in the greater conflict, whether or not the shard generates its own energy, and how much they want to grow the shard. As a rule of thumb, though, that's more-or-less true."

"True. If this is a great game of cops and robbers..." She drummed her fingers lightly on the desk. "Your control aspect is both a conflict-imbalancing power and a relatively power-hungry one, and was thereby restricted. Cauldron capes are not necessarily limited this way... But even if the vessel can withstand the stronger power, any cape so produced may not last very long. As a result, they'll be more reliably useful to us than natural Triggers, but they'll also have lower ceilings on their strength." She looked towards me. "Legend and Eidolon can gain power from their shard. I would assume I expend energy only when I fly?"

"And when you utilize your super strength, to some degree." I shrugged lightly. "The majority of the energy expended by your shard was to... let's say 'lock' you in your current configuration. No aging, peak physical and mental condition, immune to most attacks that aren't extradimensional." She nodded, and as I did, I drew another circle, shading it in to the 40% marker, then one more, writing "50%" and adding a tiny up-arrow. "Ballparking it off shard intuition alone, you can operate as a hero at your current pace for, oh, twenty or so more years? You won't experience any signs of deterioration, not like Eidolon has, but I think you'll know when you're running out of time."

If she survived that long, anyway.

"And Legend and Eidolon have longer... I assume Legend is the 50% circle?"

"Right on both. Natural triggers are hooked up to some outside energy source... I don't know what it is, and the limiters on most powers suggest it's finite, but there's a lot of it. Probably something dealing with alternate dimensions? Nothing we need to care about."

"Don't let anyone from Earth Aleph hear you say that," she said mildly.
She was making bad jokes. That was a good sign.

"I'll do my best," I replied, waving it aside. "Anyway, natural capes won't run out, but that's not true for formula capes. Even if we go with supercharged capes with short batteries, I'd have to test whether people can withstand that level of power, and I don't know enough about shard energy requirements to gauge the best balance. I mean, I'm pretty much just doing this by eye now, and it's coming out to about forty years or so?" She nodded. "And even if I learn how to adjust that, we have a natural ceiling. There just isn't ever going to be a cape that can stand on an even footing with Scion."

"Hence the focus on coordination." She sighed. "We're reaching the end of any use in keeping Cauldron hidden away?"

"Exactly." I dropped into my chair, narrowing my eyes at her. "All of which you would have learned, if you'd just asked. I discussed all of this with Contessa, Doctor Mother, and Number Man ages ago, once I really mastered formula-making and worked out all of my shard's insights. I expected you to talk to them if you ever thought I was stepping on your toes."

"I speak to Contessa twice a week," Alexandria said, and I raised my eyebrows. "If simply to give her an opportunity to openly nudge me in the correct direction. I resolved to moderate you if necessary at least that long ago, and I'd expect her to have a path related to your goals. One of this week's calls was yesterday evening, an hour after your talk with the Director. She said nothing."

"If I had to guess," I said, "I'd say she let this conflict happen early, to get us talking... And as a demonstration of my power, so you would know to take me seriously." I sighed. "But honestly, trying to out-think the near-omniscient precog is a headache at the best of times; for all we know, she just asked the wrong questions, and she never saw this coming at all. So let's talk details, Alexandria: I'll tell you what I have planned, you do the same, and then you get to unfuck the Piggot situation, because I'm pretty sure that's at least partially your fault."

Her eyes narrowed back at me. For a moment, I thought she'd argue, and then she sighed. "Fair," she admitted. "Though you should have seen it coming, with her background and psych profile."

"Maybe." I shook my head, slumping in my chair. "Honestly, after that, I'm amazed that all this went so well. After you set the hounds on me, I didn't expect you to be so..."

"...reasonable?"

"That's sort of damning with faint praise."

"I'm sure you were surprised," Alexandria said. "This is often the job we are given: two people with the same goal and different priorities, engaged in discussion over the details." She shook her head. "Whatever our problems, Taylor, I will never be your enemy--your opponent, perhaps, but as you have seen, I am willing to admit fault. We are and will remain on the same side. This surprised you, because you are young. You still expect grand confrontations, a dragon to slay." A faint smile crossed her lips. "It seemed simplest to fulfill your expectations."

"You were watching," I said slowly. "All of that, dragging in a Director, just to...?"

I thought, sometimes, that the problem with people was that they had no sense of scale, that they couldn't visualize the size of the problems or the stakes.

Apparently taking the far view didn't solve all perspective problems.

"...to see what you would do to an obstinate, infuriating woman who was no great threat to you?
Yes." Alexandria sighed. "Emily Piggot is extraordinarily clever, despite her biases, and she plays the game quite adeptly... To say nothing of the obstacle her lack of a shard presented, to your power. But there is very little she can do, considering our control of the system in which she rests. A fact you are, and always were, fully aware of." She closed her eyes. "And yet you played the game regardless. You gathered what information was available, took what measures were available to you, and once you discerned true victory was impossible, you left."

Rebecca leaned forward and opened her eyes, and in that moment, something about her changed. Alexandria's shard brightened, her entire body seeming to become a finely-toned blade.

"If you had acted otherwise," she said, very quietly, "if you had shown any less restraint, then we would be having a very different conversation right now."

That display probably should have frightened me. Instead, my own eyes narrowed, my mind starting to cycle faster.

_Suffocation? Impossible with current tools. Retreat, utilize portals--ocean? Yes._

I took a deep breath, shaking my head.

"Don't do that," I said; she was observing me closely. "Whatever. Either way, Rebecca, I'm not going to hold a grudge; get over me stepping on your toes and I'll do the same." I held out a hand. "Maybe not friends yet--but allies?"

"Of course, Taylor." She took my hand, shaking it firmly. "Please begin with your general outline of events to come. It's long past time we began to coordinate."

"Probably better to call a more general meeting," I said, as I let go. "No reason not to bring Legend and Eidolon up to speed."

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"Director," I said, dropping into a chair. For her part, Director Piggot looked back at me, expression cold and tight.

I hadn't asked for a meeting; I'd simply walked into her office, at a time she had nothing scheduled. Her door had been locked. She owned the only copy of the key.

"Administrator," she said. "What brings you back here?"

As she pulled up the Protectorate teleconferencing app, I walked around, standing at her shoulder. She glared at me; I ignored it.

A moment later, Chief Director Costa Brown's face appeared, drawn and tired.

She'd been using make-up to appear to age, all this time, even as Alexandria stayed the same. I supposed it made sense that she'd be good at designing for a look.

"Chief Director Costa-Brown," I said, before Piggot could. "Thank you for arranging this meeting on short notice."

"I could hardly do anything else," Costa-Brown said. She sighed, the sound like an iron weight, as her eyes fixed on Piggot. "Director. I've met with a number of Protectorate Thinkers, and I've spoken
with the Triumvirate. The situation is... worse, than we anticipated."

Her words hit Piggot like a blow. "Chief Director..."

"I believe that Administrator told you that we have a time limit far more pressing than we believed," she continued, to Piggot's shallow nod. "I've been briefed on that situation. Their explanation is reasonable, and they have good reason to believe what they do. In that light, Administrator's actions are, if anything, conservative."

"And that excuses everything," Piggot said, voice numb with disbelief. "We are to simply unmake all that protects us, just to move a little faster?"

"Yes," Costa-Brown said baldly. "Not all--there are some procedures that still must be followed, if only for the comfort of those we work with. Abandon everything and fear will only spread faster. But the task ahead of us requires cooperation on a scale humanity has rarely tried, and most such attempts are miserable failures."

I could see Piggot's expression shut down.

"You don't believe this is actually happening," I said, from behind her shoulder. Piggot looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "You think that she's been Mastered, or coerced, or tricked, or that the person we're talking to isn't her at all."

"Reasonable explanations," she said, somewhat stiffly.

"That's unfortunate," I murmured, and she looked up at me. "I'd hoped that you had at least one person you really trusted... Someone who you'd believe in, even if you can't believe in yourself. But to you, even she's still human, isn't she? Flawed and foolish and broken. The moment she steps out of line, she's lost your trust."

I mean, she was right to be skeptical of Costa-Brown, but that emotion would still be a bright thing.

"There isn't a single perfect person in all the world," she said. "And on mere odds alone? It's much more likely that you're mistaken. When will your crisis end? When will the things you break return? It won't and they won't. You'll find some excuse, Administrator--something that tells you that it's okay to make another exception, that you need a little more time, a little more power. And then you yourself will become a crisis, something that requires someone else's extreme response." She laughed humorlessly. "I've seen people like you again and again and again, Taylor Hebert, because the order we have now is the exception. History is full of people just like you--and yet, humanity is still here."

"Anthropic principle," I said, to her slight furrowed brow. "The fact the world hasn't ended yet just means the world hasn't ended yet, not that it can't. Your worldview basically can't be proven wrong, you know, and that's always a dangerous sign."

She didn't reply. I rubbed at my forehead. What would jar her point of view? What would make her doubt her knowledge of the way things were long enough for her to change her mind...?

A common enemy? No... The real enemy.

"Miss Hebert." The Chief Director spoke, and I looked up. "I know you well enough to know you're considering something rather rash. Let's handle the issue at hand first."

"I can indirectly prove that the situation is of a larger scope than she knows," I said. "If she knew what you knew, well, maybe we'd have more luck."
For a moment, her brow furrowed... And then Costa-Brown's face twisted in sudden horror. "Absolutely not," she hissed. "Administrator, your actions thus far have been within reason, in light of the situation--but this is an entirely new realm of rashness. I cannot possibly allo--"

Piggot had frozen the moment the Chief Director had begun speaking again; Costa-Brown hadn't noticed, with her eyes on me. It wasn't until near the end of her interjection that she looked to the side.

And then Piggot began to laugh. It reminded me of the way I'd laughed the other day, when she'd said those words, when the world had echoed awful patterns--angry and bitter, but still, for all that, darkly amused.

"God," she said. "I'm an idiot, aren't I? Alexandria." She looked at the screen with sudden venom. "To think, all this time, and I never even bothered to look at you. Just how corrupt are you, that you'd never even give us a chance?"

For a moment, Alexandria looked back at her, brow furrowing. Then she sighed, short and sharp.

"God damn it, Taylor. You just had to go off-script."

She reached forward, and her screen went dark. A moment later, a portal opened, and Rebecca Costa-Brown--Alexandria--stepped out of her office and floated into Piggot's.

Judging by the way Piggot had reached under her desk, she had a panic button. Judging by the look on her face, it wasn't working.

"This would have been simple," the hero said. Piggot stood, and Alexandria raised her eyebrows; Piggot froze, face twisting in frustration. Alexandria looked back towards me, crossing her arms. "Five minutes without any bright ideas, and the problem would have been solved--and you were the one that told me to fix this, if you recall. Now we're going to have to act rather drastically. Now, I'd like to simply wipe her memories, but..." She looked up at Piggot a moment, her mouth twisting; judging by the way she was inspecting Piggot, she was reading something in her body language. "Yes, you have a contingency plan for that, don't you? You'd notice. With Contessa, we could still remove that contingency from play... But even afterward, I'm afraid you're still a problem, Emily. You've already proven that you're remarkably close to realizing who I am. That's a complication best avoided."

"You're going to kill me, then," Piggot said, glaring up at her; I couldn't see a speck of fear through all her hate. "Later, once you can find a sufficient excuse."

"No," Alexandria said; she seemed disappointed, almost. "Director, I'm seeking to simplify matters. Death? Complicates. But there are a number of ways to push you off of the board... A number of which will leave you believing it was your own idea. Humans are generally stupid, after all, and you trust so very little. That makes you quite easy to influence."

Judging by Piggot's scowl, Alexandria had hit on a nerve just now.

"So," I said, and both heads turned towards me. The time they'd spent focused on each other had given me more than enough time to calm my head and think--and I'd needed it.

I'd asked Alexandria a question--a reasonable question for her character, something she could justify under the identity of Chief Costa-Brown. I'd expected her to say yes or no; I hadn't expected her to give the game away. If she was that damn uneasy about me saying something, she could have asked me not to, beforehand.
...not that I'd have obeyed, necessarily. But I'd have strongly considered it.

"If you want to get rid of her anyway, then there's no harm in trying my idea, is there?"

Alexandria stared at me, then sighed again. "You are an exasperating woman, Taylor Hebert."

"And you're just fantastic yourself," I said, eyes lingering on the Director. "Portal, fragiles storage, my first locker." I tapped the vial against my hand, focusing on the light... And then I stepped forward, sitting on the edge of Piggot's desk, even as Alexandria floated off to the side.

This had escalated quickly. Judging by the way she was watching me, and the tight pursing of her lips, she was giving me a chance... Or enough rope to hang myself, if her internal narrative really was 'and then the child screwed it all up.' I'd just have to impress her, then.

Time to see if I could still fix all this.

"The imminent apocalypse," I said, holding up the crystalline vial, "is Scion deciding to end the cycle. He's an alien and the source of all natural powers; our 'shards' are just that, parts of himself, distributed among the people of this world. The shards are meant to fight, to cause war and strife and conflict, and the Endbringers are tools to keep us continually on the back foot. The thing is... Originally, there were two Entities."

I'll give Piggot this: she thought quickly. I could see her connecting dots, and she probably got there faster than I would have.

"An artificial power," she said, and despite the situation, I could see a bit of awe in her. "You killed the other Scion and took that from it?"

"The Entities are enormous," I said. "This is maybe a billionth of the one we killed." I flicked my thumb against the glass of the vial, sending out a single ringing note. "Just as the Entities give us the powers that are worst for us, just as they deliberately create Jacks Slash and Blasphemies and Ash Beasts, I have the power to create specific powers... To create powers that lift us up, just as theirs tear us down. It gives a ready source of heroes with useful powers, you see. This formula was originally meant for someone else, but it still fits you, Emily Piggot--it's a power that will heal you, that will bring you back to your best self, if you let it."

"And that's your price," Piggot said, scowling at me. "You want me to take that vial, to become a parahuman and fight for you. I step down, I get out of your way, and you get to run roughshod over the PRT and Protectorate."

"Not quite," I said. "You take the vial, and then I show you Heir, the dead Entity. I'll tell you the full story, with all of the details I left out just now. Once that's done, you promise not to speak a word of any of it to anyone without permission, a promise that our perfect precog will enforce with extreme prejudice... And then," I said, shrugging, "that's it. Join us, join the normal Protectorate, become a vigilante, join the military again, leave all this behind, even oppose us--so long as you keep our secrets, you can do anything at all, Emily Piggot, and I'll accept it. I'm sure you won't be a villain, and that means the rest is details. I would like your help, but I won't demand it."

"That's your offer," she said, staring at me. "Either you wipe my memory and arrange my removal, or I gain a power, learn all the secrets of the world, and then do whatever I want."

"I know, I'm a ruthless negotiator," I said. "I'm sure you'd like a softer touch, but beggars can't be choosers." I held up the vial. "That said, the offer is entirely genuine, Emily."

"What do you want?" I tilted my head, and she shook her head slightly. Her arm swept out,
encompassing the room, the office, the PRT, the Protectorate. "Not with me, with all of this. What do you really plan to do with all your power? You..."

She trailed off. I didn't know what she meant to say next, but then again, it seemed that neither did she.

"I want to save the world," I said, without a moment of hesitation. "With the help of as many people as I can convince. Nothing more or less, Director."

"With people like that?"

"Oh, Alexandria is an asshole," I said frankly, to the hero's bemused eyebrow. "But everyone else I work with is fine, and that's really not a bad ratio, all things considered."

She had no reason to trust me yet, which just meant I had to take that task more seriously.

Emily Piggot expected me to stick to the shadows, to keep a fierce hold on my power and my secrets. In her eyes, I had to be stupid, greedy or both. I had to want something selfish out of all of this, and to put it above more important things. In other words, I had to be wrong. Small differences in the image she had of me would be reasoned away, just as my reveal of our timeline had been, just as the Chief Director's endorsement had been.

To win her trust, I had to shatter that image all at once. I needed to defy her expectations in every way, to keep her stumbling over missing stairs, such that she couldn't keep ignoring the contradictions. It wouldn't be easy, no, and it'd all come down to presentation... But Emily Piggot's greatest advantage over me was and had always been her lack of a power. The moment she took that vial, the battlefield would become one I was more comfortable with.

I'd already resolved to clear out crime in Brockton Bay, and Armsmaster wouldn't appreciate a reversal of that promise, even if turnabout was fair play--but for all my haste, I could probably still afford the detour. With a Director's approval and a strong accomplishment, I'd be in the strongest possible position to branch out from Brockton Bay.

If all that wasn't enough, if she really was too broken to trust us, then we would make her forget. I'd lose nothing but the power I'd given her, a tiny fragment of the Entity that wouldn't be much use against Scion. With that power in place, I'd have an easy way to remove her if necessary... And with my power, I was sure I'd see betrayal coming. Even if I didn't, we had Contessa, who already had Paths guaranteeing Cauldron's secrecy.

It might work, it might not, but either way, I'd have given her a chance. I didn't want to leave a scorched trail in my wake. Begin as you mean to end--the more I used Cauldron's power despite other options, the more I convinced myself that there was no other way, the more paths would close ahead of me. I had to try and show trust, even if it earned us nothing.

There had to be more to me than the Administrator, more than the girl that looked like Jack Slash. I wanted more than that from my life.

She looked at me a moment longer, then she stood.

"Fine," she said, biting off the word. "I accept your offer."

Considering how much we normally charged, she could at least pretend to be grateful.

"Excellent," I said, smiling. "Portal, patient's chamber."
We stepped into the room with the chair, the place I'd given out so many formulas already.

"Sit in the chair," I said. "You might want to use the straps... The empowering process isn't pleasant, and you might fall off if you thrash too wildly. I can offer you a jumpsuit, but this formula won't do a thing to your clothes."

"No to both," she said. I nodded, stepping forward, handing her the vial.

"Here."

For a moment, her hand tensed around the vial, as if she would dash it to the ground. Alexandria tensed, but I held up a hand.

Whatever she chose, I'd respect it, even if she chose Alexandria's alternative to death.

Emily Piggot watched the hand I'd raised until I lowered it again.

"Your power... It sees things in normal people too, doesn't it."

"With the right perspective," I said. "Hypotheticals. Powers really do tell you an extraordinary amount about a person, and Coordination has had countless cycles to learn." I tilted my head. "Not even going to ask what power that vial contains?"

"You said powers were chosen for people," she said. "To cause strife. They change us?"

"The Entities give us the powers that are worst for us," I said. "Ones that will drive us to self-destruction, push us too far too fast. I think I've mostly overcome that, and I try to do better for those I empower, but... I'm still a natural Trigger, you know," I said, voice heavy with irony, and her lips twitched just a little. "It does show. But you, with no natural Trigger, with that power? I think it'll be fine. You'll be given to conflict, but you always were, and you'll find yourself in situations where you want to use it, but that's the nature of all people with power."

"Then it makes no difference." She held up the vial to the light. She nodded, seeming grimly satisfied by something she saw in it. "I'll fight to stay myself, regardless." She unstoppered the vial, lifted it to her lips, and drank.

I took the empty vial, even as she began to thrash and convulse. The vision came, just as it always did, layered over the world the same way the web was.

*She stood at the head of an army, surrounded by crystalline beasts of every shape and size.*

Endbringers, I realized, seeing beings like Behemoth and Leviathan--creatures that weren't human and hadn't ever been human, custom-crafted with Empowerment. But of course that was the case. The Entities never created, did they? So they were tools of the cycle, not Triggers...

*With a word, the Endbringers flew and ran and swam through the air, all set upon the floating forms of golden light.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Alexandria, equally frozen. She was seeing her own vision... A memory of the Entities appearing, spreading the shards, a memory of the great plan and the bearer's own place in it.

*For a time, there was a war of all against all. For every beast that was struck down, ten more flew against the Entities. One Entity fought, great beams of golden light scything through the artificial titans, even as the other shielded, pushed them into each other, or slowed them down, controlling the*
The battlefield in a million different ways in every instant—but the Endbringers had their own powers, and they wielded them with equal ferocity. Behind them, the Lightbearer stood, grimly surveying, the only one of her kind there to fight. She fidgeted with a shining ring on her equivalent of a human hand, gathering her resolution.

But seeing Triggers no longer made me forget, and I had no idea why. Now I saw a different sort of memory in these visions—the memories of past lives, embedded in Coordination. Usually, I'd realized, it was the Lightbearer, that powerful previous bearer... But whether that was a function of recency or importance to the shard, I couldn't be sure.

Her plan came to fruition in an instant: the right Endbringers, put in the right place, the right powers at the right time. The field of stopped space and time snapped into place, a dozen different variations on the same theme overlaying and overlapping; within the space, they'd created a directional nullification field, letting powers go in but stopping them from going out, and a moment later echoes all across the spectrum overlapped with it to reinforce the one-way mirror. It was the product of long, painstaking, painful work, the absolute peak of Empowerment Coordination's freeform shard creation.

Attempt after attempt after attempt, and I'd finally gotten the memory that I needed to see.

But the Entities had a contingency in play. Her masterwork broke like glass, and then the Entities were there, behind her lines. Her personal guards turned, her last resort defensive net rose up in an instant, but they couldn't stop the beams of golden light. She raised her not-hands in an instinctive warding-off, not-fingers clinging tightly to the ring, and then--

The memory abruptly ended.

Oh, I thought, numbly. So that was that, then.

When I opened my eyes, Emily Piggot stood above me, a shimmering ribbon-sword of light tight against my throat. It was a brilliant green, the color of fresh leaves and new life.

It was oddly beautiful for something so deadly.

"Triggers incapacitate parahumans," she said, speaking with grim satisfaction. Alexandria tensed, and Piggot's smile spread; she raised her other hand, clenching it at the ready for another blade. "Bad idea, Alexandria," she said. "I do have a hostage... And I'm sure that this power can hurt you."

The strange sense of calm was still filtering through my veins; I felt oddly distant as I shook my head.

"It can," I said. "Her Adaptive Armory is an extradimensional power. Stand down, Rebecca."

Piggot stared down at me warily. "You knew I'd do this," she said. "You left yourself vulnerable."

I hadn't, no.

"Open, not vulnerable," I said instead. "Look behind you."

She turned. A tiny window was cut in the air, just large enough for the barrel of a gun. She flinched, just a little, before turning back to me.

"If you really planned to kill me, then I'd give up on you," I said. "If you tried to take the shot, you'd have died... But you're not that lost. I believed in that, and I still do." I looked up at her, ignoring the weapon at my throat. "So let's move on, Emily. There's things we need to talk about, and we're burning daylight."
She didn't. "Something happened to my body," she said, and I smiled faintly.

"Oh, good, that side-effect kicked in," I said. "Wasn't sure it would. See, one wonderful thing about those vials is, powers change the host. Sometimes, with people like you--with people like the Triumvirate and Hero--it decides to fix you first. I can't promise perfect healing, but regular dialysis should be a thing of the past, at the very least."

She stared at me a moment longer. Then the sword receded, Contessa's gun vanishing with it; Piggot hesitated a moment, and then reached out, offering me a hand up. I took it, standing, and the warmth of a human hand finally seemed to finally return me to myself.

"Come on, Director," I said, smiling; she tried to let go, but I kept a hold on her hand. "Follow me, and I'll show you all the secrets of this world."

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I dropped into a chair; Contessa was already there, at the tail end of one of her phone calls. She finished it out, then put it away, raising both eyebrows.

"It's time already?"

"I cut the rest of the day a bit short," I said. "Tomorrow's going to be a doozy, and it's hard to be too interested in training when you know it really is just busywork. I think I've convinced Director Piggot, so maybe she'll let me blow some of it off now."

She nodded, pocketing the phone, and waited expectantly. I watched her, tilting my head.

"'Path: Finding out whatever's bothering Taylor,'" I said, and for perhaps the first time, I saw Contessa react with genuine surprise. I shook my head. "No, I can't read the Paths off your shard, if you were wondering. Cold reading. Something's bothering me, you were waiting for something, and I had a feeling it wasn't a part of a preexisting Path, which meant it had to do with me. Working on not needing to lean so hard on my shard intuition when I'm dealing with people."

"Cold reading is more than worth your time," Contessa said, smiling more openly at me. "Well, now that it's out in the open, I suppose I can just ask."

"You could," I granted graciously, and Fortuna frowned at me. I laughed--it was sort of cute. Petulant, almost. "Better. Talking about this with Contessa is a recipe for paranoia."

"Well, I'm glad to have earned a little trust," the girl in the suit said, relaxing into the arm of the sofa. "But to be fair, talking about anything with The Path to Victory is a recipe for paranoia."

"Well, yeah, but I accepted that ages ago. This... is different." I sighed, turning sideways, slipping my legs over the armrest and letting my head loll back. It was uncomfortable, but it was uncomfortable in a way that anchored me to my body, made me aware of it. I spent so much time halfway outside myself that it was sort of novel. "I'm thinking about the final battle."

She nodded, slipping down on the couch, resting her own head against the armrest of her Cauldron-white couch. She wasn't wearing shoes, and she'd already draped her suit jacket over a chair, leaving her a lightly-colored dress shirt and dark slacks.

"The thing is," I said, eyes on the ceiling, "is that I can remember a bit of the last final battle, now, back when my Coordination and Dauntless's Empowerment made the Lightbearer. I suspected this before, but... As it turns out, she made an entire army of Endbringer equivalents and engaged both Entities head-on. She played her trump, was maybe even about to win, but they activated a
contingency... Escaped the cage, somehow. And then they just appeared on top of her, blasted through her defenses, and decapitated her entire army."

"I suppose that's a problem," Fortuna said; despite her calm words, she couldn't quite hide her alarm. "Are you worried that Scion will come after you, the moment that all this begins? That he'll connect the dots, and blame your shard?"

"Probably not," I said. "Thing is, the more I see of the shards, the more I see of powers, the more I think that Scion is less a person and more a program. Look at powers—who's more creative with their power, a street-level cape or Eidolon? Humans evolved to be problem-solvers because we're so much weaker than that which threatens us... But the Entities are individual hiveminds of incredible power and versatility, and at some level, I think they always were. They're not creative, because they never needed creativity—if it's a matter of power, they have power on every spectrum, and if they need to know what to do, they can look at the future. That's why they turned other worlds into testbeds for the shards, because they can't improve them the way we can." I stared at the ceiling. "But assume that looking into the future like that takes energy, and that the Entities are fundamentally stupid, at least compared to us. What's the simplest solution for simple problems, for a very basic mind? A matching list. And the Entities have to have fought each other, considering the sheer number of weapons they possess."

"In other words," Fortuna said slowly, "the issue isn't that he'll reason out that any one person is to blame... But, rather, that one of his scripts is, 'Kill the Master.' The moment any leader makes a difference, Scion will prioritize targeting them."

I nodded. "So we've got to decentralize. We've got to have a thousand plans, a thousand independent cells with a thousand different weapons, acting without any attachment to each other, such that destroying any single part won't unmake the whole. That's the strength of our division, even as his power is the strength of his singularity. We try anything else and we'll have lost before we even begin." I breathed out, long and slow. "The thing is... I think it'll still work better if someone's calling the shots, if someone sends in specific groups at specific times. The more independently we act, the more morale becomes an issue."

"And we already know leadership will likely trigger the Entity to try and cut the knot," Fortuna murmured. "I can see why you'd be reluctant, then... My power would make me good at that role, but I can't see Scion. I know it's difficult to put anyone else in a role that means certain death."

"What? No." I looked at her, and her own eyes returned from the ceiling; she cocked her head. "I wasn't talking about you."

Fortuna frowned at me, brow faintly furrowed; her head tilted, just a little. Then her eyes widened.

"It's what increases our odds the most," I said. "By that point, I'll have directed Protectorate forces against small-time villains and in training exercises, killed the Endbringers, maybe taken out other S-classes... I'll have gained experience and established trust, but more than that, I'll have real respect." I returned my eyes to the ceiling. "And it's what my power is meant to do, in a serious fight. I'll be as good at it there as anywhere, and considering our enemy, we need every advantage."

"But if you do, then you'll die."

"Yeah," I said. I stared at the ceiling. "Very probably. We can work on countermeasures, but he can kill any cape that can ever exist, if he wants it badly enough—with the sheer length of that battle, he'll get lucky sooner or later. Still, if I don't do it, and we can't beat him without my help, then we all die anyway." I tilted my head back still further, feeling the strain in my neck. "I'm not the kind of person who can just stand back, so long as I can still do something. So I'm probably not going to live to
Fortuna stared at me a moment longer before chuckling humorlessly. "No wonder you didn't want to have this conversation with Contessa." She looked at me a little longer. "And no wonder you were so willing to risk your life, earlier today. In the wake of that Trigger... For a moment, with all that noise, I couldn't see you. You really could have died, and there wasn't a thing I could have done."

That reasoning wasn't quite right, actually, but I still nodded. The silence stretched on.

"I wonder how you're supposed to feel," I said. "Faced with your own looming death."

"I don't think you're supposed to feel anything in particular. Different people are different." Fortuna kicked her feet on the edge of the couch, and I listened to the dull thump of sock against surface. "But how do you feel, Taylor?"

"Not much," I said. "I feel sort of bad for Dad, but that's it. It's just sort of an 'Oh,' feeling. That's what's left: I'm going to spend the rest of my life working, day in and day out, to save the world, and then I'm going to die before I know whether or not it all worked. 'Oh.'" I kicked one foot in a vague wave. "It all seems pretty unfair, but I stopped hoping for 'fair' ages ago... Not sure I ever really believed in it."

"I really have no idea what I'm supposed to say," Fortuna said; I looked down just in time to catch her turn to the side, her head against the armrest and her eyes on me.

"And I have no idea what I'm saying," I said. "So I guess that fits." I stared up at the ceiling. "I wonder if that's why my shard picked me: because it knew I'd probably die doing all this, and that I'd be relatively okay with that, by human standards. I wonder if that made it feel anything."

"I don't think 'shards' feel things, not like we do," she said. "For the most part, I think they just are."

"Seems right," I said. "At the end of the day, if it chose me, it chose me because I'm the kind of person who'll do this. I'm determined enough to follow this to the end of the road, even if the road doesn't go much further." I raised my hand, blocking out the ceiling light, looking at the glow escaping between my fingers. "For the dream I saw that day."

"You can blame me, if it helps," Fortuna said. "Even if I had good intentions, I'm still the reason you're here."

"I think you're a friend," I said. "That means something."

Contessa said nothing.

I took a deep breath, turning to the side again, pushing myself up to sitting. "Okay," I said. "Enough of that!" I grabbed the remote. "I need something nice and optimistic. What's next?"

Fortuna stood up, walking in front of the television. "Well, if you like RPGs, and you're looking for something more optimistic... Any interest in time travel?"

"Oh, I think I've heard about this one," I said. "Sure."

We started up the system. As the title sequence began to boot up, Contessa looked back.

"Taylor." She paused a moment, and even I couldn't tell if she was really hesitating. "I know you said we were done talking about that, but I want you to know. If you die, there or anywhere else, I'll make sure your people are taken care of. Your father, friends, boyfriend or girlfriend, if you ever
date--anyone you'd want to protect, I'll watch over them, keep them as they would be if you were still here. I won't leave you anything to worry about, once you're gone. I promise."

For a moment, I couldn't respond. Then I found myself smiling.

"That's all anyone can really ask for, isn't it?" I leaned back in my chair, controller in my hands, eyes on the screen. "Thank you, Contessa."

Her shard shifted, but she said nothing more.
Friday, two days since the empowering of Emily Piggot.

The Director stood beside me at parade rest, something in her bearing more military that it had been, like a soldier with her rifle in-hand.

That change in bearing hadn't gone unnoticed, it seemed; Brandish in particular seemed the habitually wary sort, and the change in a fixture of the city set her shard on edge.

There were two obvious things about New Wave, when they were all in costume: one, they were a great big family, a veritable sea of blond and brown and similar features, and two, they didn't have masks. I didn't mean that they'd taken them off--I mean, they didn't wear them, full stop.

Once, New Wave had been just that: an attempted revolution, a new way of doing things. Instead of having heroes hide behind secret identities, their real name known only to the people they worked with, they championed a more direct kind of accountability. Between their power and their new ideas, it had seemed like it just might work, for a little while.

Then the murder of a member in her own home had reminded us all that you only needed one asshole to unravel any utopian plan. Overnight, they'd become simply another group of officially recognized (if independent) heroes.

Brandish was the effective leader, also known as Carol Dallon; a hero and a lawyer. Lady Photon was her sister and second in-command. Their husbands were Flashbang and Manpower, and each of them had two children, Glory Girl and Panacea and Shielder and Laserdream, respectively.

If I hadn't realized that shards could reproduce, looking at New Wave all at once would have told me as much. They were a veritable sea of shard remixes--husbands and Panacea aside, every single person in that group had the same ingredients, if arranged differently. It was almost disorienting to look at, like a giant group of near-identical quintuplets.

"Thank you for coming on short notice, New Wave. I appreciate it."

"Such requests are quite rare, outside of Endbringers and other S-classes," Lady Photon said, taking over smoothly. I suppose she knew her sister at least that well, by now. "What requires all of us here, Director? I assume it can't relate to Panacea alone."

"That would be part of it," Piggot said. "As it happens, Administrator--" She gestured in my direction. "--also has concerns relating to the powers of most of your younger generation."

Brandish frowned. The rest of New Wave seemed surprised, with the notable exception of Glory Girl, in the back, who examined me with undisguised curiosity, and Panacea, who looked wary.

Glory Girl dated Gallant, didn't she? ...or Dean, I wasn't sure which one the public knew about. Either way, she should have known about me--and thus, I had assumed, so would her family.
And yet Glory Girl wasn't surprised, but most of them were. Had he asked her to keep a secret? I hadn't asked that of him. Was that due to his knowledge of her family? Or had he not, and there just poor communication there? Panacea had known... The two of them talked, at least.

Their family dynamic wasn't quite what I expected, then. I'd have to adjust the plan.

"Good afternoon," I said, ducking my head with a smile. "I am Administrator, a Thinker 9-Trump 3. My specialty is powers and the people behind them." I hadn't brought the mirrored mask today, and between my suit and my age, I could see they weren't quite sure what to make of me. "I'd like to offer a quick quid pro quo, New Wave. Due to the range and strength of my power, I've amassed quite a bit of specific information about the capes of our city, heroes and villains both. I'd like to assist your younger generation with a few issues they seem unaware of, and I'd like to offer you my information on the villains. In return, I'd ask that you take my advice seriously, and that you, Panacea--" I nodded toward us. "--assist us briefly. We'd like a health check on someone affected by a power."

"Is that so," Brandish said, frowning. "That last issue seems to be the most pressing." She half-turned, and Panacea nodded, the gesture small and tight.

The shard of the so-called 'healer' pulsed a baleful orange, something I'd only ever seen once--with Leet, whose shard was blood red. Most shards had no hue at all, only light, and those two were the only ones I'd seen that made me so uneasy.

"Where's the patient?"

Piggot raised her hand, and I saw a tremor run through the group. I could see them question it immediately--someone had attacked the PRT Director of Brockton Bay?

"To be more precise..." Piggot raised a hand in front of her, creating a brilliant ribbon-sword of emerald light. "...it's an issue with my own power."

The reaction before had been nothing, compared to this.

"She has an adaptive barrier power," I said, before they could say anything stupid. Piggot had already turned off the sword. "It sustained her when she should have died, around the time of her Trigger, at the cost of most of its strength. Unfortunately, though, you need to remove stitches before a wound can heal, so her health's been poor as a result. I helped with that much, at least... Without her barriers in the way, she does have something of a healing factor."

Mostly lies, naturally. Piggot could probably hold herself together with barriers, if she really had to, but not for long. Days? Maybe. Years? Definitely not. Still, it wasn't like Panacea could see any of that, and it was the sort of thing her shard combination could have accomplished.

Most importantly, it was the sort of lie that'd fit naturally into the world, because the Director's ill health was a matter of public record. 'Ah,' people would say, 'that's why she never had Panacea heal her'--and anything else would seem like a conspiracy theory. Panacea would see signs of healing, and that would only strengthen the story. It'd provide a minor scandal, a bureaucracy shake-up, and between that and the crime initiative we'd start soon... Well, it'd provide a good opportunity for me to vanish into some other city. With a few achievements under my belt, I might be able to start working without the Triumvirate's open support.

Alexandria would be less happy about the eyes on the rest of the PRT Directors. Something that had happened once could happen twice. Still, it'd benefit us to give Piggot a win, if she had to leave her post, and both she and the Director agreed that it'd do something for the damage I'd done (and would
do) to PRT protocol.

I had to rock the boat, but I didn't want to sink the ship. That meant walking a careful middle ground, at least whenever that was an option.

"You want me to make sure there's no lasting damage," Panacea said, and I nodded. "Nothing dealing with the power itself? Because I can't affect powers."

That was as much a lie as her insistence that she couldn't affect brains or that she was 'just a healer'; for all that most of the shards projected into countless alternate dimensions, they still had a biological interface inside of us. Even if she couldn't affect the shard itself, she could affect the depth and nature of that connection.

Still, no reason to contradict her just yet.

"More or less," I said. "Personally, while you're at it, I think it'd be great if you also helped her restore herself to fitness--"

"I'd rather you didn't," Piggot interjected.

"--but she'd say no even if you offered," I said, not missing a beat. "As you see."

"And after this meeting," Brandish said, "the Director will announce her resignation from the PRT."

She wasn't asking.

"Naturally," Piggot said. "A press conference is already scheduled on the matter. The PRT exists for the sake of the powerless, and I may no longer count myself as among that number." She crossed her arms behind her back once again. "If you have the power to act, and you do not, you are accountable for what you allow to happen. I do not intend to continue standing aside, if I may serve."

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye, catching hers. She looked back at me steadily.

We were still far from friends, it seemed, but she was amenable enough to our cause... Good. I'd have to make sure I didn't do any damage to that fragile trust, at least until I could pull her deeper.

"Then I have no objections," Brandish said. She turned back. "Does anyone else?"

No, it seemed.

"Okay, then," Panacea said, stepping forward. "Excuse me."

I watched her shard. The sullen hue of the shard darkened and pulsed as she touched the exposed skin of Piggot's neck, closing her eyes. It didn't take more than a few seconds, but that was enough time for me to understand. That shard was like a caged wolf.

"There was some residual damage and remaining inefficiencies in your system," she said a moment later, stepping back. "Along with the early stages of some other ailments. My power requires biomass, so for simplicity, I used a bit of your fat reserves. You should now be as healthy as you can be at your current weight."

Normally, I'd probably have read her manner as calm and composed. With context, she just seemed tired.

How much of that was the weight of her work and her responsibility, and how much of that was the frustrated fragment of an alien god whispering in her ear?
"Thank you very much, Panacea," Piggot said. I gave her an askance look. "Miss Dallon, that is," she amended, which got me more than a few curious glances in turn.

"Right, then," I said. "In return for your understanding, New Wave, and for the sake of both your family and the city, I'd like to start handing out advice. Do you mind?"

There was an exchanged series of looks. I waited, as did the Director.

A moment later, Brandish and Lady Photon nodded. I clapped my hands together.

"Good." I pointed towards one of the twins--or, well, maybe not twins, but the people with the most similar shards. "Shielder, you're up first. Can you take a step forward?"

He did.

"Right," I said. "The first thing you need to know is that our powers are, fundamentally speaking, answers, and our triggers are the question. 'With this capability, what can I do to resolve the situation'--but so far as I know, that structure only really applies to first generation triggers, like myself, the Director, and your mother." I tapped a hand against my chest. "Second generations and up, like yourself and your sister, are alternative answers to the same question, and they're not shaped as strongly to the individual. That's why your powers are related... But there's something important about those answers. They're all equally valid, you see, and every parahuman's powers are meant to operate independently. When there's a cape, like you, that seems unsuited to one-on-one combat, then that's a sign you're misunderstanding your own answer."

Brandish was the first to glance at Panacea... As I expected, she was the fastest on the draw. A function of intelligence or mindset? Either way, Amy noticed her mother noticing; in the moment no one was looking at her, she scowled at me.

Smart enough to realize I'd done that deliberately, at least.

"You do rather like to hear yourself talk," Piggot murmured, and Laserdream stifled a laugh.

"I'm a Thinker, it's part of the job description," I said, even as I smiled. The Director really was good at this--that had been an excellent distraction. Best not to keep their attention on that point when I'd already accomplished the goal. "So, Shielder," I said, crossing my arms. "You should know your mother and your sister's powers rather well. Tell me, how does your power differ from theirs?"

"Well," he said slowly. "My shields are stronger, my lasers are weaker, and I fly more slowly?"

"True, but all of that's basic," I said. "I want detail. For example, movement doesn't bleed your shields of their strength like it does theirs--you can keep up a full-strength shield no matter how fast you go."

That got me sharp looks.

"Well, there's that," he said, with a slight frown. "And I can make more of them... But my lasers have recoil, so if I fly and shoot at the same time, I slow down and my steering gets wild. I have to anchor myself first if I want real precision."

"Right," I said. "Okay. Let me give you a hint: your lasers aren't meant to be a weapon."

Glory Girl got it first, as I'd expected from the team Alexandria Package. Or, well, second, after Piggot--experience as a PRT officer did give her certain advantages with dissecting powers.
"Oh," she said. "He's actually more like me, right?"

"Basically," I said, with a nod, as I looked back towards the youngest male of New Wave. "Your name shouldn't be 'Shielder,' it should be 'Wrecking Ball.' Your 'flight' is for course correction, while your additional shields let you contain your lasers as you use them to fly--and since you can wrap them around yourself, and they're incredibly strong..." I clapped my hands together, then spread my arms wide. "The same materials, combined to create a power that you use totally differently. It's less precise, less surgical, but it's also capable of destruction on a much larger scale. Your main flaw is that, against humans? Fighting the way you're meant to will probably splatter them across the city. You're not going to have much cause to use it outside of Endbringers and other Brutes, so I suggest you stick to teamwork for now." I pointed at Glory Girl. "You do, at least, have another shield-based Brute to practice against--and you WILL need to practice."

"Shield-based," Lady Photon said slowly. She looked towards Brandish, then back towards me. "You're saying that our powers are related?"

"Sort of," I said. "You two sisters triggered at the same time, right? Or somewhere around there?" Two slow nods. "Right, thought so--you've heard of Mass Trigger Events, right? How a bunch of people can all get the same sort of power near-simultaneously? Brandish has the original shard, and you're the second-generation remix of it, sharing the same concept of 'hard light weaponry.' Laserdream and Wrecking Ball here are third generation shards from you, while Glory Girl's a second gen off of Brandish." I pointed at Glory Girl, and then at Shielder. "Hence why their powers are so similar--Glory Girl doesn't have the laser development, because Brandish's shard is tied more tightly to the user, causing Glory Girl to manifest the shields as a sort of exoskeleton. That's where the super-strength comes from."

She also had some sort of emotional aura, but so long as she wasn't consciously activating it, it seemed to wash off of me. The fact I was keeping my eyes on the web of light probably helped. I wasn't very eager to subject myself to even that limited version of it, though, considering how I'd reacted to Alexandria pulling a threat display.

"Cool to know," Glory Girl said, cocking her head. "Doesn't really make a difference, though, does it?"

"Your shield is invisible, but it's still a shield," I said. I tilted my head towards Shielder. "Ever seen his break? Yours is stronger, but it's not THAT much stronger. A good gun used correctly will take it down for a second or two." I touched my hand to my right holster. "With your permission, I can show you."

"Oh," she said, grinning; she stepped off the ground, floating a few inches upward. "Is that why we're in the power testing area? You want to make a spar of it?"

"We can, if you want to," I said. I half-turned, right arm facing her as I stood in profile, drawing a silvery Tinkertech pistol; it'd taken some doing, but I'd eventually convinced Kid Win to replace the ones I'd melted. (Couldn't blame him for his reluctance, with how long the first set had lasted.) With my left hand, I drew a knife, holding it up and pressing my thumb against the edge; as I pressed down, it released paint.

"Pistol uses real bullets, but the knife's blunt," I said. "We can score this to three points, if you want." I let the knife fall to my side, pistol resting down and forward. "Lady Photon, Shielder, Laserdream, if you would?"

They raised their hands, and I felt as much as saw the shields rise.
I nodded, then closed my eyes, beckoning Glory Girl forward. My right foot tapped a tattoo against the floor, knife drumming against my back leg, as I stood in my modified fencer's stance.

Jack Slash didn't use this stance. Jack didn't use any stance at all, and he never showed the knife until he used it--which meant that knife was always present, even if only in the minds of others. That unpredictability was part of his myth, part of the face he presented to this world. This, too, was mine: the variety of tools, the waiting stance, the air of unshakable confidence.

I'd see whatever she did, and I'd unmake it before the first blow was released. That was what it meant for Administration Coordination to really fight, whether it be with words or with knives.

"Ready when you are, hero."

Glory Girl rose up; I let my gun rise, tracking her, and she began to curve. She flew, faster and faster, circling high above the room; with the way she was moving, the human arm simply didn't have the ability to follow her all the way. If I turned, she'd move faster than I could, even if you never got dizzy.

She was taking this at least a little seriously, then. Good.

I didn't continue to track her. Abruptly, her shard shone; I was moving before she even started the dive proper. As she approached, I twisted aside, letting her pass by. Before she could move out of reach, I fired twice, lunging forward in the next breath.

When she stopped, she had a thin line of red paint across the side of her neck.

"Dead," I said, opening my eyes. I returned to my stance, Tinkertech gun pointing at the ground. "See what I mean? That barrier's strongest when no one you fight knows it exists, so they try to overcome it with pure power. They gather a big punch to bring it down, it comes back up, and all the while you seem invincible--but that only applies if you know what it can take. You need to learn, fast."

"You started dodging before I started diving," Glory Girl said, frowning. "Precognition?" She rose off of the ground again, expression set in irritated chagrin. "That's new."

"Shards are meant to fight--they show aggression very clearly." I said. "I'm not a real precog, but I do come by my rating honestly." I raised my pistol again. "Done?"

"Can't you tell? I'm feeling real aggressive, right now." She had a natural confidence, or else she was very good at acting; I couldn't see a single trace of doubt in her. "Come on, Administrator. Let's dance!"

Before, it seemed, she'd been holding back. This time, she blitzed me head-on, moving twice as fast.

I fired twice just as she passed, but my arm couldn't rotate fast enough; with a semi-automatic, I couldn't have hit her with a third bullet before she passed. She started curving the moment the bullets hit her barrier, passing behind and up; she touched the ceiling, then dived straight down.

The ceiling surface hadn't cracked, but I had a feeling that concrete would have. They'd really reinforced this place.

*Can accelerate/decelerate faster when she touches a surface--shield interaction? Yes. Spreads force evenly across surface, preventing sufficient damage to cause break, utilizing shaping to customize movement vector afterward.*
She'd touch the ground, then lunge directly for me. If I dodged her descent narrowly, she'd touch down, she'd reorient, and I'd be caught faster than my legs could move.

Caution would leave me helpless... And against a Brute, most people would be cautious. A surprisingly clever tactic.

Very similar to Assault--shared tactics across shards...? No. Learned tactic from observation of other host, shield manipulation offloaded to shard.

Interesting, but not useful. I focused.

When she dove like a falling star, I fired twice, up at an angle. The bullets whizzed past her narrowly, and in the next moment, she touched down and lunged for me. She stopped short with a careful application of flight, then flicked lightly against my forehead.

"Ha! Gotcha!"

"Not quite." Brandish spoke before I could, eyes on me. "Administrator. If you had broken her shield just before she hit the ground... You said it's the source of her strength and her durability. Without it, she'd have broken most of her bones, correct?"

"Definitely," I said. "At that speed? It might have even killed her outright, depending on where those broken bones went." I looked up at Glory Girl, meeting her eyes. "Even with Panacea here, I didn't want to take that risk."

She was struck dumb for a moment, mouth hanging open, but she rallied quickly. "But--you missed!"

"Wrong," I said, patiently. "I didn't hit you, but the bullets went exactly where I planned—one on each side of you. I don't miss. If I was anything less than perfectly confident in my accuracy—" (and if I didn't have Contessa to make sure I didn't murder a hero) "—then I wouldn't have taken the risk." I flipped the stage knife in my hand, tapping her in the shoulder with the back of my hand. "Take it from me, Victoria Dallon: you came very, very close to very real death, just now."

I turned around as she stared at me, walking to the other end of the arena.

"That was two out of three," I said, turning to face her again. "I win, regardless of how you do now, but ending it early's no fun. Want to try and earn that last point?"

"Definitely," she said, stepping off the ground. "Fair warning, Administrator: I'm coming at you with everything this time. When I hit you, I'm not going to be able to pull it. Even with Amy here, broken bones are going to hurt."

"I know," I said. "I'm at least that resolved." I raised the gun again. "You're strongest when you control the fight, Glory Girl—I'll let you have that advantage one last time."

"You're gonna regret it," she said.

I already regretted it. This was going to suck.

She took off, repeating the circling tactic from the first fight. I'd placed myself near a wall, and I ran, breaking for the center.

It didn't matter. She touched the back wall, bouncing off for the floor, letting her shield take the brunt of it even as she accelerated. She moved like a skipping rock, touching the floor again and again, the
constant contact and redirection giving herself the ability to turn on a dime. For all intents and purposes, she'd become a speedster Brute--and no matter how I turned, she kept herself at my back, keeping my gun out of play.

In a normal city, doing this would render an entire street unusable; this was the sort of tactic she'd dreamed up for anti-S duty, and she pulled it off even better than Assault. I felt almost honored to merit it.

Still, no matter how fast you are, you still need to see. She had no extra senses; I did, and I'd geared up to take advantage.

So as she approached, I dropped a low-powered flash grenade--big flash, little bang. As the barrage of light attacked our senses, I retreated into the web of stars, tracking Glory Girl. She veered into the floor again before she planned to, crashing, tumbling, but her shield held... And as she began to pass, I took a deep breath and prayed (to no god in particular) that the Path to Victory was working full-speed today.

And then, once I was absolutely sure no one could see us, I let Glory Girl clip my side.

Even in the web of lights, I could tell it hurt; I'd retreated far enough that all I noticed was the pain. A moment later, I found myself on the floor. I tried returning to myself experimentally, and then I immediately retreated back.

I had the worst ideas.

I don't know how long it took Panacea to get to me. I do know that she touched her hand to me, and the pain receded. I breathed in, and got a mouthful of blood for my trouble; I sputtered through it (former broken nose?), then took the tissue she offered me, wiping at my face. She gestured, and I blew my nose too, catching sight of bloody phlegm (definitely a broken nose).

Judging by the faint stickiness I felt in other parts of me, and the way some bits of cloth seemed to be dangling, best to assume I'd ruined this suit. No matter, I had replacements.

She picked me up (surprisingly strong) and turned me, propping me up against her arm and opening each of my eyelids--checking for a concussion? A part of her pretense that she couldn't work on brains, I assumed.

Still, that moment was the opportunity I'd been waiting for. I met her eyes, speaking just loud enough for her to hear.

"Our powers are alive, Amy," I said. I felt a little pulse of surprise inside her light. "Parasites. Shards want to fight, and they want to do new things, and you don't do either. Leet is what it looks like when a shard wants a new host. You need to start fighting or Tinkering, Panacea, and soon."

She dropped me, standing up and whirling on her heel.

My head hit the floor.

Ow.

"I see you're just fine," she said bitterly, stalking off. "You may want an independent assessment, I am not a credentialed doctor," she said, perfunctorily; a standard spiel, I assumed, because it contrasted really weirdly with her tone and attempted head trauma.

I pushed myself up, looking towards New Wave. "I'm fine, thanks," I said.
"What did you say just now?" Brandish was looking towards me, eyes narrowed to slits. "Did you arrange that just so you could--"

"Carol," Lady Photon said, a hand on her arm. "That could have killed her, remember. What sort of person would do that deliberately? We're just lucky that she seems to be fine!" She looked towards me. "Are you all right, Administrator? You should be more careful!"

"Yeah," I said with a sheepish laugh, pushing myself up. "Sorry about that... Overestimated my extra senses. Seems even I get disoriented when that sort of thing goes off right in front of me." I winced, looking towards Glory Girl. "I'm really sorry about that. Did I worry you?"

"Well, yeah," the hero said, with a shaky smile. "You really are okay, right?"

"I am," I said. "Trust me, I wasn't, I'd be asking for more healing... But your sister does good work."

She relaxed.

"Good."

I smiled back at her, looking back towards the rest of the room.

I had no idea whether that'd do anything about the rumors she sometimes used excessive force, but hey, I wasn't focusing on that. Multitasking has limits.

"I want to talk to you, Administrator," Carol Dallon said, eyes still fixed on me. "In private."

"Carol! Do you even see how she--"

My words to Panacea would stick all the more for the situation I'd delivered them, and with her power, I was pretty sure Glory Girl had seen worse. More than that, it'd go down on my combat record, make my apparent combat precognition seem a little less impressive; I didn't want any place I visited deciding I was a useful addition to their combat roster.

A controlled burn that passes the line is just a forest fire. Time to put this one out.

"No, no," I said, waving it off. "Don't worry on my account, Mrs. Pelham--you, of all people, should know how good Panacea is at what she does. It's fine... Besides, I've done with everything I wanted to do here. At least, assuming you all don't have any more questions?" I smiled at them, noting the shaken heads, then looked towards Brandish. "Good, then; if you don't mind, I'll put off that villains brief until tomorrow. For now, let's go, Mrs. Dallon. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have."

I walked out, and she followed me in silence. We walked a way, dropping into an unused meeting room. I'd left my phone on the table, along with my wallet and my keys, and I scanned my texts as I sat down.

By the time I looked up, her lips were set in a pensive frown.

"You knew," she said. "You knew that I'd want to speak to you privately in this situation. You took that risk, let yourself be hurt that badly, on purpose?"

"I did, though it was more complicated than just that," I said. "Between what I've seen of your shard and what I've heard of you? It wasn't that difficult to arrange. And between my shard's predictions and Panacea's power, I wasn't in that much danger. Despite what you expect, she relaxed a little once I dropped my mask; I suppose I wasn't the only person most comfortable facing a possible
opponent. "Let's get to business. In short, your daughter's in serious trouble."

"Amy," she said, not asking, and I nodded. "How so?"

"Our shards are alive," I said. "They're a kind of parasite--we're more creative than they are, so they attach themselves to hosts, note how we make use of the powers, and use that information to grow and branch out. They want to fight, they want to be used for something new... And when we die, they move on." I ran a hand through my hair, which was horribly tangled. "Shards pick hosts that will use the powers, and that's usually bad for us. Second generations--people with shards budded from existing ones--seem to be free from that, at least, and their Triggers are much less traumatic... So compared to we first generations, they're usually a lot better off."

"But Amy isn't," she said, staring at me. "Because she doesn't fight, and she doesn't do anything new. She just heals."

So she was a second gen. I'd thought so, but I'd still been blindly theorizing--her shard was nothing like the rest of New Wave, and a shard was a shard was a shard. With the original, there were tells; without, the differences between a first and second-gen were buried in the sheer sea of variation between shards. This time, I hadn't had an oddly similar 'parent' to work off of.

"Correct," I said. "She's a largely unrestricted biokinetic. That means she can knock out or even kill with a touch, and she could be a sort of freeform Biotinker, if she was so inclined. If she did either, she'd be fine. Instead, she's headed down the same road as Leet. Her power will eventually start actively attempting to kill her so it can move to a new host, as his is now. Shard rejection is rare and I don't have much data, so I can't tell you how long she has left, but I don't find that fact very reassuring. You need to do something, and fast."

"Can you prove it?"

"Depends on what you need," I said. "I can prove bits and pieces, but most immediately, all I can do is tell you who already trusts me. The part about shards being alive? Maybe a dozen people in the world are cleared to know." I opened my contacts on my official Protectorate phone, moving down to one particular number and holding it out. "I told Legend to expect a call from you. Tell him what I told you about shards being alive, and listen to what he says."

"That doesn't prove anything," she said. "It could be an imitation or recording."

"I expected you to be skeptical. Would you prefer a video conference?"

"Yes," she said, and I nodded, walking over to a computer resting in the corner. I logged in, booting up the projector.

"Let's do that, then."

Within the minute, a familiar masked face appeared on the screen. He held up a newspaper (today's date), then stood up, showing his office; he turned the camera towards the window, giving us a brief glimpse of the New York city skyline, then turned it back towards him.

Then he glanced to the side--I knew he had seen me, because he twitched, full-body, as if he had quickly strangled some larger response.

"Administrator," he said, voice as openly alarmed as his reaction was restrained. "Is this really the time? You look awful."

I blinked, then looked down at the tattered remnants of my suit--I was decent, but it was very
definitely damaged. I'd managed to forget.

For a second, I thought of making some bad joke about compliments to women, but it didn't seem like the time.

"Oh, right," I said, looking up. "Don't worry, Panacea was there. This suit's a goner, but I'm fine."

"If you say so," he murmured. "The body's all well and good, but the mind--no, I suppose this isn't the time." He took a deep breath, reorienting himself, before looking towards Brandish.

"Well, hopefully all that convinced you this wasn't a recording," he said, not quite managing to smile. "If not, well, there's not much more I can do at this distance." He looked towards me. "Administrator. What do you need me to confirm?"

"Shards are alive," I said. He nodded, looking towards Brandish.

"That particular secret is one we keep particularly close to the chest," he said. "We'd ask that you not spread that fact--even within your own family, if possible. The shards do appear to be harmless on their own, but we're concerned about reactions. We parahumans already draw a fair amount of suspicion in some circles, and adding alien parasites to that won't help us."

She dropped into a chair, eyes falling to the floor.

"I see..." She breathed out slowly. "I need time to think about this."

"Understandable." I looked towards Legend. "I'm trying to spread out 'verify my tall tales' duty out among you three, but you might have to do this again. Sorry."

"Hazard of the position," he said, waving it aside. "If that's all?"

"It is. Good luck with the rest of the day."

"Likewise." He paused. "And, please change your clothes as soon as you can, Administrator. It's... unpleasant, to see."

"I will. Sorry."

"It's not me you should be apologizing to." He sighed heavily. "Just, speaking as a father myself: don't let yours see you like that."

I had nothing to say to that, and I think he realized it; he nodded, as if satisfied.

The line went dead, and I walked over to the central table, taking my own seat. I yawned, leaning back in my chair, and closed my eyes.

Now that I'd been reminded of it, sitting in this ruined suit really was unpleasant, but I had a meeting to finish.

...Hmm. I'd need to call someone about the chair, wouldn't I?

Time passed.

"Mass triggers," Brandish said suddenly, and I looked up. "All of this. If I got my sister involved--"

"The shards have a kind of precognition," I said. "I can't say for sure, but I'd guess that the two of you were both chosen for a shard already ready to bud; it wasn't like she was an accident." I yawned
again, shaking my head. "Mmm, sorry, pretty tired."

"Can you just... not use powers?"

"Second or third gens, maybe," I said. "Everyone else is chosen because they'll want to. I'm not sure what's up with Leet; he's either a second-gen, or another Trigger introduced noise into the prediction... Uber, maybe? Probably that. I'm thinking about it, though, because it's a clue and I don't have enough of those." I looked toward her. "Besides, Legend already said it, didn't he? Shards are harmless if you just use them occasionally. If you wanted to be a hero before, no reason not to keep doing it now."

She nodded, eyes falling to the table again. It was some time until she spoke again.

"Shouldn't she have at least been warned first?" I looked up, blinking. "I mean," she said, hesitating, before she rallied. "If they want something out of us, if they can influence us at all... Shouldn't Amelia find herself wanting to use her power, in the ways it wants?"

"Oh, I'm sure she does want to," I said. "I can't say I'm sure why she doesn't do it. If I had to guess..." I let the silence linger, watching her. The effect of this would be all in the timing. "...I'd say she's worried about being a 'bad person.'"

She flinched, just a little, then went still. That was a hit, then... It seemed not all was well in that house. I'd thought that was possible, and seeing who talked to who about what earlier had helped narrow the list, but I hadn't been sure.

Then again, not everything was well in my house, either. Stones and glass.

The silence dragged on, and at last I sighed.

Brandish seemed to be like me: someone strengthened by conflict, who worked best opposite an opponent. If I antagonized her, she'd bounce back twice as harsh. Judgment wouldn't do me any good, especially when I knew so little. Before this, Brandish would have struck me as an overprotective parent, not a distant one.

Also, if I was being entirely honest, this was stupid and I wanted to move on to more interesting things. I didn't get this power to be anyone's superpowered therapist.

"Honestly, whatever you're thinking, get over it," I said, and she looked up. "The useful data here is, 'oh, I made a mistake.' Everything else that came after that is stupid self-flagellation. You've got better ways to spend your time."

"What do you know?" I'd given her an easy outlet for her negative feelings, and she sprang on it. "You don't know a thing about me or mine."

There was a hint of doubt hidden deep in her voice, which was professionally gratifying.

"I don't, and I don't care. My shard wants me to reorganize the whole Protectorate system, kill the Endbringers, and bring stability to the entire world, and I'm one of the few people in the world with a reasonable shot at each of those. From that perspective, a lot of problems--yours included--seem like petty bullshit. Gather a little courage and fix it; I'm sure you're already thinking of something that'll work."

"Most people can't contact the Triumvirate to solve their problems... Much less most Wards."

"Yeah, about that? I'm not a Ward," I said. "I just didn't correct your first impression. Full
Protectorate at 15, I report directly to the big three, and sometimes I even give them orders. Legend sits fifteen minutes of his day aside just in case he called, and you think he was humoring me? Of course not." I shook my head. "You really have no idea who you're dealing with."

That put her off-balance for a moment, which was really all I needed.

"But that doesn't matter." I propped my head up on one arm, waving the other vaguely. "Just do something for your daughter--I don't care what, just so long as it works. Even on the scale I work on, Panacea's ridiculously important. I don't know who she's a second generation of, but we don't get shards that strong very often, much less in such an important category. Please don't let us lose her to something stupid."

She opened her mouth, eyes on me. A lot of the frustration in her had bled off, and I could see her finding her feet again. She'd moved past self-pity, and that meant she was going to start finding things to do. As with most people dealing with uncomfortable topics, she'd first start with trying to make someone else do it.

"You could do more. You know more about what this 'shard' wants, don't you?"

"I could," I said. "But I've got plenty of irons in the fire, and I can't affect this as much as other things. Every moment is precious, and that means I delegate."

"Piggot hasn't announced her retirement yet... And Protectorate membership at your age breaks quite a few rules."

It wasn't a threat so much as a negotiation, at least as I understood her. Besides, I had a certain soft spot for people who'd go a little further for family--all the more if things were somehow difficult between Carol Dallon and her (adopted?) daughter.

Didn't mean I'd allow it, though. Fool me once, shame on me..."

"The last person to try that sort of thing," I said, "is about to announce her retirement. I wouldn't push your luck, Carol."

Armsmaster was actually more relevant to this, but 'I had harsh words for the last person to try that sort of thing' was a lot less snappy.

Brandish nodded, short and tight. "Understood."

Genuine, so far as I could tell, but I'd keep an eye on her. She wouldn't act impulsively... And whatever her problems, she seemed to take family and heroism seriously.

"Good. Thank you. With your views on public disclosure, I do appreciate you making an exception." I leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes. "In exchange, if I can ever do you a favor, let me know."

"I only know because you arranged all this to warn us. And now you offer me a favor for that?" Bitterness seeped into her voice. "I must look a mess."

A joke about my ruined suit probably wouldn't go over well... She really did have self-loathing issues.

"You look like a person with problems, same as most other people, same as every other cape. That's part of why we're chosen, and that's part of why we don't choose to walk away from all this." I stood up; I yawned yet again, shaking my head. "Right, sorry, I'm bushed--I need to get some shut-eye for
a bit before I get to the rest of my day." I pulled a card out of my wallet, sliding it across the table. "That's my number. Get in touch if you need to call in that favor, or if you ever think you've run out of options. Whatever you think of yourself, whatever you've done, you're still out there fighting." I smiled briefly, then turned toward the door. "That really does mean something."

A nap. Contact Armsmaster and see where we were. Scan the city again. Formula. A client meeting to administer another formula, and an initial meeting with another; had to check the wish list first. Dinner with Dad. Time with Contessa and Fortuna. Actual sleep, eventually, and I needed to finish another book before Saturday.

I had plenty to keep me busy.

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Saturday.

I dropped into the chair; once again, Dennis had shown up early.

"You look even more tired," he said by way out greeting, pushing the plate and the tea towards me. I gave him a grateful nod, picking up the cup. "Still recovering from that incident yesterday?"

"Guessing you heard that one from Dean," I said, and he nodded. Made sense that Glory Girl would tell her boyfriend. "It wasn't as bad as it looked."

"I'll take your word for it," he said, dubiously. Then he leaned forward, peering at me. "Apparently her mom's been a bit weird ever since you and her talked," he said, and I shrugged.

"For the better, hopefully." I clasped my hands around the cup, enjoying the warmth. I was spending a lot of time refining Number Man's prediction theory, off in the too-cool rooms where we kept the mined shards, and apparently the BB Protectorate thermostat was controlled in Boston. (It was a government thing.) Using air conditioning in February was heresy. "Chris doing all right? I'm sure Colin's been working him to the bone."

"Don't even get me started." Dennis rolled his eyes. "If I worked hours like that, I'd be on strike--and Kid says he's 'having fun'," he said, with finger quotes. "Hypnosis doesn't fall under Armsmaster's list of inventions, right? Right?"

"Probably not," I said, deadpan. I rubbed at my nose. "Heads up--you're going to have a new PRT Director soon. Maybe tell Aegis, since he's the team leader? With any luck, Brockton Bay's going to have a lot less crime soon, so it shouldn't make that much difference, but... Piggot's moving on to a new job."

"So that's what the press conference on Tuesday's about," he murmured, tilting his head. "Supposedly we're running security."

"Yeah, Armsmaster and the rest--me included--are going to be busy somewhere else at the same time, as it happens," I said. "I'll be within ten blocks of that press conference, so keep an ear on your comms, but security shouldn't be an issue."

"Didn't you have a meeting with her earlier this week?"

"Yeah." I took a bite of my sandwich. "And then with Armsmaster immediately after that, which, yes, does explain what's going on with both of them."

He laughed. "You're a real mover and shaker, aren't you?"
"Do people even still use that expression? I mean, what with the power categories?"

"Nope," Dennis said cheerfully, grinning wider. "And they give you this look when you do, like they're blaming you for making them realize that. It's weird for most people, remembering that powers are still such a new thing... They've been around all our lives, after all. Have to get to grandparents before you get people before it now."

That was the strangest part of all this, to me. How could people look at the recency of this, the structure, the rules, and not think it artificial? How could they just accept it, ignore it, go on without looking for the answers...?

Ugh, Thinker arrogance again. Had to stop that.

"And I'm sure they'll always be around, in one way or another."

"That means something, coming from you." Clockblocker smiled. "You know, you look just as tired, but... Compared to last week, you look a lot more confident. Feeling better now that you know you can fight? Gotta be reassuring, what with your amazing 'fight the S9' plan. It'd be embarrassing if you couldn't even throw a punch."

"That might be part of it," I admitted. "It's just, well, perspective. Talking with more people, doing more things, seeing the road ahead. Before, I knew my direction--but now I know the place I have to get to. That means something."

"Wow," Dennis said. "That... was a lot more serious than I expected it to be."

Yeah, he didn't know enough to get the black humor in what I'd said, did he?

"Still," he said. "I'm glad to be relied on, at least that little bit... It's kind of heavy sometimes, being the one that's not allowed to get heavy. Jester's gotta joke, or else something seems really wrong, you know?"

"I've got my own role," I said. "And it's 'act perfect.' I kind of know what you mean." I shrugged, looking at him askance. "But then again, I'm no one's emotional support. You've probably got it worse, in that respect."

He blinked at me. "Wait," he said, slowly. "'No one's emotional support'? You... do have friends, right?"

"At the moment," I said, "I have somewhere between zero, two and five, depending on your definition." I shrugged lightly. "And my Dad, I guess, but we've got sort of a crappy relationship." I frowned, shaking my head. "...wait, sorry, that was a bit much, huh? I've just sort of been bludgeoning people with the truth lately, it's a good way to put them off their balance. And now I'm doing it in normal conversation? Wow, I'm bad at this."

For a moment, he stared at me.

Then he started laughing, loud enough to get looks from the other patrons.

"You know," he said, leaning forward, arms crossed on the table. "It's like you've got two settings: 'teenage girl' and 'badass Thinker.' The great thing about watching you is when they bleed over, because left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. Which is good, because right hand is probably planning to take out the Yangban or something."

I raised my eyebrows. Really? The Yangban?
"See," he said, grinning, "that's what I mean. I mention taking out the Yangban, the parahuman group that has the rest of the world eyeing China nervously, and you immediately shift from 'embarrassed girl' to 'they are beneath me.' You've already thought of how you'd take them out, haven't you?"

"Honestly, yes. We barely even know anything about them, and they still piss me off." He looked at me, amused, and I elaborated. "It wouldn't be that hard, you know."

They were like some twisted mockery of Coordination, or maybe even an Entity, and a part of me wanted to destroy them for their sheer insolence. To kidnap capes, take their identities from them, force them to share powers, reduce them to some faceless part of a larger gestalt... That was the very antithesis of what my powers were, of what we had to be to defeat Scion, and I hated them for the massive waste it represented.

They weren't technically an S-class, but if I had to choose one set of people to take down out of pure personal pique, then they'd top the list.

"Fair," he said. He watched me, expression abruptly neutral. "You're okay with that? With being two people?"

"More or less."

"That's fine, then," he said. "Whatever you need to do." And then he smiled again. "Can't say I'm that different." He took a sip of his tea. "So--books. You did read at least one of my recommendations, right?"

"Somehow, in-between everything else." I paused. "Two of them, actually. You?"

"Of course." He leaned forward, eyes aglow with concentrated good cheer. "So, which ones?"
My first reaction to the new Velocity was surprise, naturally. The second was a moment of immediate satisfaction, the knowledge that even if I hadn't built this, I had enabled it.

The third reaction was a matter of copyright concern.

"Are we going to be sued by someone from Earth Aleph? Can we be sued by someone from Earth Aleph? I'm not up to date on interdimensional law."

"To be fair," Armsmaster said, crossing his arms, "there's only so many ways to do 'flight-capable metal-armored superhero.'"

"And it's not like I planned this when I made a red costume, way back," Velocity said. He shook his head. "That's why we had to make this purple instead."

If not for the way it caught the light, you might not have thought Velocity stood in armor at all. It was smooth and close-fitting, like steel spandex, cut close to the frame; even his helmet clung like cloth. He still had his original costume's racing stripes down his arms and his torso, but, well, that didn't make it look any less like an extended reference.

"I haven't had much use for this compound before," the Efficiency Tinker said. "It's more durable than leather, but not so much more... Heat resistant, but not especially so, not a strong conductor or insulator, and it's expensive enough that it's normally difficult to justify the slight increase in performance. All the same, from our tests, that bit of durability really does make a difference when Velocity pushes his field toward its limits. And he has no reason not to, in combat... Not with this armor."

"My field makes me and everything around me lighter and stronger," Velocity said. "And I can still understand you all, somehow, even when the world's so much slower." He pushed off the ground, and as he did, thin ports along his back and legs activated. He course-corrected, jetting backwards, flying in a quick circle before flipping once more and landing smoothly.

It was a shame Kid Win wasn't here for the first real unveiling of the suit... Piggot's press conference would be starting any minute now, and they had to be at the ready nearby.

"When you consider the integration needs," Armsmaster said, a slight smile showing through his professionalism, "there wasn't much room for controls. There's a minor learning AI in the helmet, and we've trained it to interpret his body language. It took nearly half a day of constant refinement, and there are details that still need working out, but he can fly reliably." He glanced at Velocity, and a slight smile tugged at his lips. "More or less."

"You're going to keep giving me crap about that, aren't you," the hero said, aggrieved, and Armsmaster nodded solemnly. "It was one time!"

"Dauntless requested that I bring it up again, should the opportunity arise." Armsmaster crossed his arms, the very model of sober consideration. "I take my duties as team leader seriously, you know."

Velocity gave him a dirty look... And then his shard glittered with something not-quite-aggression. "My only real problem is that my gloves look dumb as hell," Velocity said, and Armsmaster immediately scowled. His counter-attack had struck true, it seemed. "I mean, constant jazz hands? Really?"
"The injectors are on your fingertips, and the only place we could put the launchers was the space in-between your fingers. Full articulation would cause coverage problems with your Breaker field; if you need to hold something, initiate a selective armor purge."

"I know, but... Still. Look. Look at this! People are going to laugh at me! And with good reason!"

Armsmaster sighed, rubbing at his forehead, even as Velocity waved his wide-splayed metallic hands. From the first word to the last, it seemed they'd just retreaded an argument that was already old and tired.

"Truly we are in a Monkey's Paw situation," I said, my voice as dry as I could make it. "On one hand, you can fly, inject anesthetics that safely put down anything between 'infant' and 'Triggered elephant,' and fling iron ball bearings that could punch through an entire arms depot before stopping, provided they didn't explode violently first. On the other hand, people may laugh at you." I tilted my head, lips set in a pensive frown. "I thank the gods that you, not I, are burdened with such choices."

"I know," Velocity grumbled, "but--"

"Shut up, Other Robin," a cheerful voice said. I glanced to the side, watching as Dauntless approached us. "You get to go from 'hero' to 'superhero.' Don't sweat the details."

"I know, Robin," Robin Swoyer said, frowning at him. "It's just, I wanted this to be really cool, and... Jazz hands. This all just... suddenly went from 'completely awesome' to 'pretty cool,' and that sort of blows goats, you know?"

"Again with the goats," Robin Smith said. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

"I just like how it sounds, okay?"

"Do you."

"I mean as something angry to say!"

Armsmaster cleared his throat, and the two Robins turned towards him. "We have a meeting soon," he said. "Let's try to preserve some measure of dramatic atmosphere, shall we?"

"Nah," Assault said from the doorway. "That sounds boring." He gave Velocity a thumbs-up. "Nice suit! Looks better than I expected, given what you had to work with."

Armsmaster frowned. "The materials?"

"No, Armsy's sense of style."

"Restrain yourself, Assault," Battery warned, approaching from behind him.

"Thank you, Battery."

"If you burn our dear leader too badly now, he'll be sulking for the rest of the mission."

"..."

"I knew there was a reason I married you."

"Lack of any other options?"

"That too."
I glanced at Miss Militia, who had followed after the married couple; she was watching, and even with her flag-print scarf in the way, I could tell she was smiling.

"Are the team members always like this before a mission?"

"They are," she said. She chuckled softly. "After years of rotations, that is; our first Protectorate team was more dour. This is different, but... It puts me at ease."

"Me too," Triumph said, bringing up the rear. "And I do better when I'm nervous, so cut it out." He rolled his shoulders. "This is going to be a day we remember one way or another, I can tell."

That seemed like a trigger to start.

Today, we were going after the biggest criminal gang in the city.

"The plan's relatively simple," I said, and all eyes turned towards me. "From what intelligence we have available, we know that Empire Eighty-Eight has initiation ceremonies twice a month. They're a sort of formal elevation of promising new recruits from grunt to quote-unquote family, and it's also when they do in-group promotions. It's been about a month and a half since my Trigger, and in that time, I've noticed all their capes showing up a certain place twice, separated by two weeks each time. I checked the records, and there's been a complete absence of E88 crime at that time every two weeks, going back months and years--not enough to be especially noticeable any individual time, considering how much time criminals have to spend not committing crimes, but in the aggregate, it's distinct. As it happens, today's the next turn around the schedule."

"Must be some place pretty discreet," Triumph said, crossing his arms. "Somewhere in the docks? We've got plenty of old abandoned warehouses."

"No," Miss Militia said. Her eyes were fixed on me. "Not with that expression." She frowned. "Somewhere no one would see, plenty of space, multiple entrances..."

Assault snapped his fingers, pointing toward her. "Secret tunnels." He looked towards Battery. She nodded toward him and he nodded back, both of them looking towards me.

"One of the Endbringer shelters," they said together.

"Bingo," I said. "We've got four shelters, spread throughout the city... They were contracted at various times with various designs by varying contractors. No one wanted to put all the eggs in one basket, and we still don't know the limits of each Endbringer, so we haven't got much standardization." I reached into a pocket, pulling out a thin list and holding it up. Dollars, times, places, and names spanned the page, listed column-by-column in very small font. "I took an evening with some Thinkers I knew and followed the money. Most groups involved seem more-or-less legitimate, but there's one stand-out." I flipped the page, which had all of the same information, arranged in a diagram. "This shelter's construction was arranged by one primary contractor, with the subcontractors primarily providing power, water, and materials. Nothing strange with any of them. But if you follow the primary contractor and their staff and their other contracts, you start noticing that they've got a lot of European connections. Look even deeper than that, start digging through all of the public information available, and you start noticing shell corporations. Deeper still? You start noticing some serious irregularities... Like the fact that not all of these companies can account for where all of the money is coming from."

"Gesellschaft," Velocity said. "Fuck! Don't we check for that sort of thing!?"

"We do," Dauntless said, scowling. "Both in terms of finances and structures... Watchdog keeps a
very close eye on this sort of thing, and they're known to do so." He looked down at the paper a little longer. "But if they had a good grasp on the specific Thinkers and their domains, or if they were able to modify information as it passed through intermediaries..." He tilted his head. "The initial inspection is the most strict. So long as they got through that, they'd probably be fine."

I gave him an inquisitive look, and he shrugged lightly. "Dated someone from Watchdog once," he said. "Work came up, and he was very good at his job."

"And if they succeeded, then they'd reap the benefits of a discreet, heavily fortified shelter, funded by public money." Armsmaster took over, thinking out loud. "And Brockton Bay doesn't have a subway network. With the depth and breadth of powers available through Gesellschaft and their branches, it's quite plausible that they'd be able to create multiple entrances throughout the city."

Eyes turned to me, and I nodded.

"We're already checking for similar shelters in other cities," I said. "Today's operation will warn those branches that we've caught on... But it's difficult enough to conduct one sting, let alone one in every single city with a Neo-Nazi chapter. Right now, we'll take what we can get. Besides... Whatever trick they used to get something past Watchdog, we can't let that hole in security go unpatched for too long."

A round of nods. No one seemed particularly dissatisfied.

"As for this shelter, the number of secret entrances is relatively low," I said. "I checked. For all intents and purposes, there are only four that matter."

"Wait," Triumph said. "If there are Protectorate Thinkers who can do this sort of thing, why has this even been a secret this long?"

"The same way they got it past us in the first place," I said. "By knowing the exact domain of a few Thinkers and optimizing around that. Where they hid facts from certain eyes, I just assembled a wide spectrum of powers and used my power to get granular with them. Don't assume anyone else could get you this information."

Mostly because I'd actually gotten all of it from Number Man, with a little help from Contessa.

"We'll return to that later," Armsmaster said. Thankfully, he hadn't been wearing the helmet with the lie detector. "For now, let's consider our strike plan. Administrator, the map?"

He hadn't asked if I had a map before, and I hadn't told him I'd prepared one, but apparently he knew me.

Not well enough, though, because I had two maps.

"The shelter is here on the map of the city," I said. "Now, as I said, there are four tunnel entrances, here here here and here. I've inspected the floor plan of the shelter, here, and I believe that we're dealing with some sort of fake wall, here."

Which I knew because I'd portalled into the shelter earlier this week. It was a surprisingly intricate mechanism--maybe even Tinker work. It had very strict conditions for activation, but once it did activate, it did it quickly and soundlessly--enough that someone could possibly slip in and out of the shelter, even in the middle of an Endbringer attack.

"From here, the tunnels branch out--but you'll notice that all four radiate out from the same side of the shelter location. The purpose here is to allow discreet entrance, not to allow them to scatter in the
case of an attack. It's possible that they'll attempt to, but that's relatively difficult given the basically stadium-style floor plan. Big, circular pit." A round of nods. "Still... This does mean that we have two entrances. And, as it happens, our target is underground. Downhill."

I grinned, and as I did, the room's atmosphere changed. There was a charge here, now.

After the exercise against Vegas, it seemed Brockton Bay knew me well enough to understand how I worked.

"I'm thinking," I said, "that the best way to win a fight is to ensure it isn't one... And there's a reason this particular shelter isn't intended for use against Leviathan." I rested the list of companies against my mouth, hiding my smile even as it widened. "I think that most people don't realize just how vulnerable it makes you, when someone always knows exactly where you are."

---

Containment Foam is a miracle of technology.

A minor Tinker came up with (or, considering how Tinker shards worked, plagiarized) the basic idea: a super-strong adhesive foam that, due to general physical properties, would creep over and coat anything that touched a sufficiently large bubble of the stuff. The slipperiness of it would keep you from finding your footing, so unless you flew, you wouldn't have the leverage to do much damage once you were in a bubble. Even if you did, it was super-strong, so it'd take a serious Brute or Blaster rating to cut through it, especially when it was heat-resistant and nearly shock-proof... And the foam could be compressed to an incredible degree, such that a single tank could contain a deceptively large amount.

Unfortunately, it was a shard design, and Entities don't really care about things like 'nonlethality.' Confinement Foam wasn't breathable; anyone trapped in it would die, unless they could go without oxygen. And the Tinker was a villain.

It was a good thing that he Triggered in a city with a teleporter hero. That was in the early days, when Eidolon wasn't so worried about conservation, and if anyone could manage the right sort of Brute or Blaster rating, it was him. Slick was Birdcaged within the day. He was still there, and with his body count, he wasn't likely to step out any time soon.

For a while, Confinement Foam was just a PRT case study, one example of why villainous Tinkers always demanded your respect, no matter their record or their apparent specialty. A sample was locked away, just in case, and they put that incident behind them.

And then Dragon appeared.

A so-called Tinker Tinker, though no one was quite sure what her specialty was. (Yet, because I hadn't met her.) She proved herself, refining a number of old decommissioned hero and villain designs, and in time, she was given (reluctant) permission to study one of their more innocent-seeming catastrophes.

Within the week, she created and demonstrated Containment Foam, and PRT doctrine was transformed overnight. It had all of the properties of Confinement Foam, except it was breathable--and suddenly, non-lethal takedowns of most capes by mundane humans were possible in a way no one had ever imagined. Cheap, easily scalable, neither needing Tinker assistance nor maintenance to produce... In so many ways, the new form of Foam was exactly perfect for peacekeeping purposes.

So each and every Protectorate branch had goddamn huge tanks of it. They actually used a modified
sort of cement truck to pressurize and transport it over long distances; it was the sort of thing that got
a heavy hero escort, nearly so much as Birdcage trips, because if Containment Foam was so useful in
the hands of unpowered humans, what could a clever villain do with it?

I'd already cleared the procurement for this mission with Piggot; it was the sort of thing that would be
frowned on, the sort of thing that'd probably get a Director's feet put to the fire, but she was on the
way out anyway. It seemed that bullshitting this sort of paperwork still passed her ethical standards,
at least.

So we took four Containment Foam transport trucks, drove them to the main entrance of the
Endbringer shelter, drove them through the main entrance of the Endbringer shelter (it had a wide
lobby and great big doors inside and out, for ease of evacuation, so we didn't actually do that much
damage), and then we emptied their full contents into the middle of an entire underground circle of
Neo-Nazis. Due to the high pressurization, it flew out all at once, a deafening tide, sweeping up the
Empire's inside lookouts and carrying them toward the rest of our targets.

It all sounds very action-movie when I put it like that, doesn't it?

The transport trucks were the kind that beep when they drive in reverse, and we had to back them
into the lobby. Believe me, superheroes or no, that drained a lot of the dramatic impact.

Also, I only had a learner's permit, so I didn't get to drive one of the trucks. We were breaking the
rules anyway (I'm pretty sure you need some sort of special truck driving license for anything like
this and I don't think anyone in the team was certified), so I really didn't see why I couldn't.

Not that I had the time to whine about any of that, at the time.

"Hookwolf incoming, Kaiser breaking free!"

For all the strengths of Containment Foam, it's not that effective against people whose entire body is
a blade--but so long as they were focused on us, the rest of the capes were a non-issue.

Kaiser, who created blades; Menja and Fenja, who became giants; Krieg and Rune, both basically
telekinetic; Hookwolf, who shrunk into a core of flesh inside a great mesh of steel; Stormtiger,
aerokinetic hand blades; Cricket, enhanced senses and coordination; Viktor, a skill thief; Othala,
temporary power-granting Trump; Alabaster, time-based rewinding Brute--

A powerful team, by general standards. Very few villain groups had so many capes, even fewer
Protectorate teams did, and this was after a splintering of the Brockton Bay group... And they were
only a single cell of the greater Gesellschaft.

--of all of them, only two members escaped the roaring flood of containment foam, which flowed
until the shelter was very nearly half-full. Menja and Fenja had tried to grow, to let others climb
above the sea, but that took time and we hadn't given them any. Krieg could have stopped it, and
Rune could have slowed it down--but Dauntless had dropped Rune on his first teleport, and Velocity
had used the hidden entrance to blitz Krieg.

(Velocity had insisted he take out that particular Nazi himself, just for that pun.)

I'd told them where each and every member was, I'd told them exactly what would happen, and I
hadn't been wrong. The rest had just come down to surprise and overwhelming force.

Hookwolf came for us, and Dauntless reappeared, meeting him head-on. The steel wolf's first charge
crashed into Dauntless's shield, and a moment later, the Arclance sheered effortlessly through a steel
leg. The sea of metal adapted quickly, reforming and darting around toward me and Triumph,
seemingly weaker targets--

Then I raised my Tinkertech pistol and fired directly through the pulsating mesh, striking a window opened only by the damage Dauntless had done.

The shot of Armsmaster's tranquilizer hit him like a ton of bricks. Even as he staggered, I raced past him; Dauntless shielded me from Hookwolf's drunken swipe, and then I was in the flooded theater.

I got there just in time to watch Velocity hit Kaiser like the fist of god.

There was a great steel crash, a purple blur slamming into Kaiser's shielded face, and the steel-armored 'emperor' was sent skidding across the surface of the containment foam sea.

Wait, Velocity couldn't make a fist in that armor, right? He'd complained about it and everything. Had he just...?

A blade rose up from a gap in the crowd, hooking into metal armor, pushing him up above the clinging bubbles, and then there was a gunshot crack: Velocity's fist--wait, correction, his hand--had flown forward towards the blade, and he'd released two bullets with it. The force of his superhuman punch was added to the force of the launch, already accelerated by the lowered mass within his Breaker field; the moment it left, the mass of the two bullets increased many times over, and the parts of the blade they struck weren't destroyed so much as disintegrated, the fragments of blade and bullet sinking harmlessly into the foam sea.

As he fell down, Dauntless appeared. The Arclance moved, shearing through the surface of Kaiser's armor, exposing skin--and then Velocity was there next to him with a five-finger touch.

The leader of Empire Eighty-Eight dropped.

Before he could sink into the foam, Assault appeared from the tunnels, skipping across the surface of the foam with a quick series of touches. He tapped Kaiser, and as the armored leader of the Empire flew, Assault tapped another bit of foam. It flew faster, catching up and coating him in mid-air; when the leader of the Empire hit the ground, the containment foam cushioned the impact, sending him rolling harmlessly into Dauntless's shield.

Assault landed next to me as I finished twisting away from the criminal-turned-missile. The hero raised both arms and cheered, turning towards all the sections of an imaginary adoring crowd.

"Eight-point-one," I said.

"Ah, the Russian judge," he said, shaking his head with a sigh.

"You're not even old enough for that to have been a thing. Also, anyone not me would have had a very bad time just now."

"I had faith in you!"

"Ow. Less force on the back slapping, please."

"Don't be such a girl."

"Reconsider your phrasing, Ass. Quickly."

"...yes, dear."
"Good," I said, reaching out to shake her hand. "That'll do. If you ever want more than that, let me know."

The Blaster Purity, formerly of Empire Eighty-Eight, nodded slowly, eyes on the contact card in her hands.

Another of our constant coordination problems: a former villain, pushed to reject the organization that had pulled her in deeply over her head, who had turned to vigilantism with her circle--and only gone after the Azn Bad Boys. Regardless of the reason, the heroes hadn't even noticed her change of allegiance, only that the Empire seemed to have spread out.

Without the blinding light, without the roaring power flying from her hands, Kayden Anders (nee Russel) looked very small; she was short, mousy and tired. I wondered how many people would see that, through the shrouding halo of her reputation as a fearsome enforcer.

I'd verified that she really was out, and the fact that she and hers weren't captured with the rest of E88 would add a little more weight to the tale.

There'd been a small window to act. In another world, with another woman, I might have been able to announce her assistance with the rest at the second press conference of the day, to add a little more weight to the story... But she'd chosen to continue working independently. We'd say as much today, and that would be that.

I looked one last time at the boy sitting with us; his expression tensed, but he still met my eyes.

"I can't sense people that haven't Triggered yet," I said. "But I'm sure you have a shard, so I want to warn you. You may have thought about it before, romanticized it, thought that powers would make things better for you... If only a little." He didn't say anything. "They won't," I said clearly. "All our powers do is make us more ourselves, both the good and the bad. They're a floodlight, throwing everything we are into stark relief, shadowing over all the details. Be careful that you don't lose yourself to that, Theo Anders."

Kaiser's son stared at me a moment longer, then nodded jerkily. I nodded back, then slid a second business card his way.

"Whenever that day comes," I said, "if you're not sure what to do with yourself, tell me, and we'll talk options. I won't trap you or restrain you, because I don't need you. You're replaceable, and I mean that in the best possible way: I'd like to have your help some day, but I don't mind if you go your own way."

After a moment, he nodded, closing his hand around the card. I nodded back, turning and leaving.

I reached for my phone, tapping out a quick text to Emily as I walked.

Then I stepped into a stairway, checking up and down, before opening a portal. I stepped through into my office, and a moment later, I received a text.

'203'

I entered the Rig through the specified empty meeting room, walking down the hall a ways. I knocked on the door of another room.

"Hey! Good to see you," Aegis said, a warm smile crossing his unmasked face; all of the Wards and Protectorate members were all together here, entirely out of costume. Wards were sitting with Wards, Protectorate with Protectorate, each along one side of a long table. "Assault was just telling us about
"I'm sure you're a better storyteller," I said, smiling.

"Right," he said. "So, anyway, as I was saying, Miss Militia, Battery, Dauntless, and Armsy each took a truck, while me and Velocity infiltrated through the underground tunnels. The little ones--" He said, pointing at me and Triumph. "--took shotgun on two of the trucks. Now, Triumph here is used to being the new guy and never getting any of the glamorous jobs, but Administrator here? When we said who would be driving, she just got this really annoyed expression for half a second, like, 'Are you shitting me, this is my awesome plan and I don't get to drive?''"

All eyes turned towards me.

"To be fair," I grumbled, "that is a totally legitimate complaint, because I'm pretty sure we were already driving without appropriate licenses."

"Lies and slander," Assault said, without missing a beat. "And if you look you will find all of the appropriate permits on record, which are totally not fakes we quickly commissioned when we realized that someone might try to look that up."

"If we were going to bother with forgeries, we could have also lied about who was really driving."

"Lies and slander," he repeated, more loudly, and there was some scattered laughter. "Also, you're the only one of us that looks fifteen."

"And we were in costume," Battery said. "Even if we were wearing PRT gear over it. Didn't want to take risks if we somehow got pulled over." She panned a look over the room. "Wasn't someone supposed to explain that to her?"

Glances were passed around the room, before the Protectorate members--Armymaster included--all looked towards Triumph.

"Hey! I had nothing to do with this!"

"You're the new guy," Assault said, very patiently. "Everything is your fault. Anyway!" He cleared his throat loudly, looking back towards his audience. "So, while Velocity and I went on foot, they drove to the shelter. They pulled over nearby, pulled off the PRT gear, pulled on masks--"

"It's starting," Armymaster said, and we all turned towards a TV in the corner. It was brought off mute, bringing the PRT's meeting hall into view.

"Damn, didn't get to finish," Assault grumbled. "Thanks for the distraction, new guy."

"Why am I still the new guy, anyway!? Administrator just joined!"

"We like her more."

Triumph glanced around the room. The Protectorate members all nodded, very seriously.

"...oh, fuck all you guys."
Laughter finally won the battle. Assault cheered in quiet triumph as money changed hands (Dauntless and Velocity had made some sort of bet?), while most of the other Protectorate members smiled. Of the Wards, though, only Clockblocker seemed to take my sudden good cheer in stride.

"Told you," Dennis said, as the others looked towards him. "We all wear masks when we work, you know? And she doesn't, mostly--so without that, she draws a sharper line. You guys just haven't seen her out of costume yet."

For a moment, there was silence, interrupted only by the sounds of the starting press conference.

"Wow, you're already writing poetry about her," Chris finally said. "You must have it bad."

"Wha--" For a moment, Dennis flushed, before punching the Tinker lightly on the shoulder. "Hey! I was trying to be serious!"

"Yes," Carlos said sagely, the leader of the Wards hiding a smile behind his hand. "And you're a man, Dennis. We aren't allowed to be deep unless we're trying to impress a woman. If you're only just now learning about sexist double standards, then you have a lot of catching up to do."

"I thought it was cute," Missy said innocently, and as the youngest member spoke, Dennis's face twisted in agony. Dean sighed, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"That was very impressively timed, Missy, but please save your psychological attacks for our enemies."

Dennis shot up from where he'd started to slump onto the table. "Wait, she did that on purpose!?"

"Duh," Sophia grumbled, from where she was staring at the TV. "Keep up, idiot."

The Wards all stared at her. After a moment, she glanced back, then turned back to the TV, her scowl only intensifying. I snapped my fingers softly before anyone could speak up, and as the eyes of the other Wards turned towards me, I shook my head.

If she was participating in friendly banter now, even lightly, then best not to draw attention to it; if Shadow Stalker became an actual part of the team, it'd only be to the good.

Emily Piggot walked on stage, and the faintly audible murmurs of the press intensified. I couldn't blame them. Earlier in the day, the Director of our PRT had appeared on TV, revealed her powers, and announced her situation and impending resignation, with the intent to eventually become a hero--and then this, a second press conference in the same day. The expectation, voiced or otherwise, was that the second would somehow trump the first, and where did you go from that?

The first rumors regarding our attack against Empire Eighty-Eight would be just starting to circulate. A success on this scale would seem outlandish, impossible; it was against the rules of stories and storytelling for the heroes to so suddenly triumph so completely, and so no one would let themselves believe it, any more than they'd ever questioned Jack Slash's success. People believed in narrative more than they ever believed in reality, and the crime-ridden state of Brockton Bay had been The Way Things Are, displaceable only by something on the scale of an Endbringer.

That was fine. The fact that the rumor had been out there, and that they'd so casually dismissed it, would only amplify the effect of this announcement. This was a day the people wouldn't soon forget. And if they refused to believe it now, well, it'd soon stop being a matter of choice.

...everyone was looking at me, for some reason.
"If that isn't a face you can trust, I don't know what is."

"Yeah, I'm kinda starting to see something in those 'Jack Slash, except a hero,' comparisons."

"...you know, speaking as a Ward, I'd like to register formal concern that one of our local heroes has been compared to the leader of the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"It was a professional compliment."

"I don't believe so, unfortunately... The first time, at least."

"It happened more than once!?"

"Shut up, guys, the Dir--Miss Piggot is starting to talk."

"Wow is that an unfortunate address. Just keep calling her 'Director' until she gets a cape name."

"Right, right."

"Assuming she doesn't follow Administrator's lead and go with 'Director,' anyway."

"...you know, she might just pull a Clockblocker with her name, if people make too much of a fuss."

"Still proud of that!"

"I know that this is unusual," Emily Piggot said, having finished the initial padding of the speech, and we all began to pay attention in earnest. "Earlier in the day, I announced my imminent resignation--and yet, here I am again, with another announcement." She chuckled, shaking her head. "I assure you, that situation has not changed. Rather, I am here for rather happier news."

She half-turned, and the screen behind her began to cycle through images: the flooded shelter, followed by one-by-one mugshots, each a split-screen with a picture of a villainous cape in costume. Murmurs rose in the room.

"I," she said, turning forward again, "am here to announce the capture of the white supremacist villain group known as Empire Eighty-Eight--all of Empire Eighty-Eight."

The murmurs rose higher.

"Those of you who are particularly acute," Piggot said, not raising her voice, "will notice the absence of several known E88 associates: the Blaster Purity, Master Crusader, and Changers Night and Fog. We have confirmed, to our official satisfaction, that these villains have left the main organization behind--for approximately the last quarter year, they have been operating as independent vigilantes. We will continue to monitor the situation. Should they continue their path away from crime, we will extend them the same courtesy we extend all other such capes."

Piggot folded her hands behind her back, standing at parade rest.

"And thus," she said, "with the defeat of their full cape roster and a significant number of their mundane supporters, captured during one of their so-called 'initiation' ceremonies, we have come to announce our victory. As of today, we have broken the back of this foul 'Empire' within our city."

The voices swelled and rose, cameras flashing in the room, and she remained silent. Soon, the reporters present began to call out questions, even as Emily Piggot stood, head bowed, eyes closed.

A full minute passed, and she said nothing. In time, the questions died, the voices grew silent, and
the flashing cameras stopped. The silence dragged on, and on, and on--

"Did you hear their voices, people of Brockton Bay? Did you hear their questions, people of the world?" Piggot opened her eyes, looking up, and her eyes seemed to pin the viewer in place through the camera. "In all that speech, in all the rising voices of our city's reporters, there was not one word of celebration, not one congratulation for an extraordinary achievement--nor was there a word of condemnation, for all that we've lost, because we have allowed the looming shadow of villainy to rise above us for so long. No, not at all. All I heard, all you heard just now, was fear."

She shook her head slowly, back-and-forth, then leaned forward, hands rising to clench along the sides of her podium.

"'Are you sure?' 'How can that be possible?' 'What does this mean for Brockton Bay?' 'What measures are you taking against retaliation?' 'How will this impact our readiness against the Endbringers?' To us, to all of us, this has become normal. In a major United States city, it has become accepted that villains rise, claim parts of our homes for themselves, terrorize our citizens, impact our industries and livelihoods, and should they refrain from excessive murder, we allow it. Their defeat becomes strange, and their retaliation becomes a thing that we fear. Remember those words and those fears, citizens. We don't intend to let you hear them much longer."

The reporters didn't speak up again, and I couldn't blame them. Somehow, over the course of those words, she had stopped being a bleach-blond overweight woman and become a force of nature.

"There will be those who try to tell you that this means nothing," Emily Piggot continued, straightening. "That there are others with the same loathsome 'cause,' in other cities such as our own; that the great shadow of Gesellschaft will rise to drown out this new light. They will speak of power vacuums, that other villains will seek to claim territory. They will tell us that there will be consequences, that we have brought only pain for the citizens of Brockton Bay, that our city will become the stuff of cautionary tales and nightmares."

"And I know," she said, "that there is reason for that fear. The death of Hero, the first leader of our Protectorate; the destruction of the Tinker Sphere; the Quarantine Zones, sitting like scars on our great land; all the lives lost, each and every day, in the shadows and in our streets. We have known pain, all of us, and that is a lesson humans learn well. But if nothing is done, then we know that the day will come when continuing to flinch away will end everything we care about. I cannot tell you how that end will come; I cannot see the future. I know only that it shall." She shook her head.

"There are those who tell themselves they have done their part with half-meaures; there are those who have already given up; and there are those who hope for a hero above heroes, someone stronger than Scion, who will end this without the need for our action. All such people mistake our weakness for powerlessness, and so they urge some form of surrender."

She scoffed, shaking her head again, short and sharp.

"To those people," she said, fixing her eyes on the camera again, "I say this: the darkness can be broken! The sun rises, and the long night will end, because we will end it--but without our action, without our sweat and tears and blood, that shining day will never come! Life," she said, voice rising, swelling, "was not born to give up!"

She pounded the podium, once, and the sound echoed through the room.

"And so we shall not. This is not the end," she said quietly, turning away; with the utter silence in the room, the words still carried clearly. "I will not, we will not, let it be the end. With the time remaining to me in my post here, with the authority I still possess, I intend to see this through to the end. There will be a time, when all is said and done, when people ask where the tide began to turn--and I intend
for the answer to be 'Brockton Bay.'"

I don’t know who began to clap. I don’t know if it was even just one person.

All I know is that it began as Emily Piggot disappeared from the stage, and the roar of applause continued, echoing faintly, even as the feed ended.

What was at the core of Emily Piggot? Righteous anger. She was the kind of person who stared straight at all the darkness of the world and rejected it, and who drew strength from that anger. That was why she had joined the PRT, and it was what had kept her in after her injury... But without the freedom to act on her own, with her only weapons protocol and procedure and time, forced to watch as the world slowly decayed under the assaults of villains and S-classes and Endbringers, that anger had festered. She had blamed powers, rightly so, and soon that blame had spread to the parahumans--to people who were victims, in their own way. And in time, she had become the Director I’d met, behind that desk that day.

Her post was so very little in her eyes, so much less than she wanted, but it had been what she’d had left, and by the time Panacea arrived, she could no longer trust parahuman hands. Alexandria had destroyed that last refuge, and I’d taken advantage. I’d thrown back the curtain, shown her the system, and given her an enemy to hate without reserve, even as I’d handed her a sword and shield and marching standard. She had resisted, but in time, she’d accepted it, and she had agreed to fight... Because, at the end of the day, Emily Piggot was a warrior.

She knew now that we parahumans weren’t to blame for what Scion's system did to us, and that would help her move past her unmerited hatred.

...that part of it she could see, at least. In time, the fire that sustained her might burn out the last of the rot in her heart.

Or so I hoped.

"Her power," I said, to the sudden silence from the turned-off TV, "is what I'd call 'Adaptive Armory.' She adapts to the enemy. The first time, her shield will break like glass, the second time it'll tear like paper--but it only ever grows stronger, and the sword is the same way. She could cut clean through an Endbringer, if she stayed in the fight long enough."

It was what she had needed. When she’d lost all the anchors of her world, an adaptive strength at her heart had given her a foothold, and the power had responded to that. The more she endured, the farther she had to climb, the stronger she'd be for it.

"Funny," Gallant murmured, and I glanced back towards him. "A little like Lung, isn't it? A dragon and a knight, both in the same city."

"I'm sort of worried about announcement baiting in villains," Vista said, biting her lip. "But, well, it's a really obvious trap, isn't it?"


"The heroes will want to maintain this, if this becomes a rallying marker," Kid Win said, as if to convince himself. "We should be fine."

"Either way, in the short term? Sounds like a damn big achievement," Clockblocker said, grinning. "We've got one hell of a celebration to get to!"

If only.
"This was the easy part."

Only when all eyes turned towards me did I realize that I'd spoken. For a moment, I considered it--what did they really need to know?--before I decided to be honest.

"This is going to freak out a lot of people on the shadier side of the law," I said. "Brockton Bay's had crime problems for ages, right? And yet Piggot chose this moment to reveal that the Protectorate somehow managed to defeat an entire organization of villains. More than that, what's left of them is on our side now."

"So long as there's some criminal minority to beat up," Sophia spat out, and I nodded.

"Fair," I said, and surprise flickered across her face for a moment. "Still, consider the optics. Over night, everything has changed; we have a victory on a scale we haven't had in ages. Even the Triumvirate have crime problems in their cities, and we've declared that we seek to end it entirely here." I looked towards Armsmaster. "If we were doing this without me," I said, "you'd have started with Lung, and for good reason. Velocity can clear him out with one tranquilizer, if Lung hasn't escalated far enough yet--but I told you, he's like a conflict-coiled spring, and he knows he's on the chopping block now. He'll push right up to dragonman the moment he thinks there's a fight, and the more time we give him before we strike, the faster that process'll go. And he doesn't have a kill order yet, so all the second-easiest options are out too."

I looked around the rooms; the looks were uncertain, now.

"Yeah," I said. "And that's not the really ugly part. Without Faultline here, without any of the nation's nomad villains in town--" (The Slaughterhouse Nine being the most famous, but there were still The Teeth and smaller groups of The Fallen, among others) "--and bearing in mind that Uber and Leet will run for the hills? We've got two groups left: the ABB and the Merchants. Neither's very cape heavy compared to the E88, but they have a lot more in the way of thugpower. They've already got mostly bordering territories, at the moment, but the real problem is the personalities involved." I sighed. "You see, the Merchants are bottom-feeders and Lung is always hungry for a fight."

"Meaning that if we try to attack the Merchants, Lung'll jump in," Velocity said, rubbing at his eyes.

"And if we try to attack Lung," Dauntless continued, "they'll do the same, because that's their only shot at winning. Provided they don't just leave town, anyway."

"Lung's too proud," Armsmaster said. "He won't even consider it."

"And it's a miracle losers like the Merchants got a foothold at all," Triumph said gloomily. "Cornered rats bite."

"I'm more concerned about Gesellschaft," Miss Militia said, crossing her arms. "They do have teleporters... It's not improbable that such an attack will invite larger retaliation."

"So, basically," Assault said, voice blase, "we're looking at a giant villain clusterf*ck, with chance of development into an even bigger one."

"And we can't call in outside aid, not after a declaration like that," Battery said. "Or the villains outside of town will consider us weak. We do have Purity's ex-villains, but coordination would be poor..."

"And it'd look bad," I said. "Which is a concern, considering Gesellschaft. They're large enough to consider an entire bureaucracy, and they are an ocean away. But," I said, holding up a finger,
"there's nothing saying that their US affiliates won't act, and E88 had the strongest ties to them. They normally wouldn't bother, but a defeat on this scale is a humiliation, and they're already having problems abroad. If we mess up at any point, they might use that as a pretense to shift their focus."

"Guess there's a reason no one's ever managed to clear out a city," Aegis said, speaking into the sudden silence.

"Yeah," I said. "Which is why we're going to end this quickly." I clapped my hands together. "Time is our enemy--the more time they have to plan and organize, the better they'll fight; they can rationalize this away, can shake their heads and sneer about how the E88 just had numbers, can say that the massive scale of our attack just meant we got lucky."

I paused, and then I smiled.

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow, they'll still be afraid."

"...okay, I'm starting to see the comparison now," Kid Win murmured.

I looked towards the Protectorate, ignoring him. "The Merchants come first," I said. "Mush, Skidmark, Squealer, Stain, Trainwreck--two weapon Tinkers, one Changer-Brute, a conveyor belt Shaker, and an emotion-affecting Blaster-Master. Oni Lee will probably jump in at some point, too, so we'll have a teleporter who likes suicide bomber strategies. That's going to be what everyone except Velocity does." I pointed at him. "Velocity, your job is going to be to punch Lung in the face. Repeatedly. I don't necessarily expect you to take him down, but you're going to be assigned to keeping him busy."

"On one hand," Velocity said, sounding slightly dazed, "that's terrifying. On the other hand, that's also incredibly awesome."

"What about the goons?"

I nodded towards Dauntless, acknowledging the question, then looked towards the Wards.

"To some degree, the Protectorate will be handling that," I said. "But if you're willing to take the risk, Wards? Then I could use you." I hid my mouth with my hand, affecting a suddenly chipper tone. "It'll probably be safer than an S-class fight!"

"I was about to say yes, you know," Clockblocker said. "And then you said that."

"Yeah." Kid Win's eyebrows climbed into his hair. "Your girl-who-is-a-friend is crazy, Dennis."

"I know," he said, not missing a beat. "Isn't it great?"

We began to hatch a plan.
Wednesday afternoon, in the Protectorate pre-mission prep room.

"It's strange to see you with the mask," Clockblocker said, by way of greeting. "First time, since that first meeting."

"Same, actually." I closed my eyes. "Looks like the Wards are all nervous," I murmured. "Suppose I can't blame them."

I'd learned that type of shard-light by watching Triumph over the last two missions. It seemed nervousness was close enough to fear for my shard to pick up and important enough to distinguish, a similar not-color in a different not-shade--because people who were nervous and people who were afraid both tended to make dangerous mistakes, but only the afraid would lash out. It seemed that my shard was only any good at picking up dangerous emotions.

When I cracked open an eye, I saw him still facing me.

"Any advice on helping them with that, Taylor?"

Was he testing me?

"Gallant is feeling nervous mostly because the others are," I said. "Empathy, bot h in the shard and non-shard senses. Draw him in and give him something to do and he'll be fine. Judging from how much time she spends looking at him, I'm guessing Vista likes him, so send him towards that sub-group while you handle the rest. Shadow Stalker is still on the outside but she seems be working her way back in, so give her something to make a sarcastic comment about while you're over there."

"Basically fits with what I was thinking," he said, and I had a feeling he was smiling behind the mask. "I'll go handle that, then."

I nodded. "I'm counting on you, Dennis."

There was a moment of surprise in his shard, and then he was off.

It would have been nice to know if that had made him happy.

I walked to a workbench near Armsmaster. The Tinker nodded at me, I nodded at him, and we returned our attention to our gadgets. He had two halberds, and he was checking over both; I pulled out my pistols and their oversized magazines (was that even the word, with how these were constructed?), checking for damage or unnoticed manufacturing errors in each of the parts, then moving on to my knife. It was the same sort of stage knife that I'd used against Glory Girl, edgeless, its inner chamber filled with Armsmaster's contact anesthetic.

We were planning to engage a group of villains that included a teleporter. Strong odds were that I'd be using it.

By the time I finished, Armsmaster was checking our communicators. One of them was different than the rest, and he handed me that one.

"This is more high-powered than you're used to," he said. "By default, it receives all communications--more like Dragon's model in Endbringer fights. If you need to receive or send selectively, do like so. You have two groups programmed in, along with communications to each of
the individual members."

"I did read the manual," I said.

"Tinker regulations," he said, shrugging lightly. "You understand."

I did now. They'd made me sit through another, more specific class on that, after I'd broken authorization rules against Team Vegas.

The stage knife was sort of a 'no rule says dogs can't play basketball' thing; so long as the anesthetic itself was authorized and the device itself was obviously harmless, well, no one was allowed to complain. It'd taken some work to get the right sort of pressure sensitivity on it and to create channels for the anesthetic to flow into a target, especially since I couldn't get Kid Win or Armsmaster to help without turning it into a 'tinker device.'

Shadowy conspiracies were just so much more convenient with this sort of thing.

I started going through my miscellaneous equipment, and soon enough, it was time.

We gathered together. I looked towards Armsmaster; everyone else, Armsmaster included, looked towards me.

"You all know he's still in charge, right?"

"But you'll be directing the battle plan." Armsmaster crossed his arms. "It's your place to explain it."

"Right, then," I said. No helping it.

"You all heard the upcoming flow of events yesterday." I stood up, head panning around the room. "And at the end of the day, I can't give you any more certainty than that. The Merchants will cluster close together, because at the end of the day, they're cowards. Don't dismiss them, though, because a cornered rat is dangerous. Lung? He has confidence, but more than that, he has an ego: if we attack the Merchants, he'll want to make an entrance, all the more if it looks like we're prioritizing the bottom feeders over King Dragon. That window of time is our main advantage. In that time, Wards, Protectorate, we need to do as much damage to the Merchants as we can. The longer this is a two-on-one, the longer it's two gangs against us, the more unpredictable this will be, and the more likely it is that some no-name thug gets lucky."

I gave them a moment to let that sink in.

"You've heard my briefs; I've told you everything about the villains you need to know. You know all the heroes in the city, and we're not going to get help from Purity's group. The PRT will not be coming, because the more bodies we bring into this mess, the more likely it is that someone will die. This isn't an S-class fight, so don't expect the Triumvirate or Scion to save us. The odds may seem daunting, and they are--but I know what we can do, and what they can do, better than anyone in the city. I wouldn't start a fight unless it was in our favor. If you all perform, if you live up to the potential you've shown, we will win." I gave that a moment to sink in, looking around the room.

"The natural thing to think," I said, "is that all that was a pep talk. It's not." I shook my head once, short and sharp. "If I've been of any use to you, then I ask that you believe that what I have told you is true, that it was simply fact. Let yourself trust in that, and trust in the others who stand with you. Give everything you have in the opening moments, and know that the moment the situation changes, the moment you need to know about the Merchants or Lung or Oni Lee, I will be there."

I held up the communicator on my wrist.
"I will hear everything you say," I said. "I can't afford to micromanage you, no, but I will give each of you orders and priority targets en route. If you don't hear me say what to do, defer to that information, and defer to your leaders on the field. Our advantage lies in our agility and individual power, even as theirs lies in sheer numbers... And if that sounds familiar, yes, we are playing Endbringer today."

That startled a laugh out of a few people in that sea of masks.

"If we do this right, we'll be the only ones who know the outcome was ever in doubt," I said. "And I will be doing everything in my power to ensure just that."

I walked forward.

"Come on, heroes," I said. "Let's ensure today goes down in history."

They all followed after me.

---

Emily Piggot, soon-to-be-former Director, joined us as we entered the docks.

"I thought we weren't bringing any PRT members along," Clockblocker quipped. "Yet we've got one geared and armored right here."

"The PRT," she said, "does not put parahumans on the front lines." She rested a hand against her chest. "But I've never thought much of costumes."

It should have looked ridiculous: PRT gear was military, a sort of variation on SWAT armor, and they didn't exactly recruit plus size. She wasn't carrying a gun or Foam tank, and the black armored vest wouldn't exactly do much against the sheer mass of our enemy.

But green light flowed through the hands she had resting at her side and on her chest, casting eerie shadows over the alleyway and over her helmet, and aesthetics no longer seemed quite so important.

"I," she said, quite calmly, "will be handling the guns."

"Like," Kid Win said slowly, "all the guns?"

"Yes."

"Much appreciated, Emily," I said, into the silence.

"Wait, really?"

"Yes."

We kept walking.

As we passed one of the warehouses, I turned.

"Assault," I said. "Quickly, please. I'm already regretting this part of the plan."

"Right," he said, visor failing to conceal his wide grin. "Thank you for flying Air Assault, ma'am. Please keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle, and--"

"Shut up and do it, Ass."
Assault picked me up in a fireman's carry, and then we were airborne. It... wasn't pleasant.

He dropped me off on a warehouse roof, and while I took a moment to recover, the rest kept going.

As they walked, I saw Vista's shard light up in momentary surprise. Piggot's shard pulsed along with it, then the others as she alerted them, and then they all returned to a state of more passive readiness.

She had to be seriously on edge if her range was extending that far, in light of her emotional modifier... I considered saying something, then rejected the idea. She'd consider it patronizing, and besides, the others knew her better than I did.

"You're near the warehouse," I said. "Up and over to your left. Squealer and the rest of the Merchant capes are inside, the mundanes outside. Do you see them yet?"

"Not ye--"

Now, I didn't see this part myself, being on the roof, so I'm going largely off of Armsmaster's on-suit camera and my own shard vision for what happened, but...

In short, it seems that by some law of cosmic irony, they saw the gang lookout right as he saw them--and right as Armsmaster was answering me. He yelled a warning before the team could put him down, and then the fight was on.

As I'd guessed, the thugs had largely gathered together. There's something to be said for the element of surprise, and that's why you'd spread out, to allow for more advanced tactics involving flanking or ambushes... But that's the sort of thing you do with a calm head and a steady heart. They had grouped together, reasoning to themselves that it was all about the advantages of massed fire, of protection in numbers, keeping us from picking them off group-by-group.

In truth, they'd just been afraid, and these weren't men with military training. And that made this much simpler.

On the roof, I heard the sound of a gunshot, followed by a sound that sounded like shattering glass in the same way that a footstep sounds like a stomp. It was a soft crinkle, a sifting, as if someone was running their hands through a sandbox of glass.

Shards were malleable--they had to be, to ensure they could adapt to every type of host, to ensure that the expression of the power wouldn't be too much for them to handle. Both situation and host would alter the ultimate expression of the power, giving them something they could use to solve their problems, giving them something that would work well with the host's mindset.

Formulas were no exception. For all that the calm environment of the lab would remove situational pressures, I'd seen every formula shard I'd given shift to better suit its circumstances. Emily Piggot's had changed more than any other I'd seen.

Then there were many more gunshots, and behind the popping-fireworks sound of the heavy hail of bullets, there was that same soft shifting-glass sound, over and over and over.

I'd created a shard for someone who wanted to be the vanguard, who wanted to lead the way into battles, to stand against the unknown or unknowable and triumph. With that man in mind, I'd made a sword and a shield for a hero, the sort of figure who would inspire others. That shard had been a true counterpart to Lung, for all that it was much weaker: more the weapon of a human than a monster.

But that wasn't the sort of weapon that would suit Emily Piggot, and so the resonant barrier-sword had shifted to suit her unconscious image.
There was the sound of rising shutters, an engine roar--one of Squealer's ridiculous vehicles, no doubt, something like a monster truck going through a goth phase, twice as tall and twice as wide and therefore many times heavier even before you considered everything else she'd stapled on top of that frame. She and Skidmark were on it, it seemed, racing down the street towards the group. The thugs had stuck to the center, and so the great vehicle simply drove around them.

The shard I'd given her only had so much processing power, and so it only had so much room to adapt around her requirements. She sacrificed its speed, forced it to evolve more slowly, limited her ability to grow during a fight... And in exchange, she had gained a second sword and a second shield, each of which would adapt independently from the others.

She would not grow quickly with any conflict. If she misjudged, if she faced an unexpected enemy, if she was forced to fight alone against greater numbers, she would die. She had accepted that--and in exchange, she had gained the ability to prepare, to tailor two swords and two shields to destroy any specific enemy. Today, she had spent hours piercing and bashing her barriers, slicing through steel and stone, all to perfect the tools she would need.

And so, when that great vehicle bore down on the Protectorate and the Wards, she simply raised her hand. Even as Skidmark's power threw the vehicle forward, moving at incredible speed, she focused, the light flowing from her free hand becoming a shimmering sword. She twisted, sword flying through the air. In the moment before impact, the ribbon-like blade glowed brilliantly enough to light up the entire alley.

I had asked her, earlier today, what name she intended to take, and discovered she already had one on her mind: 'Valkyrie.' Many would laugh, think it a thumb in the eye of the former Empire Eighty-Eight, an appropriation of the same mythology they had taken up as their own. Others would laugh in an unkinder fashion, thinking something about 'big-boned women' or 'ancient standards of beauty.'

In truth, that name was a regret, a curse given form. Her power was a surgical scalpel that could be honed to take the head of any enemy--but only once that enemy was identified. And that meant that Emily Piggot would only ever take the field after good men and women had already died.

The thin blade sheared up and down as it passed through the vehicle, Valkyrie weaving it around anything that began to slow it down until it passed cleanly through. Her shield shifted, and as the remnants of the vehicle slammed into it, stoppable force met immovable object.

Say what you will about Skidmark, but the perpetually-wasted petty thug knew his power well: the moment the truck began to crumple against the barrier, the moment he and Squealer would have begun to fly forward by the force of impact, he managed to throw up an equal-and-opposite field on their seats and all the parts behind them. With a horrific scream, the rest of the truck tore itself free, slamming itself flat against the barrier. The rear end of the truck floated in mid-air a moment, their forward momentum somehow cancelled out in a way that didn't rattle them. And then, with a second stronger set of those movement panels of his, Skidmark managed to launch the both of them out of their seats to fly toward one of the rooftops.

During the initial hail of gunfire, Shadow Stalker and Aegis had fallen back, circling around, using the buildings for cover. (Judging by the way she flew, she'd taken my advice when it came to costuming.) And so, when everyone's eyes were caught on Valkyrie slaying the great metal beast, the two of them fell upon the rear of the Merchants mob.

Vista's shard shone. In the next moment, the rest of the group was next to the Merchants--and then they weren't. Even while fleeing, Skidmark had brought up one of his conveyors, sending his men back, giving his men more time.
"Circle around, Wards," I said. "Aegis, Shadow Stalker, keep up the hit and run. Protectorate, Stain and Mush and Trainwreck incoming!"

"Squealer and Skidmark fleeing," Armsmaster said. "Towards another vehicle?"

"In all likelihood it'll be another ram, maybe with guns," Piggot said dispassionately. "I will handle it."

"Right. Focus on eliminating the capes. You have maybe five minutes before--"

It seemed I'd underestimated Lung. I'd expected him to prioritize a fancy entrance, something that would showcase how he was already transforming.

"Oni Lee inbound!"

I hadn't expected him to do the smart thing and send the teleporter ahead.

That meant that just as the two heavies of the Merchants and their best distraction came in, the Protectorate had Oni Lee appear at their rear.

"Names are his targets! Valkyrie!"

With my warning, she was able to twist aside, dodging the knife he'd attempted to slide into her kidney. She slammed the flat of her stone-cutting sword into his head, knocking him back, and then he dissolved into ash. She didn't miss a beat, raising her shield even as another hail of gunfire roared forth from the gathering of mundane Merchants.

"Dauntless!"

Oni Lee appeared, and Dauntless disappeared; the next moment, the hero appeared behind the villain and stabbed the Arclance straight through, and Oni Lee dissolved into ash.

"Armsmaster!"

He was taking on Trainwreck, armored Tinker to armored Tinker; the scrap-based Tinker (another formula cape; he was literally made out of his Tinker devices?) had constructed some sort of massive pile driver, and Armsmaster was doing his damnedest to destroy it with his halberd. He didn't have the freedom to react, so Velocity reacted for him, thrusting a five-fingered touch into the teleporter's chest--and through it, as Oni Lee dissolved into ash.

"Miss Militia!"

She was using rubber bullets, keeping Stain from focusing. He was sort of like Gallant, only focused entirely on negative emotions--he made you feel worthless, empty, vile, and he didn't project through anything as crude as blasts. He just stared at you. That made him more than distracting enough for Oni Lee to try to take advantage of... But Assault caught the latest clone in the head with a steel slug, and he dissolved into ash.

"Assault!"

Assault dropped, and a knife swung through the air his neck had just occupied. The hero hit the ground and bounced, legs kicking up through another goddamn teleporter clone, which dissolved into ash.

"Battery!" I said, and the moment he appeared there, he crumbled into ash on his own, moving away
before she could retaliate.

Good—he'd heard me, each and every time. I hadn't been quiet.

I felt him appearing on roofs, checking high places, circling further and further. He'd find me soon enough, but while he was searching, he wasn't hassling the Protectorate. We still had a little more time until Lung hit the field.

Valkyrie advanced towards the gang. They continued to fire, sheer numbers ensuring someone was always firing, all seeming to hope that the shield would soon fall. Most shields would have, Dauntless's included.

Some of the ones closer charged her, and she swung her steel-cutting sword; the ribbon curled around the shield and past it, cutting through both guns and bullets and slamming harmlessly into thugs, sending them staggering sideways. So long as she was cutting fifty-fifty attuned and not-attuned, it wouldn't change focus, and she wouldn't have to worry about killing anyone. Among the group of mundanes, Aegis and Shadow Stalker darted in and out, punching or slipping through walls of abandoned buildings, flying up and down, using the anonymous press of bodies to make themselves difficult to see and so spread fear; a bullet or two hit Aegis, but passed cleanly through Shadow Stalker.

And then the rest of the Wards were on their backs, and it all descended into chaos—but it was a kind of chaos that the Wards could control. Clockblocker used great poster sheets of paper to create mid-air barriers, and Vista curved the shots of Gallant and Kid Win around it.

Assault and Battery took Mush, the trash-shape Changer; Armstrong and Triumph took Trainwreck; and Dauntless and Miss Militia handled Stain. Velocity, meanwhile, flew up, eyes scanning for his own target.

"Lung approaching to your three! He's already a dragon--may have wings!"

"Roger." Velocity took a deep breath. "Velocity engaging Lung!"

"Administrator engaging Oni Lee," I said, as I felt him appear on a roof top near me... And then he pulled a pin.

Oni Lee appeared, disappeared, appeared, disappeared, appeared, disappeared—and the three fragmentation grenades appeared around me in every direction, too many to kick, too close to run.

"Dauntless! Shield on me!"

The hero obliged without question; I was just within his teleport range. Shrapnel pinged off of the barrier, but the roof and the shield both held.

(Good thing that *everything* he cloned began to turn to ash when he teleported again; three full-strength grenades would have left Dauntless without that defense for a few minutes.)

"Return!"

He did, and then I turned, knife meeting knife. Oni Lee was stronger, but I had a gun; he appeared behind me just as I fired, and the duplicate burst into ash.

29 bullets left.

"A, B, he's trying to bait you in. Careful!"
--or so my intuition told me, interpreting the dancing lights of shards in conflict, and I spoke out the words without thinking too much about it. I needed the rest of me to focus on the fight right in front of me. A month ago, I couldn't have multi-tasked like this, but Contessa had made me strong.

I twisted around his thrust of the knife, and the now-duplicate dropped it, reaching out to grab me. I pierced it through the heart, turning to fire, but I'd aimed for the head instead of center-of-mass; he was able to move, and the bullet just skinned his cheek. (28.)

I heard the great crack of Velocity's accelerated rounds and the furious roar of a dragon. Lung was indeed flying—and Velocity was trying to destroy his wings.

"V, he can fly with fire!" He was pulling a grenade again. "No point! Anesthetic! Hit him in the face!"

"Roger!"

*It probably wouldn't work very well when Lung had transformed so far, true, but it might slow him down a bit.*

I kicked the grenade, and as the duplicate tried to grab me, I pulled his arm, slamming him into the second now-duplicate. Oni Lee appeared at my back as I threw myself on the ground; the grenade flew just over the edge of the building, the low shrapnel blocked by its lip. (Four grenades left.)

"T, that sound attack worked well, keep doing that!"

I rolled around Oni Lee's attempt to stab me, then pulled my arm back before he could stomp my wrist. I brought the gun up, firing (27), then managed to kick my way to my feet—in the process stabbing another duplicate. He appeared at my side, and I dropped the gun, reaching out. Even as I twisted around the knife, I managed to grab a pin. (Three grenades left.)

He hadn't registered my movement as a threat, and that meant the grenade was on the real Oni Lee's bandolier... And it would keep appearing with him, no matter how many times he teleported.

He tore the grenade off, tossing it away—and I managed to catch him on the chin with a rising elbow. The now-duplicate staggered back, and I turned, throwing the knife.

It was a stupid gambit, a rash attempt to capitalize on the opportunity, and it shouldn't have worked.

And it didn't.

(I'd practiced for a while, yes, but throwing knives is hard.)

I did have an extra knife, but I probably wouldn't have the time to retrieve it. Damn. I wasn't nearly good at hand-to-hand to keep Oni Lee off me without it.

I managed to retrieve my gun before he recovered. I turned, firing a bullet up at the sky (26), just as Lung came into view, already two times larger than any normal man, more dragon than human.

That bullet didn't do much to Lung, but it did make Velocity turn around. I registered surprise in his shard, and then he was flying toward me. Whatever advantages Lung had, super-speed wasn't one of them, and it took him a moment to react.

Oni Lee's knife missed me, but I didn't have a knife ready to ward him off; his jab caught me on the chin, and I staggered back. Oni Lee appeared at my back, knife lancing out.
It didn't do him much good, though, because that's when Velocity backhanded him. A moment later, the flying Oni Lee fell apart into ash.

Oni Lee reappeared on the roof, still staggering from the part of the blow that had landed before his teleport. I fired at him (25), and my other hand pointed. Oni Lee reappeared, but Velocity was already there.

One five-fingered touch, and Oni Lee dropped.

 Unfortunately, Lung was already flinging a fireball.

"Dauntless! Shield on me!"

Once again, the hero appeared. The fireball dissipated harmlessly, and as it did, I heard what sounded like a helicopter, in the same way an asthmatic smoker's wheeze sounds like someone breathing.

A helicopter? Squealer and Skidmark... Position matched the direction of the sound.

"Velocity! Get that chopper! Try not to kill them!"

"Roger!"

"That's not her name, V!"

"Not the time, D!"

Lung was flying towards us.

"Behind him," I murmured, and Dauntless nodded, vanishing. A moment later, the dragon roared.

I turned and fired at Lung (24), just for the hell of it. Velocity was handling the helicopter, Dauntless was distracting the dragon, and despite the influx of ABB thugs, two heroes per villain was too much for the Merchants to handle... Especially now that the Wards were wrapping up their end of things.

I exhaled, almost feeling my mind switch down a gear as I was able to focus again.

We were almost at the point where it'd be everyone against the dragon--that is, the good part.

Which is why, naturally, the other people chose that moment to show up.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH--"

Shielder needed to work on his battlecries. Terror is all well and good, but ideally you want your enemies to be the ones who are afraid.

On the plus side, his aim was surprisingly good, and he was definitely the fastest one of the group. Lung just had time to turn around and look a bit surprised before the wrecking ball caught him directly in the draconic gut.

(Said image would be captured on camera and, over the course of the next several days, become a surprisingly popular image macro.)

Lung was knocked up and back, and Glory Girl curved around, catching him in the back of the head. Lady Photon and Laserdream caught him with lasers, and then Velocity and Dauntless were on him.
Lung grew bigger, but Dauntless and Velocity worked together to sever his wings. Lung tried to use flames to stay aloft, but Lady Photon and her children created a great sphere of barriers, cutting off his oxygen. He fell to Earth, and then Brandish, Manpower, Flashbang, and the Protectorate were on him.

It was apparently very dramatic. I wouldn't know, because I was on a roof blocks away, and Armsmaster's action cam of that part wasn't very good. There's only so much you can see when you have over a dozen heroes against one (admittedly very large) dragon, especially when everyone is either excited or terrified.

Despite that, though, Lung was well into his growth cycle, and our advantages only accelerated the process. The more we fought him, the more his power grew. We cut off his arms, but he grew more. We cut his scales, but they grew still tougher. We blocked his flames, and they only grew hotter. For a time, it was painfully evident just why such a simple man had stood as a villain for so long--

But Panacea was there, and for all his strength, Lung was still alive. More than that, Valkyrie had spent the last several minutes refining a shield against heat, and there was more than enough heat to make it grow quickly.

She reached out, touching him through a thin membrane that could stop heat but did nothing to stop touch or shards, and the dragon fell.

--and that was how Brockton Bay's non-combatant hero defeated its most fearsome villain.

Two birds with one stone. Not bad, I thought.

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Another press conference, another gathering; this time, with Emily and all of New Wave joining us, we'd made it a celebration instead of a planning meeting. We'd taken over a ballroom at a nearby hotel, disguising it as some sort of short-notice charity event.

It was nice, but it'd been a long day, and I could only handle so many people. If you asked me, my power was so social by necessity, not by inclination; people were the lever that moved the world, and I had a lot of moving in mind. By the time I got to my afternoon run and my Heir inspection period, I was usually pretty thankful for the quiet.

Today, though, the Cauldron work was on hold, because a guest of honor couldn't very well ignore her own celebration of achievement. So I'd eventually excused myself, taken to the balcony, and let myself think about the future.

Originally, I'd planned something slower, something safer. They'd all take out Lung, then the Merchants, and then they'd begin to cut down the Empire bit-by-bit, slicing off every exposed limb and then crushing the core... But the Director's particular form of the Adaptive Armory had provided an opportunity to end it all in one flashy blow, long before the deadline of time or an Endbringer attack, and I'd taken that chance. It wouldn't have worked if they'd had Blasters or creating Masters to circumvent her shields, or if we hadn't been able to distract Oni Lee, and the sheer strength of the Brockton Bay team was rare. In any other city, I simply wouldn't have had the raw materials to pull it off.

But they wouldn't see any of that; from beginning to end, the plan had rested on the razor's edge between seeming effortlessness and complete collapse. To the world, it would seem that we had ended crime in Brockton Bay as soon as we'd decided to commit, winning it all in two great battles over two long days. Impressive, certainly... But, for better or worse, I'd need to lean on this
achievement to convince other teams to let me help, and that meant this was the standard for which I'd be judged from here on out.

There just hadn't been any other way. This had been the safest path, at least in the short term, and now I had a reputation to live up to. Maybe if I focused on alpha strikes, on gathering all the required information and then ending things decisively, such that they only saw the moment of action? Maybe. A second instance might be enough to convince the Protectorate at large that it wasn't just a fluke, and then I might be able to move to a slower tack without loss of face.

I'd have to choose my next city carefully.

"Lurking out on the balcony?"

"Basically," I said, turning, as Amelia Dallon stepped outside. I met her eyes, then turned back toward the city skyline, where the sun had long since set. "I'm thinking about the future. I've learned that if I dwell on my dastardly plans in public, people start whispering nervously."

"Makes sense," she said. She stepped forward, resting her arms on the edge. "Considering that I've met you twice, you made my sister splatter you across the pavement the first time and forced me to knock out a dragon the second."

"Fair," I said, and there was a little flicker of surprise. Had she really expected a denial? "Plus I just kind of hate parties."

My utter sincerity seemed to catch her flat-footed. A slight smile crossed her lips, marred a moment later by a frown.

"You know, no one's forcing you to like or dislike me," I said, leaning on my own arms. "I don't even really care either way. Just, relax, okay?"

She shook her head. "I've lived my whole life around Victoria and her aura," she said. "I know when someone's messing with my head."

"Not well enough, apparently," I said. I turned, putting my back against the balcony, arms resting on the railing behind me. "You're a second-generation, Amelia. A first generation gets a power because they were chosen, and that power tells you quite a lot about them. Seconds, though? Oh, there's some modification of the produced power based on personality, because there's so many forms they can take, and I can see negativity in any shard--but I'm starting to think that a second-gen shard really just tells you who their parents are."

She flinched, then tried to hide it, but I was looking up at the sky; she seemed to relax a little, seeming to think I hadn't seen it.

"Probably Marquis, since you're wondering," I said, and she froze. "Crime lord, bone manipulator, defeated by New Wave... Roughly the right timeframe, too, if you were too young to remember your parents."

She closed her eyes, hands clenching tight on her arms. "I didn't want to know," she said.

"You're important, for better or for worse, and important people don't live uneventful lives." I shrugged, looking out at the sunset. It wasn't a bad one. "You'd have found out some day. And at that time, maybe you wouldn't have someone there to tell you that it doesn't fucking matter. Get over it."

She opened her eyes, glaring at me--asserting her right to be unhappy, as unhappy people so often
do. I sympathized with the impulse, but I wasn't inclined to indulge it. I continued speaking before she could decide on what to say.

"Marquis was a person," I said, "but he was also the output of a system, the same way that you're an output of another one. For every flaw in his person that put him on his path, there was someone who could have helped him. For every mistake he made, there was someone who could have set it right. He made his choices, yes, but people failed him--he wasn't naturally evil, because no one is. And in a better world, he wouldn't have had a fragment of an evil alien god whispering in his ear, urging him to indulge all his worst impulses."

"Impulses," she spat, "which you want me to indulge, just to save my own skin. To appease my own 'fragment of an evil alien god.'"

"Yes, I do," I said. "Do you think some part of me doesn't enjoy this? In a single solitary month, I've gone from a weak little girl, bullied and very nearly murdered, to one of the most powerful people in this city--very possibly in the world, with the attention I'm getting. Do you think that I don't enjoy winning? Do you think I feel no satisfaction in watching you, in realizing that I can make you do what I want with a few clever words?" She clenched her teeth, even as I shook my head. "I'm not a saint, but thankfully, I don't need to be; the world doesn't work that way. Being good isn't about being perfect, about never feeling pain or anger or hatred. Good and evil are verbs, Panacea, and they only exist in the context of actions."

I turned from the balcony, stepped forward, and poked her in the chest.

"You're frustrated," I say. "You feel trapped by your role, by your powers, by your place in the world... And you think feeling that frustration makes you a bad person." I threw out my other arm, letting its sweep encompass the city. "A month ago, I felt frustrated," I said. "By all the evils we allow, by all the people who don't understand that they could do more, by all the things that we've come to simply accept. And so I decided to act. I was lucky, yes, lucky that I have the kind of power that can do this, lucky that I attracted the attention of the powerful, but you're nearly as lucky--you have one of the strongest powers I know of, and I'm including myself. I've already accomplished something no one else ever has. What are you going to do with what you've been given?"

She looked up at me.

"Because," I said, "I was lucky, and I intend to keep paying that luck forward." I poked her in the chest again. "Give me a plan, ask for resources, ask for assistance, and I'll move heaven and earth, because I can do that now. And when you decide on that plan, your family will be with you, if you let them. But at the end of the day, the only one who can take that first step is you."

She reached up, grabbing my finger, and met my eyes. I returned her stare, refusing to be intimidated by the fact that I'd made the all-powerful biokinetic angry.

So she clenched tighter, and I felt fire move through my veins. She let go, turning away.

"Get more sleep," she said, voice clipped. "And eat better. Less take-out."

"Noted," I said. "Thank you."

She walked away.

...dammit, hadn't I planned to leave that to Carol? I mean, sure, this party was sort of sunk time, couldn't have spent it in any other way, and I hadn't planned this, but would she consider this an insult? I had asked... Ugh, delegating was hard.
At least I'd gotten a pick-me-up out of it. I hadn't realized how banged-up I'd still felt until she fixed it all.

"You out there, Taylor?" Dennis stuck his head out the door. He smiled at me. "Still need a moment?"

"No, I'm good," I said, pushing of the balcony and walking towards the door. "From what I can make out, Other Robin is getting very, very drunk and somehow no one's noticed. This should be amusing."

"You know, saying something is 'amusing' is a lot like saying it's 'funny,' but only evil people ever say 'amusing.'"

"Huh. Really?"

"Yeah, from what I've noticed."

"...I'll keep that in mind. I do seem to have an image problem."

"Probably for the best, Miss Jacqueline Cut."

"Call me that again, Dennis, and I will throw you off that balcony."

---

Sunday that same week, the day before Valentine's Day.

"Good to see you again," Satyrical said, nodding towards the camera. The viewing angle changed, showing all of Team Vegas--more than a few of them waved, with varying levels of sincerity. "It's been a while, Administrator... Or Taylor, was it?"

"Yes," I said. "I hope you've all been less busy there than here."

"Not hard," Leonid said with a lazy grin. "Did you know, there's all sorts of amateur footage of parts of that big fight of yours? The last part, at least. I'm particularly fond of the part where that speedster of yours punches the dragon in the face."

"Which one?"

"All of them," Floret said with a put-upon sigh, leaning on the table and resting her chin on folded hands. "I like a good dragon-punching montage as much as the next girl, but there can be too much of a good thing."

"I'm more fond of the heroic reinforcements against the dragon," Pretender said. "And from all accounts, that former Director of yours virtually made the thugs all irrelevant. Very dramatic, in the great schmaltzy sort of way. Did you set that up?"

"I wish I was that good," I said, smiling. "Instead of only mostly that good."

"And humble, too," Nix murmured. I suppose it made sense that the quiet one would get the dampening power.

"I'm pretty much the whole package, yeah," I said. "So, what's the occasion?"

"Two things," Blowout said. He was the one I'd called Impact, and fittingly, his voice was louder than all the others. "New Thinker in town, sniffing around about becoming a Ward. Can't help but
make a bit of a face whenever it comes up, though, which says 'former villain' and 'ego."

"Even more than the usual," Spur said. "I mean, deliberately traveling to Vegas to join up as an official Thinker? Brass balls on that one."

"Right," I said. "You want me to take a look at her?"

"Nope," Saytrical said. "Mostly just curious as to whether it was someone from your neck of the woods, and, well, question answered. Hadn't said it was a girl." He grinned. "So she is Tattletale from BB, then? Heard she called herself a psychic, back in Brockton."

"If she's calling herself Lisa or Sarah, probably. Blonde, smirks, insufferable?"

"Two thirds of those overlap with 'Thinker,' you know." Blowout gave me a shit-eating smirk, which I refused to dignify.

"But it's also admittedly something they're all pretty bad at hiding," Leonid chimed in.

"Yeah, if you can stand being in the presence of a Thinker for more than five minutes," Spur said, "then they probably suck. It's like the PRT rating, only better."

"Yeah, fuck all you guys too," I said, but I was smiling. "No wonder you haven't got any real Thinkers on a Vegas team, you discriminating assholes."

A round of shrugs went around the table, though they were fighting off their own smiles.

"If you can stand her, I'd snap her up," I said, more seriously. With Tattletale, I suspected that degree of tolerance was an actual concern. "Long story short? The more powers around her, the smarter her power gets, and it's an all-rounder. Being in a big city full of Thinkers and small talents will do her good, if you can keep that ego in check."

"Cool," Floret said. "We're up for hiring you on the 'talk to the Wards' and 'brief us on villains' services... Based on activity, we think we've got a big-shot Thinker or two laying low, with powers we haven't figured out yet. Won't hurt to freak them out a bit."

"Also," Nix said, with a surprisingly toothy grin, "considering what happened with the villains over there? This Tattletale girl probably came to Vegas to run away from you. The look on her face when you show up will be magical."

"And to think, I already wanted to go," I stage-whispered to myself, a hand on my chin.

Vegas wasn't a bad choice. I'd looked over the rosters, gotten a glimpse of the villains. True, there were bodyguards, hired muscle, but the villains of Vegas operated with discretion: they played it safe, took few chances, and did their best to erase their tracks, such that even when they were caught, the consequences weren't more than a slap on the wrist. Leet and Uber were proof enough that even open villains could avoid more than minor jail time and the occasional fee, if they played it smart, and Vegas villains were good at smart.

But however good they were, the trails still existed, if you knew where to look for them; tracking down information on the Empire's hand in the shelter was a good enough case study. It'd be less flashy, certainly, to use Number Man and haul them in through the courts—but hadn't I wanted to lower expectations? Done right, it might seem like versatility instead of weakness.

I'd have to talk to the others.
I looked up, smiling once again. "I'll see what I can do. There's some more things to wrap up here... But, well, I don't think it'll be too hard for you to convince your boss that I'll be useful."

There was a knock on the door. I glanced sideways, and as I did, my eyes widened. What in the world...?

"Sorry," I said, looking back towards the others. "Looks like something's come up. I'll catch up with all of you some other time."

I shut the connection as they said their goodbyes, turning off the conference room's computer, and only then did I turn to Contessa.

"You're usually more circumspect. What's happening?"

"Something important," she said. "Door, Cauldron situation room."

I stepped through--and then, from the other side, I heard the sound of Endbringer sirens.

The door closed behind us, and I turned to Contessa.

"You already promised," she said, in a tone that accepted no argument.

I closed my eyes. "So it's true, then," I said. I took a deep breath.

I'd promised to stay back, every time we reached this part of the cycle. At the time, though, I'd imagined it happening somewhere else. I hadn't ever imagined that she'd come here.

'A crude tool, introduced because the delicate ones weren't working.' Tattletale had warned me, hadn't she?

"The Simurgh's come to Brockton Bay."
Citizens are evacuated in Simurgh fights in canon. This has been disregarded. (Because if they can evacuate civilians in Endbringer fights, why not just do it all the time?)

Robin Swoyer had done Endbringer fights, over and over again. Against Behemoth, his wide-range dynakinesis sometimes interfered with communications; against Leviathan, there was rescue; against the Simurgh, some people managed to forget about the ticking time bomb of her presence. Even if you were barely empowered at all, there was still always something to do, and few capes were quite so able to escape and survive as Robin.

He'd done Endbringer fights, but he hadn't fought Endbringers. Today would be the first time.

"Nervous, Other Robin?"

He glanced up from the ready room's couch, meeting Robin Smith's eyes and grinning wryly. "More than a little," he admitted, and surprise flickered across his best friend's face. "I mean, for once, we're up against an Endbringer and I matter. That's as new as the rest of this is old."

"True." Robin shrugged, joining him; their powers meant they were the first to show up, and they'd be waiting a while longer. His friend rested his helmet on his knees, drumming his fingers against the metal mask; one hand fiddled with a ring wrapped around his thumb. "You get to deal with all my problems now." He raised an eyebrow, and Dauntless elaborated. "The pressure. A rising star, potential out the wazoo, might actually manage to damage one of the Big Scary Motherfuckers if you get the right gear, all that." He said it with an amusement that couldn't quite mask old remembered irritation. "You might be working off of Tinkertech, but just like me, you're the only one that'll ever get to use your gear. The moment either of us dies, it's useless."

"Assuming Miss Administrator doesn't hack in again," he teased, and his friend rolled his eyes. "So she can add 'basically a precog' to all your bullshit."

"She's welcome to it, trust me."

"'sides," Velocity said. "The psycho on the JV squad's got a partial mist transform--word is Armsy's considering making her a set of gear like this, if she shapes up, since she's got the same low-weight-Breaker thing. So I guess we've both got a runt in the wings that might replace us, if it comes to that."

"I expected you to call me on being morbid," Dauntless said, raising his eyebrows. "Didn't expect you to try and top me. You that nervous?"

"Oh, this is the first Endbringer fight since the tiny terror's joined the team."

"She's actually quite tall."

Velocity ignored him. "I'm shitting my pants over whatever crazy plan she'll be sending us into, this time. Half-expect she'll be having teleporters drop Foam trucks on the Simurgh or anything."
"Foam's been tried, it was a catastrophe," Colin said, stepping through the door. "And she won't be coming today."

He glanced to the side just as Robin did the same, catching the same look of surprise mirrored there.

"Not voluntarily, it seems," Armsmaster said, one hand clenched tight around the Halberd. "It seems she's not allowed to engage against the Simurgh, so she's been removed from Brockton Bay."

"Makes sense, I guess," Robin murmured. "Don't want her time-bombing someone you're sending all over the country."

"Shame Taylor's sitting this one out, though," Other Robin said, and they both glanced his way. "For once, an Endbringer's attacking a city that's strong instead of weak. Don't have Leviathan hitting an aquifer, no power plants for Behemoth, no infighting to weaken us..."

"Oh, but we are weak."

"Oh, but it was Lung's home city!"

"If they had just unleashed the dragon, this never would have happened!"

They both laughed, and even Armsmaster smiled.

"Come on," Armsmaster said, turning towards the door. "Follow me. The Triumvirate likes to hold a pre-briefing with local leaders, so we're expected. It'll be more interesting than sitting around here."

"Says you," Velocity groused, even as he stood up. "Sure you don't need me to read the manual backwards in Chinese one last time before we fight? Because I think my pronunciation of the phrase for 'armor purge' is getting real good."

"While I'd love to continue testing my prototype translator," Armsmaster replied, not looking back, "you're not quite as clever as you think--I'm quite sure its recognition of 'obscenity plus goats' is already well-established."

"Hah! Told you, Other Robin!"

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Briefings came and briefings went, and Velocity didn't pay it much mind; the Simurgh was the least dangerous Endbringer, at least in the short term. Oh, she was a telekinetic of incredible power, but compared to the others, for someone with Velocity's powers? That was small-potatoes. Just watch out for the Simurgh exposure timer (linked to those wonderful little bombs inside their communicators) and try not to get clipped by any flying buildings. Sure, talk of setting up dominoes was scary--but any Thinker or Master worth their salt would realize that with the rumors of her power already in play, it provided an easy scapegoat. If you asked Velocity, that probably explained..."
half of the bad things that happened to people who had been in Simurgh fights.

The extent of her power was so fuzzy and so ill-established that it really wasn't worth thinking about, at least if you had good sense. --well, except insofar as it had convinced powerful people to strap bombs to all the participants of any given Simurgh fight. Velocity would have had stern words for the people responsible, if that wouldn't result in a firing and/or demotion and/or pay cut.

Eventually, the local pre-briefing on the Simurgh ended, they left for the greater group, and Legend had delivered basically the same briefing to everyone, no one had mentioned the obvious thing. So Velocity raised his hand. Legend nodded towards him.

"So," he said, to the silence and the auditorium of watching eyes. "Are we going to talk about the way she's acting weird? Because she's acting weird."

Legend sighed. "It's the Simurgh," he said, as if that explained everything. Velocity stared at him wordlessly, and he elaborated. "The world's strongest known precognitive and Master, on top of the usual mysteries where Endbringers are concerned. She's not singing, and she's unusually still, but what does that actually tell us?" He tilted his head. "If I had to guess, I'd say that she has something particularly unpleasant in mind today... But if it's a simple fight, people will instead say that it meant she just wasn't in the mood. Whatever happens will seem obvious in hindsight."

"And so," Alexandria said, from her place at his side, "we have given you all the useful information we can. Leviathan and Behemoth have standard tactics, but the Simurgh does not. Its telekinetic power is versatile, and it uses it to its fullest extent. Take nothing for granted."

"We will do our best," Eidolon said, from his other side. "That is all we can do, and that is all we can ask of you."

He'd hoped for something more than an extended verbal shrug, but... Whatever.

"Heroes and rogues, organize by city," Legend said. "Those villains willing to cooperate with those teams, join them; if not, speak to Alexandria, and she will give you teams and roles. If you aren't willing to cooperate even that far, go to a shelter. We will take you home when the battle is over." Velocity saw a startle or two in the crowd--first-timers, who hadn't already heard this several times already. "Each of the Endbringers is so much stronger than any individual hero--stronger, perhaps, than all of us here combined. Coordination will win or lose us this battle, moreso than any individual's strength. If you won't play ball, ladies and gentlemen, then you are a liability, and we can't afford your 'help.'" He looked among the crowd.

"Those of you who have only fought against Leviathan or Behemoth," he continued, "may be confused as to this difference in strategy. In short, the Simurgh has fought in a different fashion in every single battle. We do not know what will happen, any more than any of you--all the more when, as Velocity pointed out--" More than a few eyes turned back towards him. "--the Simurgh is already acting atypically. Therefore, you will not be separated by purpose today. We want you among those who know you, who will compensate for your weaknesses and who will put you in a position to utilize your strengths. We have discovered that that flexibility is what allows capes to come home, at least against the Simurgh."

"All the same," he said, "your team will be assigned a role corresponding to the general balance of your talents. Our hosts, Brockton Bay, for example--" Velocity wished that people would stop looking at him already. "--are geared towards heavy assault, and as such they will be on the front lines. My own team is much the same. But Las Vegas, for instance, will be working support, to keep the wounded moving and to defend against whatever projectiles she chooses to utilize."
"The exception, naturally, lies with Thinkers, group Movers, power-granting Trumps and healers. If you believe that you will contribute most among your local team, join them. If not, join me, and I will assign you to one of our general support squads. Remember your communicators. In the expected event of the unexpected, you will be notified of any changes in the overarching strategy. Any questions?" He clapped his hands together. "Then that is all. Group together."

As the room dissolved into groups, Brockton Bay looked among themselves.

"I actually get to lead again," Armsmaster said, deadpan. "Imagine that."

Assault grinned. "I knew listening to her had to be chapping your ass."

"She was effective," Miss Militia said. "...though it never ceased to be strange."

New Wave approached, sans Panacea. Brandish's eyes scanned the group, and she looked back towards Armsmaster.

"She's absent?"

"By higher-order decree," Piggot said; she'd stood with the Protectorate all along, for all her lack of true membership. "She cannot contribute much to these fights yet, and she would be too potent a target for the Simurgh's manipulations."

New Wave didn't look thrilled, but they did look convinced. Having a former PRT Director was useful for this sort of thing.

Soon, the groups funneled out into the city. The Simurgh continued to float, silent and still, not a single wing flapping as it hung suspended in midair. She looked like a giant albino angel, with long snow-white hair, gray eyes, and fair skin; she wore not a single stitch of clothing, same as always, covered only by three carefully folded white wings among her great multitude. Wings flowed out of her back, arms, legs, and out of other wings, arranged in a way that made no sense, and yet somehow the result was almost artistic.

Normally, she would be singing, the sound echoing out despite her closed lips. If the voice in the back of his head was eerie, then seeing her do nothing was ten times worse.

And as he thought that again, as the last cape funneled out of the building, as they prepared to take the first action, the Simurgh threw back its human-like head. Instead of singing, she screamed, a long, wobbling discordant note that made even his bones ache--

And then she leveled all of the buildings between herself and Brockton Bay's defenders.

That attack was no delicate employment, no precise destruction. A wave of smashing force simply fell upon the city like the foot of a great giant--but there was no sound, no plume of dust. One moment, that part of the city stood; the next, it had fallen. Even to him, it had all happened in an instant.

A massive swath of Brockton Bay was simply gone.

Velocity stepped up his acceleration still further, thinking, panning his eyes over the fallen buildings, trying to overlay the map he'd seen just about a week ago, and--no shelters. Well, there was that, at least. She'd decided not to just murder all their civvies.

How had she done it...? In the moment between one millisecond and the next, between everyone else's breaths, Velocity thought. This expanse of time was his alone; he truly had all the time in the
world. Well, not all of it, he wasn't that fast, but a lot. No reason not to take his time.

Had she held back before? Well, duh, that wasn't actually the question. The important thing was, how quickly could she do that again?

If she could do it in an instant, and she was willing to use it, anyone that wasn't a Brute was going to die—but with his acceleration at its maximum, when he could barely interact with the parts of the world his Breaker field touched, mere pressure wouldn't kill him. He could probably fall into the deepest, darkest parts of the ocean and be basically fine. (Though he hadn't tested how his field worked when submerged in water—he'd run the hell away from Leviathan every time that had come up. Probably the same thing that happened every other time something on him crossed the edge of his Breaker field: pain.)

So okay, he could take her best punch, cool. Maybe her telekinetic power was like some kind of tank? Like, it only had so much capacity. If she usually drained some of it with the 'singing,' then not singing might let her store it up? If that was the case, she'd probably be drained for a bit... Or she'd be sandbagging, which she apparently did all the time anyway, so it'd look like that right up until the sucker punch. She was kind of a massive bitch, so she'd totally do that, and therefore assuming she was 'tired' might make things worse.

What was she going to do next? 'Blow up buildings' was sort of a standard opener for her, even if she'd always kept to a smaller scale. Would she throw the rubble? She'd done that before. She'd also turned the buildings into giant stone weapons, triggered progressively larger dust explosions, utilized electrical wiring and plumbing to make giant horrifying water-shock beams, looted a gun shop and a military surplus store and an entire mall's worth of kitchen knives... Technically she hadn't done all of those at the same time, she tended to stick with one trick and abuse it in horrifying ways, but that probably wasn't 'new' enough to satisfy her apparent taste for gimmicks.

Was she imposing some sort of time limit? 'Defeat me quickly or I blow up the rest of the town'? Probably. But she still had to have a fighting gimmick in the meantime, right?

Other things she did... Well, there was the time she'd stuck to just raw telekinesis and battered people around, and there was The Bullfighting Incident, which was what had made people really sure she was a precog. She probably wasn't going to turn the civvies into crazed killing machines, that was the first time in Switzerland. Somehow she'd once opened a giant portal and unleashed especially freaky Case 53s on them, that one had been memorable. With the lack of singing and the big showy thing, maybe she was going to try and screw with their minds somehow?

By the time that everyone else was just starting to realize what had happened, Velocity had been thinking about it for what would have been fifteen minutes, and after that time, he had to admit that he didn't know what she was going to do. He just had a list of things she already had done, and therefore probably wouldn't do again.

He sighed, not that anyone noticed. Sometimes, he kind of wished this power had gone to someone smarter; in the end, all he usually got out of it was time to panic, calm down, search his mind for a clever answer, not find one, give up, and then do the obvious. Just one more bit of wasted potential.

Whatever. He wasn't stupid enough to sulk during an Endbringer fight—especially not now, when he could do so much more.

"Go!" In actual time, Legend had reacted very quickly. "Assume she'll weaponize the rubble, and advance!"

The scream stopped, and no sound took its place—aside from the advance of footsteps, she was still
utterly silent and still. The first capes began to run and fly, and Velocity and Dauntless were among them, keeping pace.

He and Dauntless would take the lead, same as always, but there was no reason to run ahead; he was sure he could exhaust his entire stock of ammo and not do a thing to her. He’d use his time, keep an eye on anything and everything, and deflect projectiles, maybe? He might only be smart enough to do the obvious thing, but time in the military and the Protectorate told him that with the right timing, 'obvious' still got the job done.

The Simurgh began to raise the rubble around her, and then Eidolon raised his hands. It all slammed to earth, but though it remained silent, a thick plume of dust rose and then began to twist, twirling with each twist of Eidolon's left wrist. He clapped his hands together, and the resulting dust explosion was blinding--but not deafening. Somehow, he'd contained the shockwave... Or had he harnessed it with that aerokinesis of his, made it another part of his attack?

Either way, Velocity decided to try and buy him a drink later. It took real balls to taunt the Simurgh like that.

Alexandria charged on, heedless of the danger, even as Legend strafed around the Simurgh, brilliant light flying from his fingers. When the flames cleared and he could see again, Velocity charged forward. Dauntless had teleported--behind her, probably? Right, he had, that was his Arclance. A telekinetic push sent the glowing electric blade up and away from her before it could strike, and Alexandria weaved smoothly around it, flying in for another blow. Velocity shadowed her, then pushed ahead; as the Simurgh tried to interpose her wings, he accelerated, releasing a full one-handed volley. The bullets flew with a sonic-boom crack, as much wind as force, and with the wing out of the way, Alexandria landed a body blow.

She nodded briefly at him as she finished the pass, and Velocity disengaged. The first volleys of Blasters and projection Masters were beginning to reach her; he could see Miss Militia and Armsmaster, her with a sniper rifle, him with some rifle he'd made with Kid Win. Eidolon was using some sort of force hammer, probably related to the gravity he'd used, even as he kept the rubble pinned down and unusable; the Simurgh was using telekinesis like a bludgeon, but his aerokinesis let him dance around her air-warping swipes, cape billowing in the wind. Velocity had a feeling he was grinning, and he couldn't blame him... Eidolon looked pretty badass today, even more than usual.

In and out, around and around; Velocity continued to play support. Everyone was playing it careful, holding back something in reserve, because she still hadn't unveiled her trick for the evening and everyone knew it.

Nearly ten minutes of inconclusive fighting later, Ziz had taken nearly no damage, there wasn't a single heroic casualty, and she hadn't shown any new tricks yet, though she had blown up many more buildings. Velocity pulled up to Dauntless.

"Want me to spot for you?" Velocity glanced to the side, where Dauntless was floating, still staring at the Simurgh. "You know, you use that oversized pigsticker of yours, and I try to make you an opening or two?"


And then Robin went limp; as Velocity shook him, his head lolled back, helmet slipping from his head. For a moment, Velocity froze, thinking of chin straps and secret identities--and then he caught sight of his best friend's face.
The hero vanished. Velocity accelerated, turning quickly, and caught sight of Dauntless again as he floated behind their lines. It wasn't hard, not with the Arclance glowing like that.

And then Dauntless spun in place. The Arclance glowed and grew and stretched, the enormous electric blade scything forward—through their back line, killing Movers and Blasters and all of the people who were supposed to protect them.

Velocity stared in shock, and then well-honed reflexes kicked in.

He used his power.

Time slowed, and slowed, and slowed, but the blade still moved; he had time to see the ripples of shock begin to pass through the faces of the dying and the dead. He pushed his power further and further, ignoring the pain, pushing even as he felt as if his head and heart would split open. He pushed and pushed until time very nearly seemed to stop, until even his own body left his reach. With the Breaker field at its full expansion, he couldn't have moved his arms or legs any more than he could move heaven and earth, but he had done it: every moment of not-time made his heart feel as if it would burst, every instant sent jagged pain through his brain, and yet the Arclance stood still.

And then, hanging in suspension over the span of an eternity, he took his time.

Shock, horror, denial, anger, sorrow, acceptance—while time stood still, for a time that could be minutes or hours or days or years, he thought. Other Robin considered Robin, considered what they each wanted, considered what had happened, considered the implications. He searched for clever answers, and he found none; perhaps there were none to be found, or perhaps he was simply incapable of finding them. So he went further afield: he thought of gambles, and risks, and outright stupid plans, and in time, he discarded all of them. Not a one would have worked.

That left the obvious facts and the things that must be done. He bowed his head, gritted his teeth, and forced the pain down into a deep, dark place. He would process it later, after all of this. Until then, he had to return to the world of the living.

He slowed the acceleration, returning to his body. Time returned to the world inch by inch, and soon he wasn't so much faster than a normal man.

The first reports of casualties began playing over the speakers, and he ignored them. They didn't matter. He'd mourn any other friends after all this.

He flew forward. As he did, he raised his arm to his mouth, pressed a button, and began to speak, taking his time, speaking in the slow, steady pace that would allow others to understand him. To others, it would still seem incredibly fast, but it was intelligible, and that was all that mattered.

"Dragon," he said to his armband. "Highest priority: talk to the Triumvirate and get Administrator on the line. Tell her to brief people on what Dauntless can do in the Simurgh's hands. He's too strong to let people fight him blind."

'Highest priority' would kick it a ways up the queue, especially coming from an anti-Endbringer vet. In perhaps two seconds, she would get the message, and she might do it. By all accounts she was the one who edited the videos from the training exercises; she would have seen what happened against the Vegas team. And she knew Armsmaster, didn't she? She should have known what Administrator did there. He'd have to hope Dragon took his words, and her power, seriously.

He let go of the communicator for a moment, then pressed the button and spoke again.

In the real world, in the normal flow of time, Dauntless's head lolled back still further as he
completed the swing. His entire upper body now dangled on invisible strings, legs ragdoll limp; only his arms, ready to wield the shield and Arclance, were steady. His face was still frozen, eyes wide and staring towards Velocity, mouth set in a horrified rictus.

"Hard override," Velocity said, and then he was speaking to everyone with a communicator. "This is Velocity of Brockton Bay. The Simurgh has used Master powers to take control of the hero Dauntless. He is a teleporter, is capable of flight, can shield himself, can penetrate shields, and can expand his weapon to slash or emit blinding pulses. All abilities have a delay before reuse. Greater details on his abilities hopefully forthcoming." He took a breath, in and then out. "And he owes me twenty bucks. Now engaging."

There wasn't that much to do. With Administrator off the field, without any way to predict his teleports, with no combat-capable teleporter to counter him, the only other option was someone who could go fast--but the battlefield was just too big. One hero couldn't cross that entire distance in time, not if Dauntless used his maximum range... But he had a feeling the Simurgh wouldn't have done this, not if there was anyone else who could help him. If he was wrong, then that was great, but he had a feeling he wasn't going to be that lucky.

Oh, sure, there were two right in front of him who could do the job just as well--but if Eidolon or Legend disengaged to hunt Dauntless, the Simurgh wouldn't stand idly by. And with the speed that teleport afforded and with her precognition, she could simply destroy every single attempt to coordinate around her new assassin.

He was the only one who could do the job, because he was the only one with the ability to keep up who could afford to leave the front line. He'd have to hope for an opportunity... Or keep going after him as more heroes died, over and over and over, until the slowly-increasing teleport timer ticked up to something he could manage.

Velocity reached Dauntless just as the Simurgh forced him to teleport away. "At least two seconds," he said to himself. Robin hadn't teleported much against the Simurgh. He turned, just as Dauntless appeared behind Alexandria. He appeared slightly to the left just as she looked right, and before anyone could act, the lightning spear stabbed straight through her.

Velocity flew, looking closely. It has missed the heart, but had probably pierced a lung. He'd have to hope that 'invincible' body of hers could be healed, at least that much. For now, they all had much larger problems.

By the time he was there, she wasn't; a teleporter had taken her away. Eidolon had turned, hammering Dauntless's shield with blows, but with him occupied, the Simurgh could lift the buildings once more. Eidolon was forced back, forced to shove them all down once again, and then the Simurgh landed a telekinetic haymaker on the strongest hero--and before he could recover, Dauntless was gone again.

That would be the third or fourth teleport, right...? Probably about up to three seconds. Dauntless appeared among another group of Blasters; a Brute tried to save them, and in the controlled hero's hands, the Arclance cut him clean in two. Then he turned on the rest. His shield deflected the few shots they could quickly level at him, and the heroes died.

Legend hesitated, glancing between Dauntless and the Simurgh, and Velocity waved a hand to catch his eye, shaking his head. Legend looked at him, and a moment later, he nodded, turning back toward the Endbringer.

Velocity reached him, just as a voice cut across their communicators.
"A briefing on Dauntless," a distorted voice said through his communicator, a faint static crackle cutting through—but anyone who had heard her would recognize Administrator.

She must've pulled some strings or something to listen in, to get on the line so quickly... He chuckled despite the situation, a slight smile tugging on his lips. Yeah, that seemed like her.

Dauntless vanished again, reappearing near the Simurgh.

"His teleport range encompasses the entire battlefield, and at present it should be limited to once every three-point-two seconds. His communicator signal has gone dark, so no, we cannot track him that way."

He slashed as he appeared, cutting through an Alexandria package or two who were focusing on the Simurgh. As the rest whirled on him, the Simurgh waved a wing, and a telekinetic burst whipped through the air around him, blowing them back. Dauntless thrust, the Arclance lengthening, spearing through the one who had seemed to be their leader.

"The Arclance can lengthen to approximately three hundred feet, or can be enlarged and slashed at approximately fifty, with a blade up to fifteen feet wide. It will circumvent very nearly all defenses, as you've seen, and can be enlarged or used to blind every two-point-seven seconds."

Eidolon teleported, appearing next to Dauntless—but the Simurgh had picked up a building the moment his focus waned. Even as he reappeared, the stone caught him in the back; if not for the shimmering shield that had appeared in the moment before impact, he likely would have died, but he was still slammed down towards the pavement below.

"His shield can be used every second, but can be overloaded and become unusable. All of his abilities will charge more and more slowly the more they're used. Teleport up to three-point-five, Arclance up to three. Timers will appear on your communicators now, replacing the casualty ticker."

A pause. "Eidolon! Leave Dauntless to Velocity. Focus on the Simurgh!"

The strongest hero reappeared at the Simurgh, fists clenched tightly, but he did the job—he raised a hand, calling crackling orbs of energy, and he continued to fight.

"Good," she said. "Long Walk, take Alexandria to Panacea. We need to do this quickly."

Velocity turned, freezing time for a moment as he thought with a frenzied haste. She wouldn't dare... No, it was Taylor, of course she would.

He returned to the world, and then he ignored Dauntless, flying at full speed toward the back line.

"Valkyrie, attune your blades. Use their extradimensional properties—attuned correctly, you should be able to allow Panacea to circumvent Alexandria's time-lock. I'm counting on you two to save her."

The Simurgh couldn't possibly ignore a straight line like that. Dauntless's next teleport took him behind the healer—just as Velocity reached him.

The shield rose, just as he'd expected, and he released a full volley. The horrible sonic crack of the four guns jammed between his fingers echoed out, three of the bullets hitting the shield and breaking it. The fourth flew past harmlessly—and then Velocity was forced to throw himself to the side, accelerating, to shield Panacea from the stray round, because the Simurgh had thrown it back.

The bullet punched through his shoulder, but his tackle had kept her safe, the weight-modifying effect of his Breaker field keeping it from doing more than jarring her aside. He strangled the cry that tried to escape through his throat, keeping it to a low grunt; the bullet had exploded like microscopic
buckshot on contact, and his left arm dangled limply.

But the world's best healer was still safe, and that was the important part.

He glanced down, Armsmaster's dire warnings glancing through his mind, and was relieved to see no torn metal. He was still in the fight, then. But by the time he reached his target, Dauntless had vanished again.

He flew forward, back towards the center of the battlefield; Dauntless hadn't appeared anywhere in the back line, not that he could see.

As he approached, he saw Legend (on the other side of the Simurgh) stiffen oddly. One laser flew wild, and Velocity was forced to weave aside--and, therefore, narrowly avoided the extending Arclance that had appeared behind him. Velocity banked, turning, but Dauntless had already disappeared.

"You've got another few minutes before the shield's up again," Administrator said.

Dauntless appeared next to the Simurgh, who was now surrounded by four rotating rings of interlocking rubble. She maneuvered them around and around, blocking Blaster shots and Brute punches; telekinetic blasts rained through the gaps, flying towards people and buildings, reducing more and more to rubble as she slowly retreated towards the rest of the city.

Velocity would have considered throwing a bullet her way, if not for what'd she'd already done with his own bullets. Instead, he continued to race towards the gap.

He glanced at his watch. Two seconds left on the teleport. He'd make it there in one.

He flowed around her wild blasts, aiming at a gap. Eidolon appeared beside him, and they pushed forward together, the hero shielding the both of them. They reached the inside of the ring, Dauntless retreating to her back--and then she contracted it with sudden, crushing force.

The moment before they were pinned between her diamond-hard wings and the repurposed buildings of Brockton Bay, Eidolon grabbed his arm, teleporting the both of them away.

Naturally, the moment they'd reappeared, the Simurgh had flung all the walls their way. As Eidolon protected them, Velocity put his back to his. As he'd expected, Dauntless appeared in front of them. His Arclance shifted, beginning to lengthen--and then became blindingly bright instead.

But Velocity had seen that trick before in another enemy's hands, back in Vegas. He threw himself forward, ignoring the light, and Dauntless aborted his own forward charge, raising the Arclance. Velocity dodged it, arcing around, Dauntless continuing the slash in an futile effort to reach him--and then, with a sickening crack, the Simurgh pulled his arms out of their sockets to continue the slash.

But even so, Velocity reached Dauntless with a five-fingered touch. He pumped in a full dose of anesthetic. Dauntless's horrified face slackened, wide eyes gradually closing... And then he vanished.

It seemed that the Simurgh didn't need him awake to use his powers. Meaning that unless he could somehow convince her to let go, Robin really was going to die.

For a moment, he still hesitated, fighting the conclusion he'd already come to back in the endless moment of stopped time... But then he took a deep breath.

If his friend lived at the cost of countless other innocent lives, that friend would never forgive himself, and he'd never forgive his friend for allowing it to happen.
Three more rounds over four launchers, plus an extra shot left in the last one... His left shoulder was too hurt to use. (And in related news, son of a motherfucker did it hurt.)

*God, this blows goats*, he thought, a melancholy smile crossing his lips--and then he was off again.

"Can't keep reacting," Taylor said, voice undistorted now; she was speaking to him alone, then. "A friend and I have a map, and from what we can tell, the teleports are following a rough pattern. You don't have the time to make the next one, but you can get the one after."

"Roger."

"That's not my name," she said, voice oddly choked. "...veer left."

He did. Dauntless appeared among another helpless group, tearing them apart, but Velocity kept moving. Then he reappeared, and Velocity struck. He threw out his right arm, and then he tripped the trigger twice.

The first grouping roared as they flew past, the Simurgh having veered him aside with a rough telekinetic tug. The second volley soared towards Robin, flying to take his life--

And then they stopped, and so did Velocity.

The abrupt deceleration hurt felt like running into a wall. He tried to move his head, but all he could see was the slack form of Dauntless and his four bullets, warped by the force of their firing.

Then the bullets fell down, towards the distant earth.

*Oh*, thought Other Robin. He was next, apparently.

Dauntless was teleported away, to a building, and was lowered limply down to the ground. Velocity felt his acceleration activate without his conscious decision, cranking farther and farther forward, until the world stopped and it seemed as if his heart and brain would burst... And then time returned to normal.

Legend was flying towards him. At least Legend probably wouldn't die... And he only had so many bullets.

Well, a lot of people might die, but... Well, that was Endbringer fights, wasn't it? At least he'd saved Robin in the end.

And then there was a wrenching metallic scream. Velocity's armor abruptly warped and twisted, the fabric-like metal bulging out unnaturally, inflating in places and growing spikes in others.

Velocity began to fall. He reached out instinctively for his power, and as time accelerated, he found himself whipped around like a rag doll, twisting and turning in the wind of his passage.

She had pushed his armor through the edge of his Breaker field.


He continued to fall.

Eidolon reached out a hand. A shimmering shield began to appear below him, to break his fall. For a moment, he dared to hope--and then Velocity fell still faster, smashing through the still-forming light.
"ROBIN!"

Was that Taylor? Huh. He'd never thought he'd hear her so upset. That helped, somehow, let him focus his mind.

In the moments he had remaining, Other Robin pushed his acceleration to its maximum one last time, leaving just enough in his body to move his lips and his lungs. The wind whipped him around more strongly than ever, but he ignored it.

He breathed, in and out, letting the terror and the pain and the anger have their time... And then he spoke.

"Two last messages," he said, knowing the communicator's passive recording would catch it. They wouldn't understand a word, but they'd think to slow it down sooner or later. "Think that's all I have time for. I'd appreciate it if you could get this to them, Dragon."

"To Administrator," he said. "Taylor. You're going to blame yourself. Don't. Easier said than done, I know." He chuckled, the sound coming out more pained than he had wanted. "Yeah, I think we can say the Simurgh came for you, that's fair. Just means you pissed her off enough to make her show her true colors, and that's someone no one else has ever managed. You did good--for Brockton Bay, for all of us, for me, and I really appreciate all of it. This didn't last long, but... I had fun. Kill one or two of those fuckers for me, okay?"

Not much time left.

"To Robin," he said, and he paused. "No, fuck that, you're Other Robin right now," he said, and despite the situation, he smiled. "Everything I ever wanted to say to you, I already did, at some point... And the other way around, I'm sure. It's been ages, and I still didn't know you nearly long enough. I love you, man. Don't catch up to me too quickly."

Velocity let go.

He hit the ground.

Robin Swoyer died.

And then, less than half an hour since the start of her attack, the Simurgh turned and left Brockton Bay.

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