Lodestar

by ShayneT

Summary

Taylor Hebert is the grandchild of Magneto, a villain from another world. She has inherited his powers. Is the world ready for a mistress of magnetism?
Chapter 1

The smell was the worst.

If I hadn't known that I could get out any time I wanted, this probably would have been just as horrifying as the Trio had planned. As it was I’d created a force field immediately after being locked in but I was still stuck with the stink of the air trapped inside of the force field with me.

Oxygen was paramagnetic; I knew that from chemistry class. However I'd never worked out how to control oxygen with my powers, something that I was obviously going to have to rectify.

I sighed as I heard the bell ring and the footsteps retreating. It stung that no one had thought to help me or even tell a teacher. There was a time when I would have been furious, railed against the cowardice of people who should have had more courage.

My expectations had been lowered over time to the point that I was hardly surprised.

The hardest thing was keeping my temper under control. I was fully capable of making the locker explode, and the fact that it would have undoubtedly turned some of the students outside into a paste was not bothering it as much as it should have.

It was good that they were gone.

I waited until I felt the iron in everyone's blood moving out of sight. It felt like it took forever even though it was a matter of only a couple of minutes. Without my powers I'd have been kicking and screaming. I might even have been stuck in here for hours.

If the Trio had known what I could do they'd have never locked me in a metal locker.

A quick use of my power and the lock spun outside. A moment later the lock slipped off the locker and I was outside of the locker.

I wasn't going to be able to stay at school, not with the filth that was covering me. Hopefully the Trio would assume that the school janitor came to let me out, or even that some member of the student body had helped. I crushed the lock into a tiny ball and slipped it into my pocket.

Something was going to have to be done about Emma and Sophia. They were escalating at an alarming rate and without any consequences it wouldn't be long before I was forced to do things to them that I didn't want to do.

If I could have gone to the authorities it would be easier, but long experience had shown me that was closed off to me. Emma and Sophia had some kind of mysterious hold on the school administration.

The fact that I didn't react to anything they did only made them escalate further, and it fueled a rage that I'd been trying to keep myself from expressing, because if I did it could end badly.

Maybe it was time for me to stop practicing and planning and actually do the thing me and Emma had talked about when we'd been friends.

Maybe it was time for me to become a hero. If I waited much longer I suspected I'd end up as a villain; it ran in the family after all.

As I left the school I scowled. Learning that my grandfather had been one of the greatest villains of
his world should have horrified me. Yet the more I learned from my father and from things my mother had written, the more intrigued I became.

My grandfather had been called a terrorist, a villain on a scale that rarely was seen on Earth Bet. He'd been incredibly strong, with powers to put entire super teams down. He'd had a philosophy, one which I wasn't sure I entirely agreed with.

I stepped outside the school. There was no guard to stop me, no lanyard on my neck to reassure everyone that this was a place where I belonged. Those were for schools that the city cared about. Winslow was where the forgotten were left to die.

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“So you mean I'm actually Jewish?” I asked. I was twelve and my powers had just manifested. They weren't much, just seeing magnetic fields and moving small objects, but they were enough that the first person I told was Dad. Emma had been curiously cold recently so I hadn't told her.

Strangely, learning that Mom wasn't actually from Earth Bet wasn't the thing that shocked me the most. Even knowing that her father had been a villain didn't phase me.

Yet I'd been telling Empire 88 kids for years that just because my last name was Hebert didn't mean that I was a Jew. I hadn't disliked Jews, but I hadn't wanted to be bullied by even more of the school's populace.

“Your grandmother wasn't Jewish, and it's passed through the mother's side,” Dad said. “So...no? Your mom was raised as a Methodist and she never considered herself Jewish.”

“So what was granddad like?” I asked.

“Disappointed in your mom for not being a parahuman. They had different words for it in their world, some of them ugly.” Dad stared at me, then looked down at his hands. “He'd have been pleased to know that you were a mutant.”

Mutant. It didn't sound like a particularly pleasant word. I rolled it around in my mind.

“It happens at puberty on their world,” Dad said. “They don't just...trigger like people do here. There are other people who do, of course, but they aren't considered the same as mutants.”

At my look her held up his hand and shook his head. “Don't ask me to explain it; I don't really understand it myself. Your mother seemed adamant that they were different somehow.”

“So why was granddad a villain?” I asked.

“People persecuted mutants and he felt he had to protect them,” Dad said. “Some of the things he did to do that turned out to be pretty dark.”

“I don't understand,” I said. “How can protecting people be bad?”

“He was a holocaust survivor, and that warped him, at least according to your mother,” Dad said. “It haunted him and in some ways he ended up almost as bad as the people who'd murdered his entire family. Yet there were times when he was a hero too, when he saved their world.”

He'd have hated Brockton Bay, I supposed. I saw a dozen swastikas every day on my way to school.
The Empire claimed that it had refuted the old school Nazi ideologies, that it was simply about protecting the little guy from the scum who was ruining the city, but everyone knew the truth.

They were Nazis who were pretending to be something new, but they weren't.

Well, it wasn't like I was going to be a hero, not with the ability to see magnetic fields and move a pencil. It was a cute parlor trick, nothing that would be able to stop the most incompetent of villains.

Little had I known.

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My power had never stopped growing. Over the past three years it had kept getting stronger, reaching the point where I was no longer sure just how strong I really was. There was only so much testing you could do before people started to notice.

Dad had taken me camping once, and I was easily able to lift the car, but beyond that I had no idea. It was something I was going to have to test out, and it wouldn't be smart to do it in the field when I was fighting.

After all, learning I couldn't do something would probably get me killed.

It was why I'd been working on a costume for weeks. It was mostly made of metal, of course. My powers gave me an intuitive understanding of some kinds of sciences; I'd have thought I was a low level tinker except that designs didn't automatically come to me. I had to study hard and learn, something the trio hadn't been making easy.

Most of my studying had been done at the library. I'd discovered that taking advanced classes had actually been a blessing in disguise; none of my tormentors were bright enough to get in, and those classes had become a haven for me.

I'd started early enough that the bullies hadn't been able to sabotage my grades enough to keep me out of those classes. I could only imagine the kind of hell my life would have been otherwise.

It wasn't even as though the advanced classes at Winslow were all that advanced. It was just that the teachers were a little more interested when faced with students who were slightly more interested in learning than the rest of their classmates.

Unfortunately, only three of my classes were advanced. That was all Winslow had to offer, and I'd taken all I could. Computer class was a haven simply by chance. The other three classes were open season.

Every day was a challenge.

If I'd wanted, I could murder every student in the school without moving from my seat, and there were times I'd fantasized about it. Simply pull the nails from the building and turn them into projectiles. I'd gotten really good at moving more and more objects, and I suspected that no one would be able to even run.

It had always been a simple daydream, something that I knew I'd never do no matter what the provocation. What worried me was the fact that I was having that daydream more often.

I needed an outlet for my rage, or Sophia and Emma would end up as chunky salsa and I'd have a kill order from the Protectorate for using my powers to murder a pair of norms.

Walking home covered in filth wasn't the best of ideas, but I doubted any bus driver would let me on
board in this condition. I took control of a water hose and washed myself off as well as I could but I was still reeking and covered in filth.

As I walked home I decided. Tonight was the night. I'd go out and I'd work out some of my anger on people who deserved whatever I had to give them.

After all, what could go wrong?
Shadow

If I'd had any other power set, creating a costume would have been a nightmare. I'd never learned to sew, and professional costume design was expensive and ran the risk of threatening secret identities. The last thing I wanted to do was go out on my first night in a ski mask and hoodie.

Instead I'd created my own breastplate. I'd crushed alternating layers of hard and soft metal together using my power and metals that I'd scrounged from places like the train yard and the Docks. The whole thing weighed ten pounds, but I'd been practicing wearing it for several weeks. It had felt unbearably heavy at first, but now it was getting easier. It had the added benefit that I was getting more fit.

Thankfully I'd never let myself develop a gut even when I was depressed because of Emma. Having my power and believing I would eventually become a hero had been part of that.

Even though I was reasonably confident that my force shield would protect me from most things, I thought it would be a good idea to have at least a little added protection. After all, I'd never really tested my force field under real conditions and had no idea how it would hold up.

Painting the armor red had actually been more difficult. I'd never been particularly good with crafts and apparently there are a lot of steps to painting that have to be done before you can create something that looks beautiful and a little shiny.

It had taken multiple tries and several times of having to leave the basement with a fan to ventilate it before I'd finally gotten the result I wanted. Paint thinners in a poorly ventilated room gave me a headache.

The amazing part was that Dad had no idea. I told him I was doing a school project and he never even went downstairs to check, even though he could smell it. Mom's death had turned him into a shell of the man he had once been and just looking at him hurt me.

The rest of the outfit had been harder to design. I'd eventually settled on black leather pants and I'd made a cloak out of thousands of tiny metal chains. While it wouldn't stop a bullet it might stop a knife, and I had things I planned to do with it. I'd covered the chainmail with red cloth that I'd woven the metal into.

I had a belt onto which I'd attached a few essentials; for now it was mostly just a fanny pack with some money and a burner phone and a police scanner hooked on my belt. I'd considered getting zip ties, but considering my abilities I doubted I'd have trouble tying anyone up.

High leather boots and a metal helmet that left my mouth free completed the ensemble. I'd tried a mask that covered my mouth, but my breath had kept fogging up my glasses, and it had made me feel claustrophobic. It was made of aluminum because my earlier designs had given me chronic neck pain. The last thing I needed was for my own armor to put me in the hospital.

I wasn't happy that the aluminum wasn't more functional; I'd have liked for it to be bullet resistant too, but it being lightweight seemed more important if I was going on patrol. People would start to suspect things if I started to develop neck muscles like a wrestler.

I'd paid for my accessories with scrap metal that I'd pulled from abandoned buildings. I'd felt guilty about committing a crime to start off my heroic career, but nothing was cheap and I hadn't had enough money to buy a stick of gum, much less three pairs of expensive leather pants.
As I carefully slipped my fanny pack to the back of my outfit where it would be covered by the cloak, I took a deep breath. I'd been delaying going out for years, always finding some excuse or other.

I'd told myself that I'd set out when my armor was perfected, or when I'd finally perfected all the aspects of my powers. The problem was that there was always a new aspect of my powers to explore. Seeing a video of a frog being levitated in a Tesla coil using diamagnetism had made me realize that I could fly even without lifting my armor. It was easier with the armor, but it had been one of the most exciting days that I could remember.

My powers weren't just about magnetism either. I had control over a lot of the electromagnetic spectrum, which gave me a wide range of things I could do, even though magnetism was the easiest of my powers to access.

If I waited until I'd fully mastered all my powers I'd be old and gray before setting out to become a hero.

This was it. Was it normal to hear by heartbeat thundering in my ears like this? Was the hitch of breath in my chest normal?

Grimacing, I forced myself to expand my senses. From the metals in his body I could detect that Dad was upstairs in bed, as were most of the neighbors in a several block radius. Most people didn't have a lot of metal in them; it would take two of them to put together a bullet's worth. It was enough that I could detect them, which meant that I was clear to leave the house without any risk of being seen.

I floated up the stairs. I was a little wobbly. I hadn't practiced a lot at flying because of the risks of being seen. I'd heard that a lot of young heroes went out to the docks to test out their powers. The gangs knew that as well and had watchers ready to follow the young heroes home.

A lot of young heroes either ended up in the gangs of ended up quietly murdered, unwritten rules be damned. Knowing that I was going to be a hero for as long as I had I'd had a lot of time to research. The unwritten rules were more vague guidelines than actual rules and they were violated regularly by both sides.

It was up to the hero themselves to safeguard their own identities, something I planned on doing. Even if my force shield proved to be as powerful as I hoped, dad didn't have anything like it to protect him.

Floating through the kitchen I reached out with my power and the door to the backyard unlocked and swung open. I floated silently through the air, my feet inches from the floor. There were no tell tale footsteps to alert my father, no sounds of movement.

The only sound was that of my own heartbeat and breathing, which sounded unnaturally loud, as did the sound of the door closing behind me with an audible click.

Reaching the backdoor I shot up into the night sky as quickly as I could. No one was looking nearby, but the last thing I wanted was to give any watchers in the distance a chance to triangulate my location.

I felt a sudden sense of anxiety as my house began to fall away beneath me. I'd flown around in my basement and even a little in my house when Dad wasn't home and the blinds were drawn, but this was something completely different.
If my powers suddenly failed me I was dead.

I forced the anxiety away and I pushed myself through the air. It didn't take long before the fear vanished and I found myself enjoying the freedom of the wind and the sky. It was effortless, moving faster than I'd ever been in a car.

Looping through the air, spinning, turning; there was a certain childish freedom to it that I couldn't help but take a certain amount of glee in. After all, there had been little enough pleasure in my life since the death of my mother.

Why shouldn't I enjoy myself, enjoy my power?

Still, this wasn't why I was here. In a way it was another form of stalling. I'd come to make a difference and I needed to get to it. From what I heard crime dropped dramatically after three in the morning, as apparently even the criminals went to bed.

I reached down and flipped on my police scanner. I'd been drilling myself on common police codes for the last few weeks, listening to the scanner and practicing so that today I'd be able to do what I needed to without flipping through my little code book.

I listened. A 10-49...a barking dog complaint. Nothing I could do about that, even if fluffy was annoying the entire neighborhood. What was I going to do to stop a dog from barking, make a muzzle? Did muzzles even stop a dog from barking?

A 10-54...livestock on the highway? Was I even remembering the codes right? I decided then and there that I was going to write them down in the message section of my phone so that next time I could check.

A 10-49...traffic light out. Was Brockton Bay not the hive of scum and villainy that I'd always been taught? Granted, it had only been five minutes, but if television had told me anything it was that crime always just sort of...showed up when a superhero started looking.

Time passed, and I occupied myself by simply flying low over the city. I knew the streets fairly well, both by studying the maps and just through watching whenever Dad drove me somewhere. It was harder to judge where I was from the sky though. Everything looked different from up here, and not just because it was dark.

A 10-57...finally. A hit and run. Someone had apparently injured someone and the police were now chasing them.

Now if I could only figure out where they were. I reached behind me and pulled out my phone and before I could pull it out of its case a gust of wind pulled it from my hand and I dropped it. I stared at it for a moment in horror before I grabbed onto it with my power and levitated it back to my hand.

It had taken me almost two weeks to figure out how to do it without damaging the compass inside my phone. A quick check of google maps and a check of my own location and I was off.

It only took a minute or two before I found them. They were in a beat up old Dodge Charger, running red lights which wasn't cool even if the streets were mostly empty. There were three police cars following them.

A simple flex of my power and their wheels left the ground. I levitated their vehicle so that the cops following wouldn't crash into them, and I began spinning the vehicle around on its axis. I pulled all the guns out, throwing them on the ground. When I judged that the men would be dizzy enough I dropped the car.
The police were already out of their vehicle, but they didn't see me floating above a building behind them. As they rushed in and cuffed the villains I felt a sense of satisfaction. I wasn't in this for the fame or for the action figures.

I'd seen how the slow death of the city had whittled my father down, turning him into a shell of the person he'd once been. It had begun even before my mother's death, although that had massively sped up the process. He'd believed that the city that he loved could rise like a phoenix, living again when it had seemed all but dead.

His faith had never been justified. Villains had eaten away at the city like maggots chewing away at the dead carcass of an animal that didn't yet realize that it was dead.

Any changes I could make would only be for the better. The first step was to give people hope.

The Protectorate never seemed to do anything but parade around and act like celebrities. Even if they did catch a villain he was out again in less than a week. I'd thought about becoming a Ward, but I didn't want to become a prancing show pony, trotted out whenever the government wanted me to give a sound bite.

I needed to make a difference, like my grandfather had. According to my father he'd been both hero and villain in his time, doing whatever it took to protect those he saw as his people.

Mutants, whatever they were didn't exist on Earth Bet, which meant that the closest thing I had to a people were the people of Brockton Bay.

More mundane calls came through the police scanner. A domestic dispute....ugh. I didn't want to touch that one with a ten foot pole.

The problem with flying was that it wasn't easy to see what was going on on the ground. I couldn't exactly see in the dark, and I didn't have super senses other than my magnetic sense that I could use to keep track of people.

I brightened. That might be the solution. At this hour people weren't usually out and about. Those who were might be involved in dastardly doings, at least enough to warrant another look.

Closing my eyes I reached out with my senses. I could detect buildings; most of them were permeated by a lattice of electrical wiring and plumbing. The people inside were much fainter, the iron in their blood almost imperceptible among the much greater amounts of metal encasing them.

Yet despite everything I did I didn't detect anyone doing anything strange. The night was dead.

I flew around for more than an hour waiting before I got impatient and headed home. I took a circuitous route in case I was caught by traffic cameras or something, even though most of those had either been stolen or vandalized.

I could only hope that every night wasn't going to be like this. Was being a hero more about boredom than about fighting?

I'd wanted to create a reputation before I tackled the Ship Graveyard. I'd lifted that car like it was nothing, so it was possible that I might be able to tear pieces off the boats and sink them or move them somehow. I considered doing it now, but I felt too discouraged.

As I landed in the alley behind my house I floated toward my gate. The latch on the inside of the gate
unlocked and I floated silently through it as it closed behind me. Soon I was inside my house, floating up the stairs and then letting my gear float off my body all at once. It was a good test of my ability to multitask with my powers and it was faster.

Also it felt cool to undress without moving a muscle.

I slipped into bed and waited to relax, but sleep wouldn't come. I was deeply disappointed. Was this all there was?

As I closed my eyes I stiffened.

I could hear whispering. I couldn't make out what it was saying, but it was distinct. It almost sounded as though it was coming from the walls.

A quick check with my ability told me that Dad was in his room alone, not that I'd expected that he wouldn't be. There was no one else in the house.

Yet the whispering in the walls continued.

I slipped out of bed and strained my ears to listen. It seemed to be coming from above me. Slipping into a robe I carefully slipped out of my room,

It almost sounded as though it was coming from the attic. I walked down the hall and the trap door in the ceiling pulled slowly down, without the normal creaking sound it made when it was done with hands.

I didn't bother with the pull down ladder. Instead I simply floated upward. Hopefully it wasn't a rat or a colony of bugs. I'd hate to think about being surrounded by something like that.

The attic was stuffed with the detritus of my parents marriage, most of it from before I'd even been born. The whispering seemed louder now, and as I floated through the dust covered remains of my parents lives I coughed, the dust filling the air.

I reached up and pulled the string to the light. The bulb was old and flickering, and I reminded myself to replace it when I got the chance. Dad had never been particularly handy around the house and now that he was depressed there was next to no chance that he'd take care of it.

There was a large chest in the corner that I hadn't seen before. It was bound in iron and had a heavy lock, not that that was an impediment. I could feel the tumblers and a moment later the lock sprang open. The chest was a moment behind.

I could barely see through the gloom; my shadow obscured the chest as I approached it.

The metal inside was something I could feel, however. With the tiniest flex of my will I levitated the thing at the top of the pile and brought it close to me.

It was a red helmet.

“At last,” the whispering formed itself into words.

“What?” I wondered. Was this some kind of tinker tech communication device from Mom's Lustrum days?

“Your fool of a father tried to lock me away, but he wasn't willing to entirely deprive you of your legacy.”
“What?” I asked again, feeling particularly stupid. Was the helmet talking to me? Were talking helmets a thing?

“Don't you recognize me, granddaughter?” the voice said. “I am what is left of your true family, even if I am only a pale shadow of the man I once was.”
"I had many enemies," the helmet said. "More than once they sealed my memories away, gelded me intellectually, turning me into a dunce so that they could turn me away from the true path."

"So you stored your memories in a helmet," I said flatly.

It wasn't even a particularly stylish helmet. If anything it looked a little stupid. I was a fifteen year old kid and I'd designed something that looked much better than this.

"This helmet was always designed to protect me from psionic attack. Telepathy was always the very least of my abilities; I only had enough to make me vulnerable."

"You mean the helmet protected you from being Mastered?" I asked, finally interested.

My powers seemed designed to fight all kinds of classes of powers. Brutes I could fight. Shakers, blasters...but I couldn't do anything about Masters.

The technology in the helmet itself, assuming it could be reproduced would be something the Protectorate would pay millions for. If it protected against the Simurgh it would be worth much, much more.

"You have inherited my abilities," the helmet said. "If you hadn't you wouldn't be able to understand me."

"So I'm Jewish and telepathic?" I asked.

"Barely," the helmet said. "With effort the power will grow, but it will never amount to anything like even minimal mastery."

"I thought telepathy doesn't exist," I said. "Except maybe the Simurgh."

"Perhaps not here, but it was common on my world."

I stared at the helmet wondering if there was some kind of sophisticated Artificial Intelligence inside. It had to be; it wasn't like my grandfather had placed his soul inside a hat.

A talking hat was just silly after all.

"So what do you want?" I asked. I tried to sound nonchalant, even though I was bursting with questions. My father hadn't known a lot about the world my mother had come from or how she'd come here, and I wanted to know everything. Yet from what little I'd heard about my grandfather he didn't respect weakness.

"To guide you in the way," the helmet said. "To make sure that this world does not go the way of my own."

"There aren't any mutants here," I pointed out skeptically. From what my father said my grandfather had been an extremist, planning all sorts of crazy schemes.

"There is one," the helmet said. "I will protect you and guide you."

"You're a helmet," I said flatly. I didn't see how a helmet was going to protect me, other than being a helmet. After all, telepathy didn't exist on this world, except maybe for the Simurgh, and as far as I
knew the helmet didn't have any other powers.

The anti-Master effect might be interesting though.

“I have eighty years of experience,” the helmet said. “I have seen wonders and horrors beyond what you can imagine... more than the heroes of this world have ever seen. I have mastered sciences beyond the comprehension of man and I can help you create devices that will astound and amaze.”

I sat up. He was offering Tinkertech?

Tinkering was the one power set that I really envied. They were able to create powers instead of endlessly tweaking the one power that they had.

From what I'd heard my grandfather hadn't been an actual tinker, offered plans and designs without actually understanding what he was building. His designs would be repeatable, able to actually make an impact in the world.

“Like what?” I asked.

The world needed new technology. It wasn't just the Endbringers; the world economies had taken hit after hit, and it took new technology to spur further development and create jobs.

“I have discovered the secrets of creating life. I have granted powers to ordinary humans, created genetic mind control. I have created clones, build aircraft and spacecraft and space stations. I have built robots and computers and power nullifiers.”

It was tempting. Dad thought robots were cool, even if he did worry about them taking jobs from people. The ability to give powers to normal people might mean that we could have a better chance against the Endbringers, and he might even have weapons that might make a difference.

Yet it felt a little like making a deal with the devil. He'd been a villain for most of his career, after all, and I was intending to be a hero. He was all but telling me that he intended to take me to the dark side.

What would I sacrifice if I listened to him?

I'd gain power and knowledge, but would it be worth it if I lost my soul?

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Put me on,” the helmet said. “So I can guide you in what must be done.”

“You must think I'm an idiot,” I said flatly. “You've already told me that you were using the helmet as a backup for your memories. What guarantee do I have that you won’t just... overwrite my memory and use me as a new body so you can do... whatever you are trying to do?”

“Have you no trust in family?” the helmet asked.

I was silent, staring at it.

It chuckled. “Perhaps the people of this world aren't idiots. I can still guide you even without wearing me.”

“How?” I asked.

A piece of the helmet detached. Without thinking I reached out and grabbed it.
“As long as this is touching your skin we can communicate,” the helmet said.

If the piece was dangerous it could have take me over the minute I touched it. I stared at the piece in my hand as though it was a rattlesnake.

“What do I call you?” I asked.

“I have had many names. I have been called Max and Erik. I have been called Magneto and master. I will not respond to grandpa or paw paw or any other puerile names however. I deserve respect, and I will ensure that you, as my progeny will receive the respect you deserve in turn.”

I had to wonder how much respect he'd thought his human daughter deserved. In his own way he was as much of a racist as the members of the Empire 88; instead of white people his chosen group was mutants. Did I really want to listen to a racist to tell me how to be a hero?

Fortunately I had time to decide. Making a life changing decision in a rush was never a good idea.

“I'll think about it,” I said. I yawned. “Unlike you I still have a body, and this body needs sleep.”

Hesitating, I looked at the shard in my hand. Part of me wanted to leave it here, to lock the chest and never look back. However, this... thing was my last living link to my mother. It presumably knew stories about her that my father had never even heard.

There had been a void in my life since my mother had died. In a way I had been almost as much of a shell of a person as my father; I was just better at hiding it.

Maybe this would be a way of healing some of what I had lost.

Also, robots.

Should worse come to worse and he started to have me build some sort of lair with an iron throne I could always chuck him into the ocean or into space. I was the one with the power here, and I was never going to put him on my head, so all he would be able to do would be a disembodied voice.

In the end the helmet was a resource that I couldn't ignore. It had the possibility of making me great faster than I otherwise would have been, which meant I'd be able to help the city faster.

I let the helmet drop into the chest and closed it up again. I floated back down to my room, shutting off the lights.

I dropped the octagon onto my dresser, setting it across the room from me; I certainly wasn't going to sleep with it under my pillow.

As I fell asleep I thought I heard whispering begin, and my dreams were troubled by images of gigantic flying robots killing everyone I loved.

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As I stepped into the halls of Winslow the whispering began.

Everyone had known what was going to happen to me and none of them had done anything about it. For some it was tactic approval. For others it was sheer cowardice. The one thing no one had apparently expected was for me to act as though nothing had happened.

“Keep your head up, granddaughter,” the thing whispered in my ear. How it knew what had happened I did not know; perhaps whatever telepathic link there was between us was deeper than I
had thought.

Perhaps sleeping with it across the room hadn't been the brightest idea.

In any case I could hear anger in its tone; whether if was anger at me for not punishing the people who had transgressed against me, or angry at them for attacking and attempting to humiliate the one mutant on the planet I couldn't tell.

It seemed like sound advice, so I walked in with my head held high. I ignored everyone and I walked by my locker, which had apparently been cleaned out overnight. I could still smell an acrid scent of cleaning fluids from it, strong enough that it burned my eyes and nose as I walked by it.

I headed for my first class, only to be stopped by Mr. Gladly in the halls.

“Principal Blackwell wants to see you,” he said.

I scowled. Given out interactions in the past I had a suspicion what she was going to have to say. She'd try to blame me for what had happened, perhaps aided by the testimony of the trio.

Turning, I headed for the principal's office.

The anger that was building inside of me wasn't healthy. I could feel lockers rattling all over the building and I had to intentionally calm myself.

“Why do you let your lessers torment you?” the voice whispered in my ear. “You have the power to make them stop... all of them.”

“Attacking norms with powers is a good way to get a kill order,” I murmured. “And while you might have been strong enough to fight the whole world, I'm not sure I want to.”

“That's only true if you get caught,” the voice said. “A simple accident with brake pads and you might find an administrator who is more willing to follow her oaths and actually protect her charges.”

According to Dad, he'd once run a school for mutants, so he knew what he was talking about. Still, he was talking about intentionally murdering Principal Blackwell. The scary thing was that I could already think of half a dozen ways I could do it without being caught.

Sabotaging her brakes was out of course; it was too close to how mom had died, and even if I was willing to commit cold blooded murder, I wouldn't do that. It was too close to what had happened to mom and would risk other, innocent people on the road.

The thought was like a splash of cold water; I felt a chill of horror go down my spine. My anger drained away.

I was going to be a hero, and heroes did not murder people because it was convenient.

“You'd be protecting others,” the voice whispered.

“I'm not doing it,” I muttered under my breath. I hoped this didn't keep happening; my reputation at school was already bad enough without my being seen talking to myself. Emma and the others would have me in a psychiatric hospital that my father couldn't afford before the day was out.

“Then we will have to find another way,” the voice said, as though the life or death of a single human had no more value to him than the fate of an ant on the ground.
The secretary looked at me with contempt as I stepped into the office. I'd tried complaining to the administration one time too many and she saw me as a troublemaker.

Her stapler was sitting precariously on the edge of her desk. A tiniest act of will sent the stapler falling. I moved it slightly as it hit the floor, and I heard her curse as she reached under the desk and hit her head. It was petty, but I felt a moment of satisfaction.

I stepped up to the door of Blackwell's office and I knocked.

“Come in,” I heard the muffled voice from inside.

As I stepped inside I saw Principal Blackwell staring at me disapprovingly.

“Why am I here?” I asked.

“This is about the vandalism of your locker,” she said.

“Go on the offensive,” the voice whispered. “So long as she controls the conversation she has the power.”

It was why she sat behind a big desk and wore the clothes that she did; it was intimidating.

“Are you going to press assault charges?” I asked.

“We're here to talk about your vandalizing school property,” she said. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You know what happened,” I said coolly. “Do you really think that nobody filmed what happened? Everyone has cell phones. What do you think would happen if I went to the press with the information that Winslow is actively participating in the assault of students on campus?”

She stared at me, silent for a moment.

“I'm sure that there is no evidence of something that didn't happen,” she said smoothly. “And blackmail is a crime. You are already in enough trouble as it is.”

“You could kill her with the paperclip on her desk,” the voice in my ear said helpfully. “It would be easy. I can show you how. You should not tolerate this from someone like her.”

“Like there's evidence that I'd vandalize my own locker?” I asked. I lifted one eyebrow. “You know there are a lot of lawyers out there who will work for a cut of whatever lawsuit winnings they get. How hard do you think it would be to make a case of willful and malicious neglect?”

The voice whispered in my ear, and I brightened.

“Sometimes winning can be losing,” the voice said. “If it costs too many resources.”

Leaning forward I said “And even if we lose how much will defending the case cost the school? What will it do to your reputation with your superiors?”

She scowled, then waved at me.

“Get back to class.”

Getting her to actually take real action against Emma, Sophia and Madison was too much to expect, at least without actual evidence and blackmail material. I knew that the three of them had probably
made sure that no one was filming; they were good at protecting themselves like that.

“I'll need new copies of my books,” I said. “And it would hardly be fair to make me pay for them again, not when this clearly was perpetrated by unknown parties.”

She scowled and scribbled out a note, as well as a hall pass without even asking.

I was tempted to make a parting remark, something scathing and cutting, but the voice interrupted me.

“Be gracious in victory, child.” His voice sounded almost amused. “Taunting the defeated only leads to retribution later. Even the mouse can wound the lion when the time is right.”

Was I the mouse or the lion? I didn't always understand his metaphors, probably because he was old. He'd grow up during world war two, and I had the impression that the world my mother had come from was farther along in the timeline than my own. For all respects and purposes he was from the future.

Instead of making a snarky remark I simply took the papers from her, looked her in the eye and held my head high. I turned and left the office.

The secretary was still rubbing her head, which gave me a grim sense of satisfaction.

Two wins in the same day, however small was a rare thing for me. Of course that meant that the rest of the day was likely to go downhill, but I'd treasure whatever victories I could get.

“Pessimism is the sign of the weak,” the voice whispered. “The strong make their own future, even if they have to bend fate to their own will.”

“I can see that you haven't been to high school,” I muttered.

The hallways were empty now, leaving me free to move around as I wished. I felt a sudden impulse to simply leave; I'd had my victories for the day, why taint that with what was sure to follow.

“If you do not conquer your fears they will conquer you.”

“What are you, a fortune cookie?” I snapped.

“Think of this as your first step toward conquest. While these people are inconsequential ants they have made you believe that they are lions. If you don't have the courage to face them what does it say about your will to face the greater villains to come?”

He was right.

I had to learn to face my own demons or I'd end up cowering ever time things became hard. I couldn't afford to let myself get weak, not when I was just starting out. I had to learn to stand up for myself or I'd be a failure.

Maybe having a supervillain whispering in my ear wasn't the worst thing in the world.
Lumps

Everyone's eyes were on me as I stepped into the classroom. They all knew what had happened to me the day before. I could see it in their eyes. Some of them had undoubtedly enjoyed it, anticipated it even. They were doubtlessly hoping to see me break down, turn into a wreck.

I wasn't going to be part of their own personal soap opera.

“Show no weakness or they will eat you alive,” the voice whispered.

For once we were in agreement. I held my head high and ignored everyone as I handed my pass to the teacher.

This was computer class, one of the classes I didn't have any of my primary bullies; afterwards I would have world issues with Mr. Gladly. Madison would be there, trying to make my life as difficult as possible.

I'd have to dodge them at lunch, and I'd have to deal with Sophia in physical education after lunch. After that I was onto my advanced classes and I wouldn't have to worry about them until tomorrow.

Logging onto my computer I made short work of the assigned work. The work had always been easy for me, and as time had gone by it had gone easier for me. I saw connections that other people didn't see and I wondered if it was my power making me smarter than other people, or if I had always been this smart and had simply covered it up to not humiliate Emma.

Logging onto the PHO afterwards was easy enough. I looked for any reference to my actions the night before.

There was one small notation, but no one really seemed to care much. There had been no video of the event and the police had only made a small note of it, so there wasn't a lot of excitement about it.

That was all according to plan. The sooner that people knew about me the sooner I would be facing real villains. Independent capes tended not to last long in the bay; they were either killed or recruited within a few months.

“Such timidity doesn't suit someone with the power of Magneto,” the voice said.

Given his... confidence, he probably wanted me to go out and fight Lung the first night out, then take a selfie of myself over his body to post online.

“Defeat the strongest and the weaker will cower,” the voice said approvingly.

“Or they'll gang up on me,” I muttered.

The classmate to my left glanced sharply at me. I frowned and shook my head at him. I was going to need to learn to subvocalize when I talked to my fake grandfather or I was going to get the reputation for being crazy that I had been worried about.

I'd never be stupid enough to take on Lung, at least not until I was sure that I had the power and the experience to take him. It was my nature to be cautious... at least I thought it was. I'd never really had the opportunity to take risks before so I couldn't be sure.

I spent the rest of the period running through a list of the known parahumans in the Bay. My hope
was that my grandfather might have ideas about how to counter each of them with my powers. Fortunately he was quite helpful, and some of his ideas were imaginative and creative.

Some of the capes in town I doubted that I'd have trouble with. Hookwolf was almost made to be beaten by me. Kaiser's weapons would be mine the moment he made them.

Others wore metal armor, something they'd probably stop doing when they realized what I could do.

According to my grandfather my force field would probably work against Purity, bending the attack around me, but I'd have to be careful about what her beam hit behind me. It was a problem he'd had in the past. As I could master other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, it was possible that her blasts might be something I could work with. I would need a lot more practice to make it work.

There weren't many Masters in the Bay...possibly Hellhound, who apparently controlled dogs although no one was really quite sure.

My biggest enemies were probably going to be people like Crusader and Shadow Stalker. Crusader's ghosts went right through armor; whether my force field would work or not depended on how their ability worked. If it took them somewhere else, leaving only an afterimage in this reality, then my shield wouldn't work.

If it simply dispersed them or put them out of phase then it was possible that it would. There would be no way to know until I encountered them, which meant that I couldn't afford to get cocky.

The voice brought up the thought that just because there were certain capes living in the Bay that didn't mean that others wouldn't come in from outside. Parahumans could be a transient bunch.

“Expect that the unexpected will happen; you can't prepare for everything,” the voice said. “But prepare for as many things as you can and the rest will follow on its own.”

It didn't seem like bad advice. Overpreparing was sometimes as bad as underpreparing, because changes could throw you off your plans.

As I got up to leave the class I saw that all three of my tormentors and their entourage were waiting for me.

“I think she's a little slow,” Julia said. “People keep trying to tell her that they don't want her here, but she never seems to get the message.”

“Hebert always was a bit of an idiot,” Sophia said casually. “Can't take a hint, not ever.”

“Head up, child,” the voice said. “Never show fear before jackals, even if they are only cubs.”

“I've seen burn victims who were better looking,” Madison said. “And after yesterday I don't think I'll ever get the stink out of my nose.”

“She always stank,” one of the hanger's on said. “Because she's poor.”

The voice in my head was silent for a moment as the tirade continued.

“I have been a leader of men for decades,” the voice began. “And I have spent much of that time learning to take a man's measure. I can look at a man and make guesses about his strengths and weaknesses.”

I wasn't sure where he was going with this.
“The redhead pretends to be strong but she is weak. Push her and she will fold like a house of cards.”

Looking at Emma it was hard to believe. She'd always seemed strong and dauntless, even when she was tormenting me.

“It's a front, a projection to the world to convince everyone and herself that she is not weak.”

Like a chihuahua in a world where every other creature was larger. They often pretended to be much larger than they were.

“The others hate her and are looking for an excuse to push her off her throne, but they too are afraid,” the voice said. “All it would take is the slightest push and she would go toppling.”

I glanced at Sophia and the voice was silent again.

“That one is dangerous. She clearly knows how to fight, and she has a self confidence that you don't often see in someone her age. She's either a member of a criminal organization or possibly a superhuman or both.”

Sophia a superhuman? Clearly his radar wasn't infallible.

I glanced at Madison and he didn't do anything but grunt derisively.

The stress on my face must have shown despite my best efforts, because Emma shoved herself in my face.

“You look upset,” she said. “Are you growing to cry? Maybe cry yourself to sleep for a full week?”

I didn't have a chance to respond before I felt rage coming from the voice, the first actual emotion that I'd ever felt coming through our link. It was rage beyond anything I'd ever experienced, and if I hadn't been in school in front of more than a dozen witnesses I'd have fallen to my knees.

I'd lost a mother, but he'd lost a daughter, and Emma's making fun of her death was apparently more than he could take dispassionately.

“It's not like you shouldn't cry,” Emma was continuing. “After all, you were the one who killed her mother.”

The shock of that held me frozen for a moment.

“Let me show you how to put this... creature in her place,” the voice said.

I nodded slightly, and a moment later he began whispering instructions in my ear.

“You once told me that you admired me,” I said coolly. “That I was stronger than you'd ever be. That's the one true thing you've ever said.”

I shrugged cruelly. “You're weak, worthless. You'll never be a big time model and without that what are you? You aren't smart and you certainly aren't nice. You might be able to trick someone into marrying you, but nobody is going to want to stay. After all, someone who wouldn't even cry when their mother died is somebody who would backstab anyone.”

Gesturing at everyone else I smirked. “How long do you think these jackals will stay around once they realize what you really are?”
“You're weak,” I said, leaning forward. “You've always been weak. You shoved me in that crap yesterday and I took it like a champion. How long would you have lasted... a second, a minute? You wouldn't last a single hour of the crap you put me through, and I've taken it for the past three years.”

Sophia was trying to shove her way through the crowd of girls who were all staring at me in shock. I'd been a punching bag for so long that the idea that I might fight back was alien to every one of them.

I felt a sudden flash of an image in my mind of an Asian face leaning forward and whispering something.

I leaned forward and whispered in Emma's ear.

“Eye, nose, mouth or ears?”

She screamed and started punching away at me. I considered putting up my shield, but the voice advised against it.

It hurt, but the bruising would be the proof I needed to at least get something done. I didn't fight back as she hit me over and over. She wasn't very strong, but I felt a vicious kick to my ribs as I crouched to the floor that didn't come from her.

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“She says you started it,” Principal Blackwell said.

“I never touched her, not once,” I said. “You can ask Mrs. Knox.”

Mrs. Knox nodded.

“She says you threatened her and she was defending herself,” Principal Blackwell said.

Alan Barnes was in the room and she hadn't even called Dad. I'd already checked and I was developing a real shiner. Emma wasn't even in the room; for some reason she refused to even look at me without lashing out again.

“I never said anything like that,” I said. “When are we going to call the police?”

“Over your behavior?”

“Assault and battery of a minor,” I said. “She has spent the last year and a half in a concerted bullying campaign that has ended in her assaulting me.”

“There is no need to involve the police,” she said. “This is simply a schoolyard scrap.”

“You're a lawyer,” I said, turning to Alan. “If I march down to the police station looking like this what do you think the police are going to do?”

“What would going to juvie do to her modeling career, to her chances of going to college?” I asked.

He stared at me as though he'd never seen me before.

I felt strange, as though I was the one in control of the room.

“There's no proof that Emma did this,” he said.
I had been searching the Internet while waiting for Alan and Emma to convince Blackwell to turn this all against me. It hadn't taken me long to find what I was looking for.

Pulling out my phone I held it up, pressing play.

Nerd girl gets pwnd!!! was what the heading said.

The audio was grainy; there was no way to know what I was saying through the catcalls of the girls. It was clear however that Emma was attacking me, and just as clear that no one else was coming forward to help me. Two of the teachers in the background were clearly not doing anything, whether through apathy or fear of lawsuits I didn't know.

“This isn't the only video online either,” I said. “I've found a half dozen of them. Most of them aren't very complimentary toward me, but what do you think a juvenile judge will think when he sees them?”

Emma had always been able to stay on top by staying out of trouble and always managing to blame others for the things she did. The moment she had attacked me in front of witnesses the other girls had seen an opportunity to dethrone her, and they'd taken it.

The voice had known this would happen before I'd even opened my mouth. Its solution had been different, something I hadn't been willing to do. It never would have suggested that I let myself be beaten; it had far too much pride for that.

Or maybe it wasn't as cunning as me.

Sometimes losing can be winning if it is done right.

If he was as old as he claimed, how did he know about social media? I'd always thought old people avoided things like that like the plague.

Of course, I obviously didn't have much experience with grandparents. I hadn't known anything about Mom's parents, and Dad's had been dead for a long time. Maybe there was a whole Senior section on Myspace where they showed wrinkly pictures to each other.

“Emma and I were friends once,” I said. “I don't know what happened to her. But she needs help. You can either get it for her yourself or I can call the police and she can get it that way.”

I forced myself to stare at Alan Barnes coldly. I didn't know how aware of what Emma had been doing that he knew about, but I did know that he had no intention of lifting a finger to help me unless he was forced to.

I didn't even need to listen to the whispering in my mind to know that.

Glancing over at Ms. Blackwell, I said, “While I'm sure the school board isn't all that interested in a simple case of assault and battery... this IS Winslow after all, I think the media might be interested. The videos alone are enough to make this mildly newsworthy, and I've kept a log of every time that I've been abused and more importantly every time that the school ignored or rejected my claims.”

“You have no proof of anything,” Ms. Blackwell said.

“I don't have to,” I said. “Emma is in trouble and the vultures are circling. How long do you think that it will be before some of the kids break ranks and start talking to reporters to get their fifteen minutes of fame? Teenagers love that kind of thing. That's why they make videos of themselves on You Tube doing idiotic things.”
Leaning forward, I said “And once a reporter starts digging, I'm betting I'm not the only one. I'll bet that there are others who have better evidence that I do. How much bad publicity do you think it takes to get a school Principal blacklisted? Mark Twain once wrote “In the first place, God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made school boards.”

“What do you want, Miss Hebert?” Blackwell asked. She sounded tired.

“I want you to do your damn job,” I said. “I want to be able to come to this school and be ignored. I'm not asking to have friends, just to not have juice thrown on me, insults every time I walk down the hallways, being tripped and almost pushed down the stairs and having it ignored because the perpetrator is a track star.”

“You are asking for the impossible,” Blackwell said, looking at me. “I can't control every student in this school.”

“Then punish the ones who do,” I said.

“Without proof what can I do? You threaten me, but the parents of the other students do exactly the same thing if I punish their children without concrete evidence, and some of them have considerably more clout than you do, even now.”

“Then get rid of me,” I said. “Transfer me to Arcadia, and I'm a problem out of your hair and out of Mr. Barnes. Emma isn't only cruel to me, but I seem to be the one she puts the most effort into. A lot of her issues might disappear if I'm gone.”

“You think I haven't thought about it?” she asked. “You've been a thorn in my side since you came to this school, and I'd love to make you someone else's problem. The problem is that I have no control over Arcadia, especially in the middle of the semester.”

“Then let me home school,” I said. “There are online computer courses I can take until next semester. I'm sure with your full endorsement Arcadia would be more than willing to let me in. After all, my grades in all the classes I'm not being bullied are exemplary.”

“And the ones where you claim to be bullied are not,” she said. She sighed. “I can't do anything about this without the agreement of your father.”

Who should have been here all along. They'd intended to bully me into compliance; I didn't even have to listen to the voice to know that much.

“Are we done here?” I asked.

“You aren't entirely blameless in this,” Principal Blackwell said.

She was planning to try to turn this around, make it my fault like she had always done in the past. Giving her time to do it would be giving her time to regain her confidence. That wasn't something I wanted to do.

“I've already taken my lumps,” I said, gesturing toward my face. “Are you ready to take yours?”

With that I stood up and left.
“Allowing yourself to be hurt for a tactical advantage is not what I would have chosen,” the voice said. “My method would have worked much better.”

“She was my friend once,” I said. “Destroying her life like you wanted wasn’t an option.”

I was heading out of school, wondering how I was going to explain my face to Dad. He had a temper, and it was going to be all I could do to keep him from marching over to the Barnes’ and punching Alan in the face.

“She takes joy in the death of your mother. Shouldn’t she pay for that?”

“To someone like her social position IS her life. What I did today is going to threaten that,” I said. “I don’t know why she responded so violently to what I said... I just got a hint of an image, but it was enough to drive her nuts.”

“Our telepathic abilities are frail and uncertain,” the voice said. “I have known mutants who could have cored your... friend’s mind like an apple. They could have stolen every thought and made her dance to their tune with just the merest effort of power.”

“People like that get the Birdcage here,” I said. “Or a bullet to the head.”

It was true. Masters didn’t join the Protectorate often, at least not openly. People thought it was because the Protectorate didn’t trust them, or because people didn’t trust them and so they kept the ones they had hidden.

As I approached a corner I could feel tiny particles of iron floating through a bloodstream.

Everyone else was in class. Whoever it was was waiting for me.

I hesitated. The smart thing to do would be to turn around and leave. I knew almost certainly who it had to be, and if she escalated enough I wasn’t certain what I’d do.

“Cowardice doesn’t become you,” the voice whispered.

I suspected that the voice was impatient with my school life. If I lashed out with my powers here I’d be forced to go on the run, which would make me much easier to bend to his point of view.

Knowing he was a villain meant that I had to take everything he said with a grain of salt. I wasn’t even sure whether to think of him as a he or an it... I kept shifting back and forth in my mind. Was this the spirit of my grandfather, somehow held through a science beyond anything known on our earth, or was it simply a sophisticated Artificial Intelligence?

Before I could choose to do anything, Sophia stepped from around the corner.

“What did you say to her?” she asked.

Her expression was dangerous; there wasn’t any of the mocking boredom that she usually had when she bullied me.

I stared at her silently. I’d seen Sophia get into fights before, usually with the Empire guys. They tended to be short, efficient and brutal. Most of the Empire guys didn’t go to the administration for fears of being mocked for being beaten by a black girl.

Idiots
“I told her what she needed to hear,” I said coolly.

“Ask her about her father,” the voice said. It seemed almost gleeful. “Girls like this almost always have daddy issues.”

Sophia's father wasn't around; she had a stepfather from what I'd heard.

“Just like I'd ask you about your stepdad,” I said.

She froze, staring at me, and then her face flushed, which was quite a feat given her skin tone. The expression on her face told me that we'd struck a nerve.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” she asked, slamming me up against the lockers.

It didn't hurt because of my shields, but she didn't seem to notice. I could have forced her hand away from where it was grabbing my shirt, but I didn't bother.

“It's possible she was abused,” the voice said. “Or that like your other friend she had some sort of trauma that has made her this way.”

I smirked.

“It hurts to think that you aren't the most important thing in my life,” I said. “To know that ultimately you don't matter.”

She froze, staring at me.

“In the long run, you'll end up in jail. You can only roll the dice so many times before you roll snake eyes.”

Shoving me against the lockers again, she said “You don't know anything.”

Listening to the voice in my ear, I said, “You think you've gotten away with it, but there are people who know what you did. How long do you think it'll be before the people in power find out?”

It was a shot in the dark. Someone like Sophia always had a skeleton in her closet, and if she really was a member of a gang there would be people who knew what she'd done.

I saw something in her eyes; I'd hit a nerve.

“You keep going like you're going and they'll lock you away. Me...my life is going to get a lot better from here on out. When we come back to our ten year reunion, where do you think you'll be? In prison orange?”

I hesitated. The voice suspected that she might be a metahuman. There was one way to find out.

“Or maybe you'll be in the Birdcage.”

Only parahumans went to the Birdcage. There was a moment of shock on her face before she quickly controlled her expression.

Sophia's hands tightened around my shirt and then she dropped it. “You're just making things up.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But it doesn't change the fact that you and Emma aren't worth bothering with. You wonder why I haven't fought back, haven't responded to either of you?”
I leaned forward. “It's because you are beneath me.”

“She's about to attack,” the voice said.

Dodging to the side, I saw Sophia hit the lockers. I didn't have any combat training, and I suspected that if I actually got into a fight with her I'd have to reveal my powers or I'd get hurt quickly.

A quick burst of power and the fire alarm at the end of the hallway was pulled. People began to stream out of the classrooms into the hall, and when they saw the two of us facing each other down cell phones were coming out and pointed in our direction.

Sophia saw them, and she snarled at me.

“This isn't over Hebert,” she snarled, and then she stalked off.

I shrugged and continued on my way to the outside of the school. Walking home in the middle of the day wasn't the smartest decision; the cops would probably harass me for being out of school. It didn't matter.

“Shit,” I said under my breath. “You're right. Sophia is a parahuman.”

The way she'd responded to the Birdcage question was highly suspicious. I suspected that it wouldn't be difficult to figure out which Cape she was. After all, she was black, which eliminated the ABB and the Empire. She was female, which further cut down the list of Capes she could be.

Although Skidmark was black, the Merchants had hardly any known Capes.

Could she be Parian? The woman had bee careful to keep her ethnicity hidden. I couldn’t see Sophia running a side business as a seamstress.

As reluctant as I was to entertain the idea, that left the heroes. She obviously wasn't Vista, who was too young and white.

Shadow Stalker on the other hand...

Of she was Shadow Stalker, it would explain a lot. If Blackwell knew about it and was making concessions because of it it would mean that my decision not to join the PRT was the right one after all.

My original decision was still sound. They seemed to be more interested in public relations than in actually helping people. Something like this would mean that they were rotten to the core. Either they'd mismanaged Sophia, in which case they were incompetent, or they were actively involved, which was worse.

“Do not allow your imagination to take you down dark paths,” the voice said. “Until you have proof this is all just speculation.”

“You are advising me to me to be cautious?” I asked incredulously. “Where's all that stuff about taking a man's mettle and all that?”

“I've had a lifetime of experience at judging people, and even I sometimes am wrong,” he admitted. “Sometimes disastrously so.”

Still, it was possible that if Sophia really was Shadow Stalker or some other independent cape that I
hadn't heard from, I might have just made her suspicious. When someone who was timid suddenly develops confidence it was typically a sight of something.

“Do you really want to be stuck in that school when I can give you an education beyond the petty science of this world?”

“You'd like that, wouldn't you?” I snarled. “Separate me from the rest of humanity, make yourself the only source of love and affection. That's how cults get started.”

“You'll need to start your own cult of personality,” he said. “Even with all your power, you need minions.”

“Calling your employees minions is part of the reason that people think you are a super villain,” I said. “Heroes lead teams, villains have minions.”

Reaching the bus stop, I waited.

I could have flown home in a couple of minutes, but that would have risked exposing myself and putting Dad at risk. That meant that I had to put myself at the mercy of Brockton Bay public transport. I'd be lucky if urine was the only smell on the seats.

“This mode of travel is beneath you,” he said.

“I'm fifteen,” I said. “I won't be getting a driver's license for at least a year, and unless you want me to build some kind of eight legged death tank, which is silly considering that I can fly, it's public transportation or nothing.”

Before he could respond, the bus turned the corner. A moment later it slid into place in front of me.

Stepping onto the bus, I slipped my pass into the reader. A moment later I slid onto the back of the bus. Carefully checking the plastic seats I sat down.

As we moved from stop to stop, I watched as the detritus of humanity stepped onto the bus. That couple were obviously Merchants. They reeked of burnt rope and their teeth were rotting. Their eyes were bloodshot and they barely seemed aware of where they were.

A couple of homeless guys stepped on board at the next stop. Even though I was a half dozen seats away I could smell them.

A harried looking women with three small, screaming children stepped onto the bus and sat down. Even though the children were running up and down the aisles she studiedly ignored them and all of us as well.

Although the voice didn't say anything I could sense its disapproval. It would doubtlessly tell me that I was better than all these people, but was I really? Did my being a mutant make me better than regular people somehow?

Emma would have made fun of Dad and me for being poor. The fact that I was on the bus at all instead of taking a cab was proof that I wasn't any better than any of these people.

We turned another corner. I'd forgotten how many stops there were. Usually when I took the bus to school I was so busy worrying about what Emma and Sophia had cooked up for me that I barely noticed all the stops.

Plus, it was more obvious when the bus was almost empty. Usually I was sitting staring at people's
coat pockets or I was standing with my face stuck in people's armpits.

One of the homeless guys got off, and I stiffened as I saw someone getting on the bus. There was something wrong about him.

Even though it was January the day was unseasonably warm. The man was wearing a heavy overcoat. He was avoiding eye contact with everyone. That wasn't unusual in itself; everyone was busy trying to pretend they were the only ones on the bus. They looked bored about it, however, and he did not.

He was perspiring, possibly from the coat, but he looked nervous. He was fidgeting and his face was flushed. His whole body seemed to be trembling.

In one hand he was carrying a large duffle bag. It looked heavy, and his hands were clenched tightly around it.

“Beware,” the voice said. “This one is dangerous.”

Reaching out with my magnetic sense, I could feel a lot of metal in the bag. I couldn't make out exactly what it was, but the whole thing had to weigh at least sixty pounds.

As we headed to the next stop, I noticed that several cars were on the road with us. They were black vans and all of them were unmarked. Their windows were shaded so that you couldn't see inside; I wasn't sure that was even legal in this state.

“I'll get off at the next stop,” I murmured to myself.

Whatever this was, it didn't look like the kind of thing I should involve myself in, certainly not while I was in my civilian identity.

The man was getting more and more agitated; he'd finally noticed the vans too. Other people on the bus were noticing him as well; I noticed that the woman shushed her children and moved three seats back, closer to me.

A check on his body showed that he had metal on him under his coat. It almost seemed like a vest, but not one like the vest I had made. It wasn't one continuous piece.

The bus started to slow, and suddenly the man surged to his feet. He pulled a gun from his pocket and he screamed at the bus driver in another language. The bus driver apparently understood him.

“He's speaking Russian,” the voice in my head said. It almost sounded smug.

“And I suppose you understand Russian?” I mumbled.

“And German, French, Ukrainian, Hebrew, Portuguese and Yiddish,” he said “Among other languages.”

Yiddish and Hebrew were different languages? Apparently being Jewish was a lot more complicated than I had thought. It wasn't just wearing a funny cap and going to church on Saturday.

The bus sped up instead of stopping at the next stop. I scowled.

Closing my eyes, I disabled the firing pin on his gun. I'd been practicing that little trick for a while since it was something I knew I'd need. While I could stop bullets fairly easily, it was better than no bullet was ever fired.
Besides, having the guns all suddenly not work would be intimidating all on its own. It would help me work from the shadows. I hadn't intended to be this close to the action, but I was glad I had practiced.

It was all part of my preparations for being a hero. I'd gotten a cell phone so that I could call the police and PRT if I captured criminals. I couldn't depend on the criminals to always have phones on them. I felt guilty for having it; Dad would look at me with a disappointed expression on my face if he knew I had it.

Calling the police would have been an option except that I suspected that it was the police following us.

Now that they were aware that the man knew what was going on, they abandoned all pretense of being innocent black vans.

“THIS IS THE PRT,” a voice on a loudspeaker said. “PULL THE BUS OVER AND SURRENDER.”

The man cursed in Russian. I ignored the voice's helpful offer to translate.

Instead the man pulled his jacket open, and I froze as I saw the vest he was wearing. It looked like it was made with Tinkertech, and it was undoubtedly a bomber's vest.

Earth Aleph had had problems with terrorists, but on Earth Bet we had far less experience with them. There were parahuman groups like the Fallen and the Teeth, and the fact that the PRT was involved suggested that this man was more than he appeared.

Before I had a chance to get a good look at the bomb he'd already closed his coat again.

“It won't be as simple as pulling a wire,” the voice said. “Any competent bomb maker will set it to go off if it is tampered with, and this one uses technology that I haven't seen before.”

“You can't figure it out anyway?” I snapped. “I thought you were supposed to be a tinker's tinker or something.”

“I can only see what you see,” the voice said. “And a glimpse alone won't be enough. What I did see was that the bomb is probably powerful enough to destroy several city blocks.”

Before I could reply, one of the PRT vans rammed into the side of the bus, forcing it to the side of the road.

“What the hell?”

Hadn't they seen the bomb? Didn't they care about civilian casualties?

The bus stopped and I realized with a sinking feeling that we were next to a familiar school. This was the school that I'd gone to when I was a child, and Elementary school with more than a thousand children.

Those idiots.

A moment later the man in the trenchcoat was striding toward me. Apparently he'd seen me mumbling to myself. In his mind I was probably working for the PRT, giving them updates about our situation.
He was screaming at me in a language I couldn't understand, pointing a gun that I'd already disarmed at my face. However, he also had a powerful bomb under his jacket that I couldn't yet disarm.

I should have sprung for a cab.
Interlude PRT

Robert gripped the steering wheel tightly. His career was over, and it was almost a relief.

The video Coil had would have put him in prison and on a registry if he'd ever gotten out. Every time he changed records for Coil, or slipped confidential information to him, he only dug himself in deeper.

The horrible thing was that he knew Coil had other operatives in the building, which meant that he couldn't risk trying to turn into an informant. Even if he could get immunity, which was unlikely given how Piggot ran things, he'd probably have a bullet in the back of his head by the end of the day.

Coil knew things, things he shouldn't have been able to know. Things always turned out in his favor.

Today was the first time that he'd been allowed to know the identity of two of his co-conspirators. The men were both riding in the van with him now, and they'd already worked out their stories; the van radio had been defective and they'd used their best judgment in stopping the bus.

The fact that they'd stopped the bus next to an elementary school was the most horrifying thing about all of it.

Coil wanted to discredit the PRT for some reason that wasn't clear to him, and something like this was going to be a PR disaster.

The fact that the bombs themselves had been stolen from PRT facilities was only going to raise more questions about the efficacy of the PRT.

He was letting down everyone else in the organization, and his guilt was overpowering. He was almost glad that the PRT uniforms covered the face and seeing his guilt reflected on the faces of his compatriots was impossible.

For the moment he had to hope that Coil wasn't planning on this being his last mission. Would he endanger a school of elementary children simply to gain some kind of advantage over his enemies?

The only advantage was that if the bomb blew he wouldn't survive long enough to know the horrible things he'd unleashed following a madman.

For the moment there was no choice but to fall back on training.

Rushing out of the van, he and his two comrades helped form a cordon around the bus. In some ways procedures weren't that different than if they were dealing with a Shaker. Evacuation was the most important thing, and from what he heard on the radio the PRT was already taking steps to try to evacuate the children. It was going to be a difficult task, considering that they were going to have to get hundreds of children several blocks away, and the school buses were not nearby.

He felt a sudden sense of resolve. It didn't matter what Coil wanted. He wasn't going to allow children to die, even if it killed him. Death would be better than living like this; always looking over his shoulder, wondering how long it was before Coil asked him to do something he wasn't willing to do.

There had been a time where he wouldn't have considered doing something like this. Every time he'd compromised, it was like a little piece of his soul had been chipped away, leaving an empty void.
Compromising had gotten easier and easier.

Stepping out onto the pavement, he pulled his weapon. Containment foam wouldn't do anything to contain the blast made by something like this, and they didn't know much about the man who was wearing the vest.

“He's moving them all to the back of the bus,” the announcement came over the speaker in his helmet, as though he couldn't see what the man was doing.

“He's using them as human shields,” another voice interjected.

The sound of a motorcycle in the distance indicated that Armsmaster was on his way. Robert had been avoiding Armsmaster as much as possible for fear of his new lie detection software. The man claimed it was nowhere near ready, but Tinkers were known to endlessly tweak projects even after anyone else would have said they were good enough.

“Do you have a shot?” Robert asked the man beside him.

His co-conspirator shook his head. Of course it wouldn't be that easy. Coil wanted to humiliate the PRT; a simple head shot could be covered up in the media as a PRT success even if it had been in front of a school.

“Back up,” their unit commander said over the radio.

There was a sudden commotion inside the bus; it looked as though some of the male passengers were rushing the man.

“Crap,” Robert said.

A moment later heat and light blotted out his vision. He staggered back, and suddenly the world went quiet as the sound of the explosion overwhelmed his sense of hearing.

Something was wrong, though. He wasn't dead, which he should have been if the explosion was as powerful as they'd all been told.

Instead, the fireball was funneling upward, away from the school and away from his fellow agents. Was this what Coil had had in mind?

The bus itself disintegrated, turning into a thousand metal fragments that were suddenly floating, rotating in a funnel.

Armsmaster pulled up beside him, with Miss Militia riding behind him on the motorcycle. He said something, but Robert couldn't hear him.

Shadows appeared in the middle of the conflagration. It took a moment for Robert to identify them as humanoid figures. Metal was flying toward the one in the lead, forming itself into armor. By the time the woman was visible, her face was covered with a sort of helmet, and her body in armor that fit her as though it was molded to her body.

Behind her were the other passengers, none of them harmed miraculously.

They were walking slowly, but as soon as they breached the edge of the flames, the passengers broke ranks and began to run.

Robert held out his containment foam sprayer and commended them to stop, even though he couldn’t
hear what he was saying.

It was possible that the terrorist and thief was among them, posing as one of the victims. That was something that had been tried before, which was why there were procedures in these kinds of situations.

The woman in the armor stood at the edge of the flames, staring at them for a moment. As the flames began to die down, the molten hot bus fragments continued to levitate. She turned slightly and gestured, and the fragments gently dropped to the ground.

Before Robert or any of the others could do anything, the woman turned back to them and then she shot into the air. She was fast; not Alexandria fast but faster than any of the Capes in the Bay except for Purity.

A moment later she was gone.

The next few hours were going to be difficult, especial once his superiors started to review what he had done.

At least the miracle he’d been hoping for had given him a second chance. Of all the stains he had on his soul, at least this one would not be there.

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“Nobody had a good look at her,” Armismaster said, scowling.

“I think it's a little like riding in an elevator,” Miss Militia said. “Everybody tries to ignore everyone else until it's over.”

“It's like that in the Bay,” Armismaster said. “I think people are ashamed to be riding the buses here.”

“What do we actually know?” Emily Piggot stared at them. “Was she involved?”

“Not as far as the other passengers could tell. He actually threatened to shoot her because she kept talking to herself, which was part of the reason the male passengers attacked him.”

“Wonderful,” Director Piggot said. “The last thing we need is a schizophrenic cape who has this kind of power.”

“She is apparently a female in her mid-teens. Her hair was described as being black or brown or red... witnesses are notoriously unreliable. Everyone agreed that she was tall for a girl.”

“How much power does she have?”

“She was able to contain the explosion using some kind of a force field,” Armismaster said. “While at the same time protecting everyone on the bus with individual force fields of their own. Given the known power of the explosion, it would take a lot of power to contain, and a lot of finesse to create so many other force fields all at once.”

“She was able to levitate the component parts of a city bus while she was doing all this,” Miss Militia said. “Brockton transit buses weigh sixteen tons empty.”

“So is she some kind of telekinetic?”
“It's impossible to say yet. I've been planning to add sensors to my armor so that when something like this happens I'll have more information. Unfortunately there never seems to be the time.”

“Make the time,” Piggot said. “Were you able to get anything from the recorder in your suit? I didn't see anything from the video.”

Armsmaster shook his head. “I didn't see anything more than you did, and you can't enhance information that's not there.”

“So what is your tentative rating?”

“So far we are tentatively suggesting Mover 4, Brute 6, and Shaker 7.”

“Brute from her force field, I'm assuming.”

“Given the estimated power she would have had to use, I am fairly confident that we are probably underselling the issue. Usually force fields grow weaker the farther they are spread; hers had to cover multiple people and a funnel covering the bus. Should she only have to protect herself, I would imagine she'd be considerably tougher.”

“How tough?”

“Tough enough that we need her for the Endbringer fights,” Armsmaster said. “It's possible that she could take at least one hit from Alexandria or Leviathan... and she might be able to take many more hits.”

“Find her,” Piggot said. “We need to get her in the Wards, or at least make a ally of her. As long as she's not actively trying to take over the city or is a Nazi, give her what she wants within reason.”

Armsmaster nodded.

“Do we have a tentative name for her?” Piggot asked.

“We are calling her Inferno.”

“Despite the fact that she doesn't seem to have fire powers?”

“We've been busy, and nobody could think of anything more appropriate,” Armsmaster admitted.

“Fine,” Piggot said. “If the name irritates her, maybe she'll come forward to correct the record.”

She turned and looked down at some papers on her desk. Picking up her phone she said, “Send the idiot who thought ramming a bus filled with explosives in front of an elementary school was a good idea up. I'd like to have a talk with him.”

“What?” she barked into the phone.

Slamming the phone down, she turned to them. “Robert Sampson was just found dead in his quarters, an apparent victim of suicide.”

“Do you want us to investigate?”

“You'll have to work with local police. Even though Sampson was one of ours he wasn't a parahuman, so we can't just take over the investigation. I'd like you to keep the results quiet, and off the public servers if at all possible.”
“You suspect it wasn't a suicide?” Miss Militia asked.

“This incident is going to cause a political firestorm, almost as though that’s what it was designed to do. I'm wary of coincidences, especially in a world full of parahumans.”

Armsmaster nodded. “I'll have a report on your desk as soon as I find out anything.”

“Don't let the investigation overpower your search for the girl; show the Wards and the others and have them keep an eye out for her. Someone with this kind of power won't fly under the radar for long.”

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Everyone stared at the black screen, everyone silent, even Clockblocker, who usually didn't know how to shut up.

They’d watched the same video three times and they were all still taking it in. Shadow Stalker was as disconcerted as anyone here. There was a new player in the Bay, and from what they'd seen she was a serious bad ass.

The thought of what she could have done with that kind of power... no sneaking around, shooting people from the shadows.

Finally, Clockblocker was the one to break the silence... of course.

“Are we sure she's on our side?” he asked.

“No,” Armsmaster said. “But she also didn't do anything aggressive toward us, which is a hopeful sign. We are to make friendly contact with her if at all possible and offer her friendly terms. Treat her with kid gloves.”

Clockblocker snorted. “After seeing that you don't have to tell us twice. I don't think even Shadow Stalker would try to antagonize her.”

Sophia glared at him and gave him the finger. It had taken everything she had to not put a bolt in his forehead sometimes. All he did was talk and talk and talk, and he never seemed to say anything useful.

A thought suddenly occurred to her. She'd been having a uneasy feeling lately, since the locker. Hebert had always had this attitude about her, as though she knew something that Sophia and the rest of the world didn't. It had gotten worse since the locker, though.

The girl had barely even protested, and she acted as though it hadn't bothered her at all.

Was Taylor Hebert a parahuman?

She'd hinted that she knew that Sophia was a parahuman, although it had felt like she was just fishing. However, she had known something about Emma that no one else had known.

Even if Hebert was a parahuman, it was impossible for her to be this mystery girl. She was some kind of thinker. Sophia simply needed the evidence that she'd used her powers against other students, and she'd be in the trouble that she deserved.

The only thing that kept Sophia from going to the Director now was fear of her own misdeeds coming to light, and the fear that Hebert would take the same kind of deal Sophia had and they'd end
up as teammates.

No, the better idea would be to watch and wait. Hebert would make a mistake sooner or later, and when she did Sophia would be waiting.

“It'd be nice to have another girl on the team,” Vista said, glancing at Sophia out the corner of her eye. “Maybe she'll actually be nice.”

Bitch. As though the runt actually had any room to talk. None of them had actually given her a chance. She'd been too dark and edgy for the Mickey Mouse club, apparently.

In the end, it would be Sophia alone, the way it always was. She couldn't depend on anyone other than Emma, and Taylor had hurt Emma.

She just needed to find a way to hurt Taylor in a way that wouldn't end up with her serving on the same team as Sophia.

Sophia already had several ideas. At the very least she'd taint Taylor in the eyes of the PRT; with luck no one even find out she was a parahuman until she was already shipped off to juvie.
Suspects

I stumbled as I landed, my impromptu armor suddenly feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds. I could feel wetness running down my nose; when I reached up to touch it I saw blood on my hands.

“It's because you have spent the past two years working on control instead of strength,” the voice said. “Your powers are like your muscles; there is an upper limit to your power, but it is easy to be unable to reach that limit.”

“I couldn't exactly go around juggling cars, could I?” I snapped.

The things in her Dad's basement didn't weigh that much, and if she'd tried lifting the entire house she'd have broken sewer lines and water mains, which would have cost them more money that they didn't have.

Still, her practice had given her the ability to do a lot of things at once, which had helped when it had come to shielding so many people at the same time. Power was an entirely different thing.

“You will need to juggle cars and more than cars if you expect to remain safe,” the voice said. “In my prime I was able to lift bridges and even asteroids. I could change the magnetism of the entire planet. My force shield held off a blow from Galactus himself.”

“I have no idea who that is,” I said tiredly. The armor began dropping off of me, piece by piece, falling to the ground.

“Imagine an Endbringer who eats entire planets,” the voice said. “And controls technology beyond the understanding of mortal men.”

“Well, I'm not you, and that whole thing was pretty hard on me.”

Even the armor had been a problem. I'd had to put it on over my force field because the metal had been blazing hot. I'd been tempted to simply pretend to be one of the victims, but the voice had been convinced that it was important to make a statement.

Sometimes fights could be avoided if the other side knew they could not win. Making them think that was almost as important as actually having the power to back it all up.

The pieces of my armor laying on the ground behind me suddenly crunched together into a ball. The metal school buses were made from was cheap; certainly not something I would prefer for my own armor. However, there were things I could use it for; scrap metal was always useful.

I was walking along my alleyway, the ball I'd crushed the material into floating a few inches off the ground behind me. My feet felt like lead.

“I should have saved the man in the vest,” I said.

“He killed himself,” the voice said dismissively. “If you'd put a force field around him like I'd suggested then you wouldn't have traumatized the other bus passengers.”

“I couldn't be sure my force field was strong enough.”

“It gets weaker the farther you stretch it,” the voice said. “Had you surrounded the terrorist there would have been no need to use multiple weaker force fields.”
“The only training I've had in my force fields was levitating my Dad's twenty pound dumbbells and letting them drop on me from the ceiling,” I said defensively. “I didn't even know if I was bulletproof.”

The whole dumbbell thing hadn't been easy either. I'd kept imagining the crunch of bones. Dad had worked with Dockworkers injured by falling objects. A twenty pound weight falling from that distance would generate four thousand pounds of pressure.

Reaching my back gate, I stepped inside. I left the ball of metal by the gate; no one ever looked in the back yard and if they did they wouldn't know what to make of it.

Stepping inside my house, I headed for my bedroom. The day had been as emotionally exhausting as it had been physically exhausting.

Why hadn't I saved everyone? The voice of my grandfather had advised against it, but I'd gone against his advice before. Had part of me wanted the man to die?

As I fell backward onto the bed, I could still hear the sounds of the other passengers screaming as they rushed the man in the vest. I'd known what was going to happen, which was why I'd been able to react as quickly as I had.

Was letting someone die by inaction as bad as killing them directly? If it was, then what did that make me?

I fell asleep before I came to any kind of resolution.

It seemed like only moments before I woke to the sound of Dad moving around downstairs. I got up and headed down to see him.

“Taylor?” he asked. The moment he looked at my face his complexion grew pale. “What happened?”

“I let Emma beat me up so I'd finally have proof the school couldn't ignore,” I said. I'd told Dad about Emma, even though it hadn't been more than two or three months ago.

He stared at me for a long moment, before saying, “And you are O.K. with that?”

“There's video online,” I said. ”I'm going to take pictures of my bruises. If they try to cover this up I'll go to the police.”

He stared at me for a moment longer, then nodded. “And the other two?”

“Madison is Emma's dog. She was never the worst of them anyway. Sophia's going to be the main problem, I think.” I hesitated for a moment before saying, “I can't be sure but I think she's a Ward.”

“What?” he asked.

“Yeah, and if she is that means that the PRT chose to overlook what was happening to me because she was more useful to them.”

“I have a hard time believing that's true.”

“You should have seen how they were acting today when I was on the bus on my way home,” I mumbled.

He froze. “Were you at that bombing site?”
I shrugged. “I was on the bus when it was happening. There wasn't anything else I could do.”

“You could see that blast from everywhere in the city!” he said. “This is exactly why I didn't want you to go out in some kind of costume fighting super villains.”

“I wasn't!” I protested. “I was just minding my own business when this guy gets on the bus with a suicide vest. I did what I had to in order to protect myself.”

“And you aren't injured?”

“Not from that,” I said. I gestured toward my face. “This was all Emma.”

“I'm not comfortable with you intentionally letting yourself get hurt,” he said. “But if it works I won't complain.”

For once he was in agreement with Granpa, which was a little shocking. Dad's moral code was obviously much better than that of a supervillain, even if he claimed to have given it up.

“Did anyone see you?” he asked.

I'd been pretty good at hiding my powers for the past two years. They could be incredibly subtle if I wanted them to.

“Everyone saw me,” I admitted. “But I made a costume out of bus parts, and nobody but the passengers got a look at my face.”

“That's too many people,” he said. “you should have been more careful.”

“What else could I have done?” I asked.

“You could have pretended to be one of them,” he said. “Pretended you had no idea what was happening.”

“Then they'd have my name and address, and it would be even easier to find me,” I said. “People tend to trigger young; people as old as the people on the bus usually have it together better. They'd have pinpointed me right away.”

“But you didn't trigger,” he said.

“They have no way of knowing that,” I said. “Triggering is all they know, so its what they will assume.”

“They'll just have to look at where you got on the bus and what students left school from Winslow and they'll figure it out.”

“Somebody pulled the fire alarm right before I left,” I said. “My bet is that a lot of people left Winslow.”

He stared at me. “You didn't.”

“Sophia was about to try to beat me up without any witnesses. I'm done being a punching bag if it doesn't serve my purposes.”

“Pulling the fire alarm is a crime,” he said. “That's a slope you don't want to go down.”

“Because of my grandfather?” I asked. “Do you think it's genetic?”
It was something I had secretly wondered about, and it was something that worried me.

“Your mother wasn't a villain,” he began.

“She dabbled,” I pointed out, “With Lustrum.”

“Well, so did her half sister and brother, from what I hear,” he said. “But they became heroes in the end. Genetics has nothing to do with why I think you should stay on the straight and narrow.”

“Then why?”

“Because if you have a tenth of the power your grandfather had you'll be able to make the world tremble,” he said. “Nobody will be able to stop you. That kind of power is alluring. It's easy to start making excuses for doing the things you want to do anyway.”

“I'm not like that!” I protested. “I care about people!”

“Will you always?” he asked. “I worry about you. You have people like Blackwell and those kids treat you like they have, and nobody seems to stand up for you, and it would get pretty easy to start thinking that there aren't any good people. If there aren't any good people, then why not take advantage of the bad ones?”

I stared at him and opened my mouth to refute what he was saying, but I couldn't think of anything to say. I'd left the piece of the helmet from my grandfather upstairs, so he wasn't helping either. I doubted that his attitude toward this discussion would have been helpful anyway.

Trusting authority was already difficult for me for obvious reasons.

“You need a touchstone,” he said. “Something to keep you grounded and human. Without it... it's be easy to get as bitter and frustrated as your grandfather, and the next thing you know you are trying to turn everyone in New York into monkeys,”

“You read that in a comic book,” I said, scowling. “I'm sure granddad never did anything like that.”

I'd ask him, of course, and if it turned out that he had done anything as monumentally stupid as that I'd make fun of him.

He shrugged, then said, “I'm getting ready to make dinner. Get washed up. You have an early morning tomorrow.”

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“I attacked a US Military base for missiles,” the voice said. “It was possibly a little ambitious for a career debut.”

“What else?”

“I created an asteroid satellite as a base,” it said. “I conquered a nation in South America... I am not sure if it exists here. I mutated a group of men in the Savage Land... that is a place on my world where dinosaurs still exist due to the intervention of... never mind.”

The one thing about my grandfather's avatar was that if asked it had no problem bragging about it's exploits in the past.

Asking was my way of determining just how bad he had been.

“Mutated them how?” I asked.
“I gave them the gift of powers in return for their service to me. They were from a primitive culture so they were easy to manipulate.”

The voice would tell amusing stories about how his daughter married a robot and somehow managed to have children and then he would say things like that.

Perhaps sensing my disapproval, the voice changed subjects. “Why are we bothering with this?”

The sun was hot and I was sitting in a metal folding chair. I was sitting in the shade behind a table on which were set several examples of my art.

I'd been practicing precision with my powers for two years, and part of that had been pressing and twisting metal and glass together into pleasing shapes. While I didn't yet have any real power over glass, I could form metal around existing pieces in artistically pleasing ways.

Creating statuettes and costume jewelry was easy that way. I could turn an aluminum can and a broken colored glass bottle into several pieces of jewelry.

I sold them relatively cheap, although my prices had gone up as I'd gotten better at my craft.

“Dad's not exactly made of money,” I said. “Even if I only make a couple of hundred dollars a show it helps a lot with the bills.”

“You should take the money from the criminals of this world instead of struggling for these paltry amounts,” the voice said peevishly.

I'd been doing these craft shows once every couple of months for two years. I'd made enough money that thinks weren't as tight as they would have been. We had the money to buy extra clothes or go out to dinner.

It helped that Dad totally approved of this. I think that he was terrified I'd become a villain and even becoming a hero would put me up against Endbringers.

He wanted me to become a rogue and use my powers to help people in tangible ways that didn't involve beating other people up. I could understand why he felt that way; he'd already lost so much and he didn't want to lose me too.

However, I wasn't sure that I would be able to stay away from becoming a hero. It had been my dream after all.

“This is an interesting piece,” I heard a woman's voice say.

I put a neutral smile on my face. I noticed that she was talking about the foot tall metal statue I'd made of Sophia running. Her face looked angry and she was wearing her track outfit from school. The detail work was remarkable; some of the best I had ever done.

The thought that I was making money off her likeness would have pissed Sophia off more than anything, which pleased me. For some reason I'd never been willing to make one of Emma, maybe because Emma had always been more painful.

The woman was attractive, with dark hair and an olive skin tone. She had a figure that I was immediately and bitterly envious of. I wondered suddenly if my grandfather, who could mutate tribesmen into having superpowers could give me curves and if it would be humiliating for me to ask.
“It reminds me of someone I know,” she said.

I froze.

“A friend?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not someone I am close with, unfortunately. How much?”

“A hundred and fifty,” I said. Before she could say anything I said, “That’s reasonable for a statue of this size considering that each one is a one of a kind item, not some mass produced piece of junk from Wal-Mart.”

“Did you make it yourself?” she asked.

I nodded.

“It’s unusual to see someone so young being so talented,” she said. She glanced at my other pieces of art.

I had a sculpture of Scion in flight, as well as sculptures of various students at Winslow in various poses. I had tiny samurai, knights in armor, cowboys on horses. Most weren't as large as the Sophia statue and were correspondingly much cheaper. I also had some necklaces and bracelets with rocks and pieces of glass that I'd thought were pretty.

“No heroes other than Scion?” she asked.

I grimaced. “The Protectorate takes trademark issues very seriously. I had to destroy my stock a year ago so I didn’t get sued. Scion doesn't have any lawyers, though, so he's safe.”

“Villains don’t typically have representatives,” she said.

“They have henchmen and fans,” I said. “And people would assume that I was endorsing them if I spent all that time to make them.”

“How did you get involved in this?” she asked.

“I had a shop teacher that got me interested,” I lied. It was a question a lot of customers asked, and one that I got good at either deflecting or lying about. “Everything here is made of recycled metal so it is eco-friendly if that's something you are interested in.”

“I'll take it,” she said after a moment. She also picked up a couple of pieces of jewelry. “How much are these?”

“Fifteen each,” I said. “You can have a third for ten more dollars. I've got a sales tax permit like I'm supposed to, so there is sales tax.”

Considering that none of them had actually costed me anything a discount was just more money in the bank

She handed me two hundred dollar bills and a ten, and I handed her back three dollars and some change.

“I haven't seen you around the craft show circuit,’ I said. “We mostly get a lot of regulars and some people who are more interested in looking around than buying.”

“I didn't even know this was here until recently. I'm glad to have found this.”
I hesitated. “Please don't tell the person you think this resembles who did the statue. If we're thinking of the same person she's already kind of touchy.”

She smiled. “I promise I won't reveal your secret. I'm Hannah.”

“Taylor,” I said, smiling, and for once it was genuine.

As the woman left I felt pleased with myself. I was making more money than usual, and it was making me unusually pleased.

“The woman suspects who you really are,” the voice said.

I froze, a sudden feeling of anxiety in my gut. Did she work for one of the gangs, or for the Protectorate? Had she just guessed about who I was, or had she been specifically targeting me?

Had I been stupid going to a craft show with metal artwork shortly after debuting as a metal controlling parahuman? I'd been doing it for years without a problem... although no one had known about me before.

The main question was what she was going to do with the information she had just learned.

“You should kill her,” the voice said. “Before she tells everyone else.”
“Jesus, what's wrong with you?” I hissed. “I don't kill people just because they look at me funny. Most villains don't even do that.”

For almost a minute the voice was silent. I found myself wondering if there was something wrong with the connection, or if something had happened to the helmet itself back at the house.

“I am...not always stable,' the voice admitted finally.

The fact that I wasn't surprised at all by that admission was bad enough. The fact that I was still willing to listen to it even after it was all but admitting that it was crazy was more surprising.

Maybe I just assumed that all supervillains had to be crazy, so this was just a confirmation of what I already believed.

“Your grandfather made multiple imprints of his mind at various points in his life. His persona was... sometimes flexible.”

“You mean he was a hero sometimes and a villain sometimes... and a worse villain other times.”

“I am an amalgam of his personality at thirteen distinct portions of his life,” the voice said. “And it is not always easy to reconcile the different viewpoints he held during those times.”

“But could someone's personality really change that much?” I was dubious. If they all shared the same memories wouldn't that make them the same person?

“Imagine if you had to share a mind with your own mind before your split with Emma,” the voice said. “How difficult would that be to reconcile?”

I froze. I tried to remember what I had been like back then, so naive, so happy, so trusting. The world had seemed completely different, and I hadn't had my current problems with authority, anger issues or general negativity.

“But if that version of me had my memories, it would be me,” I said.

“Would it? Personality changes take time. Also, being exposed to memories that you did not experience personally is not as world altering as experiencing the real thing. What would your twelve year old self be telling you about Emma and Sophia?”

“To give them another chance,” I said. “That Emma is really my friend and that Sophia just needs a little love and affection to be a friend too.”

“Imagine that twelve times over,” the voice said. “The copies were never intended to coexist. Each backup was stored elsewhere, but old copies remained in the helmet for safekeeping. When I was damaged during the war, I was given to your mother along with other items when she was sent to safety.”

“The war?” I asked.

“There was a thirteenth copy of your grandfather's mind, the last. What he saw was so traumatic that he has chosen never to resurface.”
I was silent for a moment.

“So not only do I have a Jewish Supervillain for grandfather, but I have a schizophrenic Jewish super villain grandfather.”

“Schizophrenia does not mean multiple personalities,” the voice said. “It is typically a disorder involving hallucinations or delusions... such as talking to a non-existent person that no one else can hear.”

“Ha ha,” I muttered sourly, glancing around to make sure no one was noticing my talking to myself. Fortunately my neighbor to my left was facing away from me and hadn't seemed to notice anything. The booth on my other side was empty. The economy of the Bay was making these kinds of shows less profitable than other places.

“While murder was perhaps extreme, what do you plan to do about the woman?” the voice asked.

Frowning, I looked at the remains of my work. I'd planned on staying out for another four hours today, which might have meant as much as another two hundred dollars in income. Still, the voice tended to be right about people, at least as far as I could tell, which meant that I needed to check it out.

The closest booth was ten feet away. With the ambient noise there was no way the woman there would have been able to hear what I was mumbling to myself.

Her name was Peggy Schuster, and I'd seen her around for events for the past couple of years. She was a street artist who did funny sketches of people and their children for ten dollars each. She usually didn't make much more money than I did, and sometimes she made less.

“Hey Peggy,” I said.

She looked over at me. We sometimes guarded each other's booths so that the other could go to the bathroom or get some food.

“How would you like to make some extra money?” I asked.

“Ok,” she asked slowly.

“I've got something I've got to do, but I don't want to lose these prime selling hours,” I said. “If you sell anything on my table you can have half the money.”

It wouldn't have been fair to ask her to watch my inventory for nothing, even though we all tried to protect each other from that kind of thing. I'd secretly made thieves trip or baubles slip out of pockets in the past.

She looked reluctant. “I've got my own booth to take care of,” she said.

“Turn your easel this way and you can keep an eye on my stuff,” I said. “And given the look of the crowd it doesn't look like business will pick up soon anyway.”

“And what if you don't get back before I'm ready to leave?” she asked.

“Then you can have all of it,” I said. “I'm thinking about giving it up anyway... I've got to focus on school.”

“But you've been getting so good the last few shows,” she said, looking shocked.
I suppose being a middle aged woman who was still clinging onto her dreams of being an artist, seeing someone else give up their dream must have been painful.

Fortunately, art had never been my dream. It had simply been profitable. I could have gathered cans and sold them for recycling almost as easily, although my chance of being noticed would have been much higher.

“What about the money?” she asked, seemingly overwhelmed.

“I trust you,” I said. “I’ll catch you at the next show and we can settle up, assuming I don’t get back sooner.”

She looked uncertain but nodded.

“That’s excellent planning,” the voice said. “Making people believe you trust them is one of the best ways to create loyalty. Why you would wish to have a follower of so little... talent I do not know.”

As I stood up and headed away, smiling and waving at her as I did, I muttered, “Since when have you been an art critic?”

“I am a man of refinement,” it said. “From a people who have spawned an army of artists of such skill as to make the angels weep. Seeing what she calls art makes me want to rage against the heavens.”

“You aren't a man at all,” I muttered. “And you sound like a snob.”

“I also think your modern music is rubbish,” it admitted. “An offense to the ear of anyone who has heard better.”

“So what kind of music do you like...German music?”

Silence.

“Seriously? I'd have thought you'd have hated anything German.”

“The evil in their hearts was no greater than that of other men... they simply chose to act on it. You think the rest of the world was innocent in that conflict? Haven't you read of the nations that turned our people away, leaving them to be slaughtered?”

“The rest of the world fought against them!” I protested.

“They could have saved millions, but they chose not to because of who we were. The entire world abandoned us. Every human has the potential for ultimate evil in their hearts, which is why the mutants have to be better.”

“Is that why you hate humans?” I asked.

I could feel the metal I'd given the woman retreating in the distance. It was of a distinctive size and shape, unlike anything else being sold in the market, and it was moving, which made the woman easy to follow.

“I do not hate humans. Mutants simply have the chance to surpass them, to create a world where such horrors are never again allowed.”

“I'd believe that a lot more if you hadn't just suggested murdering a woman,” I said dryly. “Or was that you from your crazy period? Maybe the rest of you should give me a little warning when crazy
starts talking.”

Before it could reply, I caught sight of the woman turning down the street.

I reached into my pocket for one of my cell phones. After I'd shown my heroing phone to Blackwell, I'd known I'd have to keep one in my civilian identity and a second one as a hero. I'd bought a second one.

Neither held any information that I didn't want anyone to know, but with two there was something I'd been wanting to try.

I'd read about this on the Internet, a way to turn a phone into a spy device. I turned the speaker off and muted the microphone. I turned all ringtones to silent. I disabled vibration.

A moment later I stepped around a corner and the phone flew upward out of my hand, leaping over a wall to hover.

With my other phone I dialed the first phone. It picked up without making a sound, and now I could hear what was happening on the other side. Now all I needed to do was get it close enough to the woman.

She was standing beside a large mass of metal that felt like a motorcycle.

“A young girl talking to herself... that's what got my attention,” the woman's voice said. “She was selling some rather good artwork at the Kirby art fair. I bought a piece and thought you might take a look at it.”

I could hear the sound of a shutter snapping.

“Yes, it's Sophia Hess. Apparently this girl knows her. She most likely attends the same school.”

The woman was silent for a moment. “I'm not sure having Hess approach her would be the wisest course of action. Hess can be... abrasive.”

She was with the Protectorate. It wouldn't be long before the Protectorate knew who I was. Would they come knocking at my door in the middle of the night, jackboots in place?

“As I said, even the heroes are fallible,” the voice said. It almost sounded smug. “Their own rules, unwritten or not say that they shouldn't reveal secret identities, yet here they are revealing yours.”

“What?” I asked. “How do you know that?”

“I've read about your world through your eyes,” the voice said. “And it's perfectly obvious. The authorities have the resources to find out the name of villains and make them public whenever they wish. Villains are caught all the time, but the only ones whose identities are revealed are those headed for the Birdcage.”

That... was true. I hadn't thought about it before. Why would the PRT protect the identities of villains they caught?

Yet they weren't extending me the same kind of courtesy?

If they revealed my identity Dad would be in danger. I had no proof yet that they planned to, but I didn't have any proof they didn't either.

“What should I do then?” I asked. “And don't say kill her; that's stupid on all kinds of levels.”
“It’s too late to do that now anyway; the rest of the PRT knows who and what you are. It’s only a matter of time before the leaks in the organization lead the gangs right to you.”

“What?”

“It’s another thing that is obvious. Case after case of villains headed for the Birdcage attacked on supposedly hidden routes, the villains released. How did the villains know where to ambush the convoys? There is no known telepathy in this world, which means the information had to be leaked.”

Hadn’t some of the Empire 88 capes been sent to the birdcage only to be broken out? I couldn’t remember. That meant that they at least had moles in the agency.

“So what do I do?” I asked again.

“Tell your father and prepare for when they come for you. Or you can try to join the Wards, even though their organization has already betrayed you on multiple fronts.”

I retrieved my phone when I heard her motorcycle rev up. For the slightest moment the thought of a small mechanical problem causing her vehicle to wreck occurred to me, but as the voice of my grandfather said, the cat was out of the bag. All injuring her now would do was turn the entire PRT against me, which was the last thing I needed.

It was just a flash of an impulse, but I felt a moment of horror at the thought. What was wrong with me? It was bad enough for an ordinary person to have random homicidal impulses. From what I’d heard everyone wanted to punch their boss in the face sometimes. It was different for someone like me.

For me a thought would be all it took to kill someone. Even now, without line of sight I could effortlessly murder a woman who was undoubtedly a hardworking and loyal PRT employee dedicated to making the world a safer place. The fact that she hadn't made my world safer was of secondary importance.

“The second step,” the voice said, “is to make a statement such that even if they know who you are they will not dare to disturb you. That is the way to keep your father safe and your sleep undisturbed.”

I’d read somewhere that the average independent cape didn't last long in the Bay; they were either killed or scooped up by the PRT or one of the gangs. As much as I hated to admit it, the crazy voice in my head was right.

I needed to do something so large that no one in the Bay could deny that I was the new superpower in town.

There was one thing that I’d been wanting to do for a long time.

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As the shadow blotted out the sun, I could see people below stopping their cars and getting out to stare up at me.

Grandfather had said to make a statement, so I was making the biggest statement that I could think of. I was moving one of the cargo ships from the boat graveyard over the city, heading for the metal recycling center at the edge of town. That center was designed to take the metal from hundreds of cars, so I hoped they would be able to use at least some of the metal from this hulking relic.
I already had some ideas for what to do with the rest of the material; there was no way the center would be able to process this much material this quickly.

In the distance I could see figures flying toward me. One was garbed in white, which meant it was probably Glory Girl. Another was red, which probably meant it was Aegis.

I was making a good clip with the ship. It was heavy even to my power, but we were still making a good forty miles per hour. I'd been flying for ten minutes and there was no sign that my power was going to falter.

I had a plan for if it did. I'd picked areas where I could set it down temporarily if I had to, even if it would destroy entire parks.

PRT vans were converging beneath me. I could see at least a dozen of them, and I could see that the police were beginning to redirect traffic from the avenue I was flying over.

As the figures got closer I could see that Lady Photon and Laserdream were also there.

Within moments they were flying in front of me.

“Stop!” Aegis said. Did it sound like his voice was shaking a little?

I didn't stop. I ignored him, choosing simply to fly around him. He moved to intercept me.

The others surrounded me in a semicircle. I wondered if they really thought we were going to fight. All I had to do was release my hold on the ship and all of them would be having a very bad day. So would the entire city.

Lady Photon shouted out, “What are you doing?”

“Recycling,” I said.

“That doesn't belong to you,” Aegis shouted.

I was surprised at his willingness to confront someone who was clearly demonstrating Alexandria levels of power. I actually doubted that Alexandria would have been able to lift the ship, mostly because it would have crumpled like tissue paper around her if she'd tried.

“Do you want to fight?” I asked. “Because I could drop this and we could see what happens. Or you could shut up and in two minutes we'll arrive at the recycling center.”

He didn't say anything, simply looking stunned.

I arrived at the recycling center.

Several men were already standing outside, staring at me. I landed beside them, and said, “I heard you take scrap metal.”

One of them, apparently the supervisor turned and stared at me. “We don't have the ability to break something that size down.”

He looked petrified, as though he was afraid I was going to drop the ship on him if I didn't get an answer I liked.

I shrugged, and a moment later the ship above us began to disintegrate into thousands of pieces of metal in a monstrous rotating cloud. I gathered together the ferrous metals.
“You guys handle cars, right?” I asked.

He nodded, eyes transfixed on the scene above.

I focused, and began splitting metal into thousand pound pieces. I divided the ferrous metal from the non-ferrous and I crushed the pieces into blocks, which I gently set on the dirt outside the plant. I could have set it on the concrete, but that would have meant destroying the plant's parking lot.

Within moments I had set the cubes down, one hundred cubes wide and one hundred twenty cubes deep. The ship had weighed more than six thousand tons, and now I was letting the non-metal remnants float into piles.

“Uh....we don't have the cash on hand to pay for all of that,” the manager said, staring at the piles.

“Give me what you have and you can have the rest for free,” I said.

It soon became apparent that the center only had ten thousand dollars in the till. They normally paid less than 200 dollars for a scrapped car, so this was understandable.

As I took the money, I turned to face the assorted heroes. PRT vans were pulling up and surrounding me.

“How long will it take you guys to go through all this?” I asked the manager.

“Maybe a year,” he admitted.

Slipping the money into a dufflebag, I turned to face the assorted heroes. I waved, and a moment later I exploded into the sky.

As it turned out I really was much faster in the sky than any of them. I left them eating dust.
“That was the opposite of keeping a low profile,” Dad said.

He still looked stunned. Apparently my flight across the city, short as it was had been filmed by several news crews on the ground. No one had time to get a helicopter in the air.

“They already knew who I was,” I said. “I had to convince them that the best idea was to leave us alone.”

Closing his eyes, Dad shook his head. “They're going to want you even more now. Before you were maybe some parahuman who got lucky. Now you're the next Alexandria. Who do you think they're going to send to talk to you?”

“The old Alexandria?” I asked cautiously.

“Or Legend or Eidolon,” Dad said. “Maybe all three.”

I wasn't sure I could take any single member of the Triumvirate, much less all three at once. Eidolon alone would pull out some kind of power that would negate my powers or control me or something.

“I'll tell them no,” I said.

Dad sighed. “Remember when I showed you Jurassic Park?”

“Yes...“

I suspected my grandfather could actually make dinosaurs and wondered idly how much zoos would pay to have one, maybe something cute and herbivorous. That whole movie hadn't really sold me on the idea that dinosaur parks were a bad idea. Being able to shut down all security at the same time on the other hand was a bad idea.

“Just because you have the power to do something doesn't mean you should do it.”

“You've been complaining about the boatyard for years,” I said.

“And you moved one ship out of what, fifty? In the meantime you floated a ship weighing thousands of tons over residential areas. What would have happened if you turned out to get tired faster than you thought, or if someone had startled you, or even been stupid enough to attack you?”

“I had plans for that,” I said.

“And nobody else knows anything about those plans. All they know is what they saw... someone holding a massive threat over their heads.”

“That's what it was intended to mean!” I said, irritated.

Didn't he understand that the threat of force was better than actually having to use force? I didn't want to fight heroes. I didn't really want to fight villains. I simply wanted to make the world a better place. I wanted to make the Bay the place Dad talked about.

“Threatening people doesn't get you what want,” Dad said, grimacing.

“You threaten people all the time during negotiations,” I protested. “I've heard you on the
telephone.”

He hesitated. “There are specific circumstances where it can be useful. But you didn't even have anything you wanted. They've been threatened, but they don't know the reason why.”

“They probably suspect,” I said. “If they are as smart as they tell everyone. If they aren't I'll have to make them understand.”

“You aren't fighting heroes,” Dad said, looking alarmed.

“I'm not sure the locals have anything that could hurt me... Miss Militia maybe, or maybe something Armsmaster whips up. I wouldn't have to fight them, I'd just let them wear themselves out until they were willing to listen.”

Dad frowned. “Try not to do that in the house; it's not paid off yet.”

I stared at him, flabbergasted for a moment, then I snickered. The image of Dad coming home to find that the walls of the house were completely burned down while I was talking to the PRT, the expression on his face...

I giggled.

He smiled slightly. “We'll have to start making some plans for our response should they actually come to the door.”

“If they try to kidnap you, make sure they know I won't be happy,” I said. It was something I had been thinking about for a while.

Pretending to think about it, I mentally summoned several old transistor radios from the basement. As they flew into the room I disassembled them into their component pieces in mid-air. I reconstructed them in the space of a few moments into something completely new.

Dad's eyes were wide.

“What is this?” he asked. “Since when have you been a Tinker?”

I shrugged. “I found plans for this online. It's a tracker; I'll put one in each set of your shoes. It doesn't take a lot of power and the power it does use is generated by your movement.”

It was a lie, of course. Granddad's avatar had showed it to me. Telling Dad about granddad seemed like a bad idea. I had no doubt that Dad would try to destroy the helmet with a baseball bat, convinced it was trying to possess me or something.

“Just remembering all of it, much less doing it all at once... “

“I think I have a natural talent for it,” I said. “You'd be surprised what kind of blueprints you can find online if you want.”

“Should I feel uncomfortable that I'd be more comfortable with finding out you were watching porn?” he asked.

I kept my face impassive. He didn't need to know that there had been a couple of times searching that had accidentally taken me places far outside of my comfort zone. We had a fairly nice computer and a good Internet connection, largely as a result of the money I'd earned with my sculptures over the year.
Convincing Dad that it would help me look up art shows and maybe even sell online had been easy. The fact that I mostly used it to search the PHO and look for Cape related information and fanfic hadn't been a problem.

I was thrilled not to depend on Computer class and the public library for everything I wanted to look up. That would have been humiliating.

Shrugging, I said, “All the My Little Pony porn has desensitized me for life.”

He pretended to chuckle, although he looked slightly nauseous. Apparently some jokes were more than he could take.

“The trackers aren't a bad idea,” he admitted. “I'd ask for something similar for you except I wouldn’t be able to do anything but call the PRT.”

“I'm not sure how to build the receiver; it was harder. I can use my powers to fake it though.”

It was a lie, of course. No receiver had even been designed because the device had been specially created for use with grandfather's power.

“If they should come to the door, do not attack them before you talk to them,” Dad said. “We've got enough money for a lawyer now, and given the nature of your powers I'm sure any lawyer would be confident you could make more money easily.”

I nodded reluctantly.

“The thing you have to remember about the PRT and the cops in general is that they are the biggest gang out there. You can take a few of them down, sure, but they'll keep calling their buddies until they dogpile you. The PRT has some Capes with esoteric powers that can probably get around your defenses if they really had to. Eidolon can probably find something if nothing else works.”

Scowling, I looked down at my feet. He was right, of course. The strongest Cape in the world could be taken down by a Master. Powers were essentially a game of rock, paper scissors. One power set could be defeated by another, which in turn could be defeated by a third.

It meant that I couldn't stop being vigilant.

“Oh, and you're grounded for a week,” Dad said.


“For threatening the PRT without discussing it first. Have you ever considered that I might have said yes?”

“Would you?”

“ Probably not,” he said. “But I might have been able to say something that could have convinced you not to do it, or at least do it a little differently.”

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Grounding fortunately wasn’t much of a problem. I wasn't grounded from the computer, and it wasn't as though I had friends that I was missing hanging out with. Dad mostly didn't want me to leave the house and do anything that would garner city wide attention again.

I spent the rest of the weekend learning to make a flexible kind of armor from normal clothes using
iron particles and oil. It was detail work beyond anything I'd done before because I had to turn the oil into nanoparticles.

As long as there were no magnetic fields it was flexible and easy. Apply a magnetic field and it hardened into body armor. It was easy enough to rig up a system so that it would work even if my powers somehow failed me.

I made a second set for Dad, with a switch inside his jacket pocket. It made me feel a little better knowing that he could have at least some protection, even though it only covered his torso.

Despite my paranoia no one showed up for the rest of the weekend.

As I returned to school on Monday, I wasn't sure what to expect. Blackwell had seemed intimidated, but I hadn't actually gone to the police. Would there actually be concrete, substantive change, or would it be back to the same old routine?

Walking back to school, I heard the whispers as soon as I stepped into the entrance hall. People were gathered together into clumps and they were pretending not to look at me.

Had my identity gotten out this quickly? I hadn't seen anything online, so it was unlikely that the PRT had made some kind of an announcement.

Approaching my locker I saw Blackwell standing beside it with three police officers and a dog.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“They are trying to set you up,” the voice whispered in my ears. “I've seen it many times before. Call mutants terrorists and the public doesn't care if you send gigantic murder robots after them.”

“There was an anonymous report that you were hiding drugs in your locker,” Blackwell said. Her face was carefully free of emotion. Was she apologetic or smirking in victory?

“The same locker that I haven't used since I was shoved into it with a pile of two week old used Tampons?” I asked. “By the same people that assaulted me on Friday?”

Turning to the police officers, I said, “You won't find my fingerprints on any of whatever you found. I'd like to press charges for assault on Emma Barnes.”

I reached into my pocket to pull out some of the pictures I'd made of my face.

One of the officers, the younger one, pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. I heard screams from my classmates who were watching from a distance.

Staring at the gun, I felt my irritation growing.

“Put that away,” I said. I didn't tell him that if he didn't I'd make him put it away. Threatening cops was exactly the opposite of what Dad had wanted me to do.

“Do this and this and this and the gun will explode in his hand if he tries to fire it,” the voice said helpfully. Images appeared in my head. “It would be considered an unfortunate accident.”

Maybe back wherever he was from, but this world had Tinkers.

“Freeze!” he shouted. “Get on the ground!”
As he stepped aside I saw that the inside of my locker was filled with guns and ammunition. It looked like I was planning to shoot up the entire school. No wonder the officer was worried about me putting my hand in my pocket.

The second officer spoke up.

“We have to take you downtown for everyone's safety,” he said. “If someone planted this it'll come out soon enough.”

That seemed reasonable enough, so I held up my hands and let myself be shoved face first into a wall. My hands were wrenched behind my back and I felt the click of handcuffs. Hands moved impersonally over my body, undoubtedly looking for weapons. I moved the piece of metal from my grandfather's helmet around to avoid the hands, but they found my two cell phones.

Moments later I was being shoved through the hallways, students murmuring and staring.

Anger at Sophia was filling my chest. If she was Shadow Stalker that meant she'd have easy access to my locker, and probably access to a lot of weapons from criminals she'd beaten up.

I soon found myself being shoved into a police cruiser. The officer didn't even try to protect my head. I'd have had a nasty knock if I hadn't used my force field to protect myself.

“Are you going to call my Dad?” I asked as both men got into the cruiser. The third officer left with the dog in another cruiser.

“When we get to the station to book you,” one of the officers said.

“There's something suspicious about them,” the voice said. “They are nervous and acting strange.”

I suppose a supervillain would know, although I had a hard time imagining my Grandfather being stuffed into the back of a police cruiser like a drunken fratboy or a belligerent redneck. I didn't dare say anything however.

Was he right, or was he simply trying to manipulate me into attacking them? If the police turned against me then the rest of the world would too, which would leave him as my only advisor.

On the other hand this could be the attempt to recruit me that Dad had been worried about.

Had Sophia even been the one to put the guns in my locker? Any of the gangs could have done it just as easily.

“Who do you all work for?” I asked.

“What?” one of them asked.

“This isn't the way to the station,” I said.

I didn't actually know that; unlike some people I didn't make regular trips down to the station because I'd been beating people up or shooting them. Half the kids at Winslow probably knew the route better than I did.

“We'll get there soon enough,” the officer who had been rough with me said.

I sighed, letting the handcuffs click off my wrists. “Didn't they tell you who you were trying to kidnap?”
The wheel to the police car suddenly jerked out of the driving officer's hands, even as their seat belts starting choking them. I took control of the car and we ended up in a side street.

We pulled to a stop and I leaned forward. “Who sent you?”

“You should have simply played ignorant until we reached our destination,” the voice said helpfully. “Then there would be no need to interrogate these morons.”

I grimaced. Crazy granddad was right again. All I'd had to do was wait instead of being aggressive and all my questions would have been answered.

Releasing the seatbelts, I said, “Take me to your masters.”

The younger one fumbled with his gun, which I polled out of his grasp telekinetically. I turned it around and pointed it in his direction and he froze suddenly. His partner was quiet as well. I pointed it at his crotch.

“Drive,” I barked.

The driver didn't say anything, but did as I said.

“You guys must be real low level grunts,” I said. “For them to send you to kidnap me without telling you who I was. Maybe they were hoping I'd kill you.”

I completely dissembled both their guns, leaving the pieces on the floor.

“Who do you work for?” I asked. I leaned forward and the metal grill separating me from the front seat peeled away like paper. I could see the white in the officer's eyes. He was sweating. “The Empire? You guys are too white to be ABB, but maybe they're a little more flexible than I thought about the whole race thing. Coil? Nobody even knows anything about him.”

I leaned forward and whispered into the younger officer's ear. “I've heard what scum like you like to do to young girls. How does it feel to be on the other side of it?”

A strange, acrid smell filled the car, and for moment I had no idea what it was. Then I glanced down and I smirked.

“I suppose that means you are starting to pick up on just how bad things are about to get.”

“Jesus, Jake,” the driver said disgustedly. He shook his head.

The younger officer didn't say anything. He simply stared out at me from the side of his eye. He was sweating up a storm. It had probably been his nervousness in the first place that my grandfather had cued in on.

“We're here,” the driver said finally.

I looked up and I froze. I'd been so preoccupied with intimidating the thugs that I hadn't been paying much attention to my surroundings.

We were pulling up in front of a police station; a real one.

“You guys are actual cops?” I asked. “Not gang members out to forcibly induct me into virtual slavery?”
“Yes,” the older man said levelly. “And no. We're just doing our job.”

“You could have said that a little earlier,” I complained.

“Would you have believed anything we had to say? The driver asked. “Me or the Rookie? Sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all.”

A nervous rookie. Shit.

I concentrated, and the parts from both guns reassembled themselves and a moment later they slipped into the men's pockets. The grill reconstructed itself and I leaned back heavily in the seat.

“I don’t suppose we could pretend that none of this ever happened?” I said, smiling weakly.

“What do you think? The older officer asked.

The rookie didn't say anything.
"Massachusetts law makes anything a teenager says without the presence of their parents inadmissible," my lawyer said. "Which is why they didn't bother Mirandizing you. That's only necessary before you are being interrogated."

So it wasn't like television where you could get off because the cops didn't say the magic words. I felt somehow dissatisfied by that. Television had lied to me.

"I told you," the voice said. It sounded almost smug. "I have been arrested too many times not to have some idea about the law."

Like he'd ever been arrested by ordinary cops. I couldn't even say anything snarky to him, not with my lawyer and my Dad sitting across from me.

I was handcuffed to the table, but everyone knew it was a formality.

"The good thing is that the gun case will almost certainly be dropped. The anonymous call that was made, the fact that you say none of your fingerprints will be on any of the guns... if that's true, and its known that your locker has been essentially public property with people who have an obvious agenda against you, it should be easy to get the case thrown out."

That was good, I supposed.

"The issue with the police is more difficult. Assaulting an officer doesn't have a very high bar. People have been convicted simply for holding onto a steering wheel as the police were trying to drag them out of the car. What you did was quite a bit more serious."

"I thought I was being kidnapped," I said. "For the reasons I told you before."

"That can be a mitigating factor. The more important issue is that there isn't any evidence. Neither officer was bruised, and except for officer Colt's unfortunate... accident, there didn't seem to be any actual harm done."

"The other officer seemed a lot more together," I said.

"Officer Fuller was a PRT agent for twenty years before he had a knee injury that sidelined him. He was somewhat more informed on how to deal with parahumans than his partner."

"He was actually kind of cool about the whole thing," I admitted. "The other guy was kind of a dick. He slammed my face into a wall and hit my head in the police car."

"There isn't any physical evidence, and of course there were no cameras inside the car. The kind of budget for that won't be available for a long time with the PRT diverting police funding."

"So it's my word against theirs'?" I asked.

"I can't tell a client to lie," he said. "But police testimony is usually believed by juries unless you can convince them that the testimony is flawed somehow. I suspect that officer Fuller's report will be impeccable and Officer Colt's will be more subjective. Both will be believable for different reasons."

"So what do I do?"

"Normally the PRT takes over in cases like this. Parahumans are outside the jurisdiction of the
ordinary police. However, the assault and battery took place against police officers. A prosecutor could make a case that you made terroristic threats.”

“I could drop a boat in their parking lot,” I said irritably. “It'd make getting into their reserved parking spots a whole lot harder.”

“Making those kind of threats are what got you in here in the first place,” My lawyer said smoothly. “And there's no need for them. What is most likely going to happen is that the PRT will come in and they will make some threats. It will be followed by an offer to join the wards with all charges being dropped. They can make that happen.”

“It's their fault I'm in here in the first place!” I said. My voice was getting louder without my meaning it to, and I could feel the whole place vibrating. I had to close my eyes for a moment to calm myself down.

“Are you sure you don't want to join the Wards?” he asked.

“They left me for two years with that... psychopath. Not just me, either, lots of other kids. I won't work for them. I'd rather go villain.”

At Dad's gasp I looked at him and scowled.

“You had to know this was coming. You've been worried about it probably since Mom told you about... you know.”

A glance at the lawyer; I hadn't told him about my being a mutant or about my grandfather. As far as he knew, I triggered in the locker.

“If they push me, I'll push back. The thing is, I can push pretty hard, and I can make life pretty hard for everyone. I wanted to be a hero, but I'd be OK being a rogue too.”

With granddad on my side I bet I'd be a hell of a villain.

“Then I'll have to make sure that they know what their options are,” My lawyer said.

The ten thousand dollars I'd given dad were just his retainer, but he seemed confident that I'd find some way to pay him his exorbitant fee.

“Can we use what Sophia did against them?” Dad asked.

My lawyer looked down at my journal. “This by itself isn't proof of anything. The e-mails you kept however should be enough to get a warrant to look at Emma's phone even if Sophia's is protected by the PRT. They'll try to take over the investigation and sweep it under the rug, but we might be able to use this to pressure them into dropping the other charges.”

“There are laws about revealing the identity of a Ward, however, which makes the whole thing a lot more sticky.”

“It feels like they are setting me up,” I said. “Sophia is a Ward and she puts guns in my locker. That leads to criminal charges, which mean I have to go work for the Wards.”

“There are a number of reasons they wouldn't do that,” my lawyer said smoothly. “First, assuming they are aware of who you are the way you think they are, they wouldn't be that stupid. Antagonizing someone able to throw ships at their headquarters isn't in anyone's best interest. They haven't even had a chance to give you the soft sell, yet.”
As if I'd ever be on a team with Sophia in it.

“Most likely they planned on using what they knew to find a way to approach you discreetly and non-threateningly. The fact that they talked about sending Sophia to talk to you at all suggests that they didn't know what she was doing.”

I nodded. Using Sophia to convince me to join would be like bathing with a Brillo pad for a washcloth; something was going to get bloody.

“We can probably make the gun charge go away,” my lawyer continued, “But that doesn't deal with the fact that your life at school is over. Officer Colt told as many people as he could what happened before officer Fuller could stop him.”

“What about the charges of assaulting an officer?” I asked.

“Officer Fuller is willing to drop charges. Officer Colt was less willing until Officer Fuller had a talk with him. The District Attorney hates the PRT, and is willing to drop all charges provided that you provide a full apology to the officers. I think in part because she knows that it will cost them a bargaining chip.”

“She probably doesn't want the police station to become a war zone,” I said. “Was that why she had me give that little demonstration, earlier?”

She'd demanded proof that I was the ship flying parahuman and not just some weak parahuman with a good bluff. I'd asked her to look out the window and then had levitated sixty cars in the parking lot without looking at any of them.

Her face had looked a little white as she'd left the room.

My lawyer shrugged. “It probably hadn't hurt. Replacing the police station would have come out of her budget.”

From the look on his face that was supposed to be a joke, but I didn't think it was funny.

“The fact that you saved a school of a thousand elementary school kids would probably come up in trial. Considering that it would be a case with no physical evidence and that it would be your word against two cops, one of whom is willing to drop the case, she probably thought it would be tough convincing a jury to convict.”

The fact that the jury would be aware that I could drop a ship on the courthouse would probably make conviction even harder.

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“What's the difference between being a police officer thirty years ago and today?”

We could hear Officer Fuller's voice through an open door as we approached. I was still in handcuffs; we were coming to give the apology I was more than happy to make.

“Forty years ago you could yell and scream at a perp and slam their face in the ground and no one really cared,” Officer Fuller said “Now any thirteen year old with a grudge can melt your face off if you look at them funny.”

I heard a muffled protest, presumably from the rookie.

“You know what being nice costs? Nothing. Being a jerk gets you a melted face. And if you should
come up against somebody you think is a Cape... it's not our job. You don't point a gun at them, you
don't be a jerk to them... if you do they melt your face.”

The protest grew louder. It almost sounded like he was whining.

“That girl was humoring us,” Fuller said. “She was being polite. She let us arrest her. You saw what
she did to those cars outside? How hard would it have been to get out of the car then ball the whole
car up like tinfoil and throw us in the Bay?”

“She had guns!” Now I could hear the rookie's reply.

“Capes don’t need guns. Most of them don’t use them because what they’ve got instead is much
better. That girl says she was set up and I believe her. She didn't need guns to shoot up that school.
All she needed was one bad day,” Fuller was silent for a moment.”If a cape starts getting agitated
you know what you do? You move really slow, you get real quiet and you do whatever the person
with the ability to drop an oil tanker on your head says!”

We reached the doorway; we were in the back of the police station. Apparently Fuller had wanted to
have a talk with Colt away from everyone, but he'd left the door open and we could hear what he
was saying.

“You know what the worst part is? You’ve gone and blabbed about her secret identity to everybody,
including in earshot of some of the perps. You know how seriously some of the Capes take that? If
she was part of the Protectorate that'd be a crime. You know why it's not a crime to out villains?
Because nobody is that stupid! Villains can explode your eyeballs for a lot less than revealing their
identities to their enemies.”

“Yeah, but she... “

“What happens if someone kills her dad because you had to open your big yap? I told you not to say
anything, and now...”

My lawyer cleared his throat.

Officer Fuller turned and stared at us. He forced himself to smile.

The rookie looked like he was going to soil himself. His face was white staring at me. He was sitting
at a desk, while Officer Fuller stood over him.

“I'm sorry for what I did,” I said. “I really thought you were criminals out to kidnap me or I'd have
never done what I did.”

Officer Fuller looked at me with one eyebrow lifted.

“If you ever need any help, feel free to call me,” I said. “I'll leave my number.”

“Oh!” I said. “And I'll try to not do it again. To cops.”

I probably shouldn't have qualified it that way considering the way Dad facepalmed.

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I was walking out of the police station with Dad and my lawyer. Bail had been waived by the judge,
probably considering that no amount of bail would have been able to keep me in jail and because the
circumstances of my case seemed to warrant it.
I had an impression that the judge didn't like the PRT any more than the District Attorney did. Both had seemed intent on getting me out of the police station before the PRT found out about me and took over the case.

“They'll investigate,” my lawyer said. “They might find fingerprints from multiple gang members on the guns, and they might want to call you back in to testify against whoever they think actually did plant the guns. This was done in your civilian identity, without any powers so the judge decided that it didn't fall under the PRT's jurisdiction, especially since it didn't involve any powers.”

I could see PRT vans pulling up, but it was already too late. I was out and the decisions had been made. They didn't have any influence on me and I was likely to walk for the whole thing.

Better yet, the BBPD had copies of all my bullying notes. They had copies of the videos of Emma assaultsing me, of the e-mails, pictures of the bruises on my face.

Sophia had escalated things and so I no longer had any interest in holding back. I'd burn her legally if I could. If she chose to escalate even further, I was willing to do so in turn.

I simply had to remember than not everyone was an enemy and that I had to be sure the people I was intimidating deserved it.

I really did intend to try to stop intimidating the cops, but the nature of my powers were such that I couldn't avoid intimidating people, unless I intentionally hamstrung myself.

“I suspect that I'll be able to force a transfer to Acadia if you want it,” my lawyer murmured. “They want to avoid publicity, even though that may be impossible by now. The fact that you are a cape is going to be impossible to hide now that an entire room filled with criminals heard Colt blab about it.”

“They'll probably offer protection for me,” Dad said.

He looked tired. This was all a confirmation of his worst nightmares; me jailed and being seen as a villain even if I wasn't. I'd seen the worry on his face the moment when he'd seen my powers when they manifested when I was twelve. He'd known how powerful my father had been and he'd known that if I was that powerful then the world would not be able to ignore me for good or evil.

“They'd better offer protection anyway,” I said.

Even though he still wasn't the man he'd once been, I knew that deep down he loved me. He was the only person left in the entire world that loved me.

I rolled the piece of metal in my pocket around and around in my fingers. It wasn't as though the crazed remnant of my grandfather was a person at all, but it was all I had left of family other than my father.

Anyone harmed or even threatened to harm either one of them, and I'd do worse than melting faces and explosive eyeballs. I would be like a biblical apocalypse.

Hmm... I hadn't thought about a name really. Was Apocalypse too villainous?

I'd have to ask my grandfather when I got home. Talking to him now would be too frustrating, what with all the people around.

From the nearest van came Miss Militia flanked by several men in black suits. They looked like lawyers. Armsmaster stood behind them, looking irritated for some reason.
“What's going on here Pettifog?” the lead man asked.

He looked a little slimy, like I imagined a car salesman would look. Not that I could remember ever buying a new car.

“You're too late,” my lawyer said. He was impeccably dressed and looked utterly confident. “She's been released without bail.”

“This case is under PRT jurisdiction!” the lawyer sputtered. “The BBPD had no right to release our suspect.”

I leaned forward and smiled at him. The expression in my eyes wasn't pleasant. It took the man a moment to understand, and then he took a step back.

Miss Militia stepped forward, her hand on her hip. I couldn't sense the weapon there; whatever she used wasn't actually metal. It was probably some kind of hard light or something even weirder and more esoteric. In any case I couldn't easily affect it. I'd have a better time stripping her arm down to the bone.

Apparently she had a little of whatever it was that my grandfather used to judge people, because her eyes hardened and the gun at her side grew larger.

Armsmaster was moving into position, trying to get behind me. As though anyone with that much metal armor was a danger to me. I'd just throw him into the bay. It was more than five miles away but it wouldn't be a problem. Someone would save him... probably.

“Here,” my lawyer said.

He handed the lead lawyer a thick sheaf of papers.

“What is this?” the lawyer looked startled at being handed the papers. Apparently he was more used to being on the offensive.

“My client has decided to sue the PRT,” my lawyer said.

“On what grounds?”

“Endangerment for one. Attempting to force her into the Wards by manufacturing a crime. Damaging and destroying property of sentimental value. Being complicit in revealing her identity as a Cape to the world. There are other charges, but those are the main ones.”

Hardly any of them would stick, but my lawyer would use them as bargaining points for what I really wanted; out of the hellhole that was Winslow.

A little money wouldn't be terrible either.
Approaching school the next morning I felt a sense of apprehension. I didn't know how much my classmates would know. Would they know about my powers, or would I just be the crazy girl who'd brought a locker full of weapons to school.

Either way, it was hard to see me being accepted with open arms.

Part of me was wondering why I even bothered at all. My grandfather's avatar certainly didn't seem to think that I should waste my time sitting in class when I could be out doing... whatever he had planned for me.

It hadn't really said, actually, and I wondered if that was something I should be worried about. I had no intention of taking over the world, no matter what it said. Taking over the world sounded fun and all, but actually running the world once you had it sounded like a thankless, unpleasant job.

If it actually showed me how to turn everyone into the city into gorillas I'd owe Dad an apology.

“Humans are already apes,” the voice commented. “I don't see what difference adding a little hair would make.”

Nice.

My grandfather the racist.

“Wasn't my grandmother a human?” I asked.

It was silent before it spoke. “I have loved many woman, some who were not mutants.”

“I really don't want to hear about your love life,” I said. I still wasn't comfortable thinking about young people having sex, much less someone who had been at least ninety years old.

“The first was Magda, a beautiful gypsy I met in the camps. I loved her and I married her. We had a child together named Anya. She died in a fire when I was prevented from saving her by men who were frightened by what I was. I...did not react well. Afterwards, she could not accept what I was, and she fled from me.”

It's voice actually sounded sad.

I tried to imagine how I would have reacted if someone had forced me to watch my father burn. I doubted that I'd have been any more merciful than my grandfather.

“I searched for her for years, haunted. There were others, of course. Isabelle, Astra, Jean, Janet, Aletys, Emma, Marie, Amelia, Alda, Karima...”

“Holy crap!” I muttered. “I didn't know that my grandfather was a man-whore.”

“Do not judge, child. I lived a very long time, and the nights grow lonely. None of them meant as much to me as Magda though, who was my first love.”

“Can we change the subject?” I asked. Listening to stories about old man sex was going to cause more psychic damage than the Simurgh.

All morning I could feel people watching me out of the corner of my eye. People whispered as I
passed. It wasn't like before, when most people had completely ignored me except for my bullies.

Now everyone was aware of me, and most of them were actively avoiding me. I still couldn't tell if it was about the guns or about the powers. How fast the news spread through the grapevine I couldn't be sure.

Madison in particular took great pains to ignore me, although it looked as though she was about to have a heart attack a couple of times when she saw me looking at her.

It wasn't until I sat down for lunch at an empty table that things changed. I was done with hiding, with eating lunch in the bathroom.

When I felt people slide into the seats on both sides of me I suspected that there might be trouble.

Considering that both of them were large enough to be football players and both had a distinctive set of tattoos I should have been even less surprised.

The fact that I could almost feel the metal piece in my pocket heating up wasn't a surprise. Given what my grandfather had been through, if he'd had control of my powers I doubt anything would have been left of them.”

“Hey, Heeb. I hear you scared a couple of pigs yesterday,” the larger one smirked. “Made one of them piss his pants. Wish I could have seen that.”

“What do you want?” I asked flatly.

“I've got bosses that would like a word with you,” he said. “A proposition that would be of benefit to everyone.”

“Except the blacks and the Asians and the gypsies,” I said.

“Exactly!” he said enthusiastically. “We need to help the good, honest people before the refuse moves in and takes over. After what that nig....bitch Hess did, we figured you wouldn't mind helping us out.”

“Where were you when I was powerless?” I asked. I hadn't been, but no one had known that. “You all let a black girl walk all over a white girl and nobody lifted a finger.”

“We thought you were Jewish, what with a name like Heeb and all.”

“And Jews aren't white?” I asked. I'd never really understood the hatred toward Jews. It hadn't been a part of history that Winslow had focused much on for obvious reasons.

“Jews are their own kind of evil,” he said.

“What if I told you I was Jewish?” I said casually. “Do you think that would make a difference to your masters considering what I'm able to do?”

He froze as he noticed that all the metal utensils on the table were bending and twisting as though they were alive.

“You know all it would take is a paper clip to kill a man,” I said casually.

My grandfather had told me a story about doing just that. It had been supposed to be educational, I guess, even if it had made me feel a little nauseous.
“You, you wouldn't,” he said nervously. “Using powers against a norm in a public school. The PRT would be after you.”

“The PRT doesn't do anything about Lung,” I said. “The Empire doesn't do anything about Lung, and all he's got is Oni Lee. I'm stronger than Lung, and what do you think that means I think about the Empire?”

The entire cafeteria was silent now, watching us.

“I've had my powers for a while, and I've tolerated certain things. That's over. Anybody comes against me, and that's fine. I'll be happy to meet them wherever they want. Anyone comes against mine though, and I'll make them pay in ways that will be talked about for generations.”

Both boys made to get up. I tried something I'd been working on for a while. I didn't only control magnetism; that was simply the easiest of the forces foe me to control. I could control all the forces of the spectrum, one of which was gravity.

“Wha...what are you doing?” one of the boy's asked as he suddenly found his weight increased by a factor of three. He slammed back on the table, and at that weight it had to be hard to breathe.

“I don't just juggle ships,” I said. “I've got tricks no one has heard of yet. Tell your masters what I said.”

A moment later I let the gravity field up and they were both scrambling away.

Considering the emotion that I felt from my grandfather's avatar, they were both very lucky. If he'd been in charge the entire school would have gotten an up close and personal anatomy lesson. Me, I felt that seeing the insides of a Nazi would ruin everyone's lunch.

Besides, I needed someone to send a message. It was only a matter of time before someone tried for my Dad, and I needed someone to make an example of, so that the others would learn they needed to leave me alone.

Better that it occur at a time of my choosing than by surprise.

The tenor of the whispers around me changed after lunch. People weren't looking at me like the crazy gun girl anymore. Instead I was the crazy and scary cape.

It was yet another reason to go to Arcadia. The people there were used to Panacea and Glory girl being open capes, and it was assumed that the wards went there in secret. People were used to capes whereas here I was treated like a freak.

I didn't even have anyone else trying to suck up to me, which was a little disappointing. Maybe I'd done too good a job of intimidating the Nazis.

As I walked to Chemistry class that afternoon I felt someone slam into me in passing. It was strange, considering that everyone else had been giving me a wide berth. I felt something being pressed into my hand at the same time.

“Check your locker,” the note said.

Opening my locker without touching it, I saw a small metal box inside. I lifted it with my powers and
made sure to raise my shields. Opening the box, I looked inside with trepidation.

A bloody human finger was inside, along with a note.

“We have your father. We will communicate with you at the end of the school day as to where we shall meet.”

I saw white.

I was barely aware of the metal doors of Winslow exploding outward on their hinges as I flew forward and then up. I wasn't wearing a costume, but I didn't think it mattered anymore. An act of will summoned my costume from my house. I could feel it flying across the city as I moved to intercept whoever had my father.

The voice was whispering admonishments; whether it was to calm me, or to tell me to kill them all I did not know. I didn't listen. All I could do was focus on the location of the tracker I had put in Dad's shoe.

I slowed as I approached a large warehouse. There was a skylight and I landed silently next to it.

“No one is invincible,” I could hear Kaiser saying. “And if this new Cape is Jewish it is only a matter of time before she comes after us. It is better to ambush her all together than to wait for her to come take us one by one. She controls metal, which means that Fog and Crusader will have to be our main avenue of attack. We will change from our ordinary costumes to Kevlar. It will be a temporary inconvenience until we end this offense to the natural order.”

They were expecting to have plenty of time to prepare for me. It was probably better that I didn't give them that time.

The roof to the warehouse exploded upward around me. I would have turned it into shrapnel but I didn't want to injure Dad.

They were there, all of them. Hookwolf, Kaiser, the giant twins, Crusader, Night and Fog and the others.

My father was in the center tied to a beam. It looked as though his arm was broken and he'd been beaten unconscious. A white cloth stained red was wrapped around his left hand.

I saw red.

This wasn't some sort of game, a polite exchange of hostages. I'd hoped that the finger had been fake somehow, but they'd actually hurt him.

“Surrender, Jew...” Kaiser began.

I crushed his metal armor like a tin can, doing the same to the squishy body inside inside. On my grandfather's advice, I did the same to the twins and to Crusader. I stopped short of killing them, but I gave them crushed ribs. They wouldn't be fighting anytime soon.

Hookwolf snarled and leaped for my father. I tore his metal body apart. What I hadn't realized was that the metal wasn't just a shell; it extended under the skin, which led to a sight I would have rather not seen. He was still alive, but just a mass of blood without a skin.

A simple snap of her cage-mask left Cricket with a broken neck but still alive.
The others were only now beginning to react, stunned at how quickly I had attacked. Fog was floating toward me; he was one of the Empire Capes who was most dangerous to me now that Crusader was down.

Stormtiger was trying to buffet me with winds. He wore chains which I used to turn his body suddenly so that his winds buffeted and dispersed Fog instead, who screamed and returned to his human form. I heard a scream from Night, who was running toward me.

Stormtiger's chains lashed out, smashing her skull while she was still human, knocking her out before strangling Stormtiger. He was too busy clawing at his neck to attack again.

Rune threw a chunk of concrete the size of a car at me; I blocked it with the metal remains of Hookwolf's shell.

Blades exploded from Hookwolf's shell, piercing her in the collar and forcing her to fall off her platform fifteen feet to become unconscious.

Viktor was charging toward me, but he was wearing a breastplate. I smashed him into Alabaster over and over until he was unconscious.

Alabaster I simply dropped Hookwolf's armor onto, followed by a truck. It was probably unpleasant, but he was immortal and I didn't know how to disable or even kill him in the long term.

Only Othalla and Krieg were left. Othalla had her hand on Krieg even as she stared at Viktor, who I remember was supposedly her lover.

Suddenly I felt myself getting short of breath. For a moment I was worried that Fog had revived; it took a moment to realize that it was Krieg. He could control kinetic motions. Furthermore, with Othalla empowering him, he was now able to withstand a punch from leviathan, at least supposedly.

Glancing around, I noted that everyone else seemed to be unconscious.

I wrenched Othalla away from him using pieces of Hookwolf's frame. Locking her down was important; otherwise I'd find myself facing opponents that I'd already taken down over and over again.

I then called lightning down from the heavens. It struck Krieg but didn't affect him. He was running toward me, and the closer he got, the harder it got to breathe.

He might be invulnerable, but that didn't make him unbeatable. I threw cars at him, but he used his power to bat them aside. He jumped for me as I levitated there, and moments before he would have gotten me, with the world slowing around me because of his field, I turned several cars into a giant fist that reached up and grabbed him. He tried to turn the fist's power against it, but my power was too strong. He struggled against it, and then his power failed.

He was unconscious in the space of a moment, only his power protecting him from being utterly crushed.

I landed and stood before Othalla.

“You will heal my father,” I said. “Or I will start breaking your bones. I'll start with the one that you all broke with him.”

“It was an accident,’ she stammered. “He wasn't supposed to fight back, not like that. He had some kind of armor on and he was harder to subdue than everybody thought.”
“I don't care. Will you heal him?”

She nodded, looking down at Viktor.

“No one else has to die,” I said. “If you don't help my dad, I think that might change, though.”

It was only an act of a moment for her to heal my Dad. As he healed I tied her down again.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I levitated it next to my ear.

“PRT,” the voice on the line said. “How may I direct your call.”

“I'd like to report a parahuman fight,” I said calmly.

“Are you safe?” the woman asked.

“Very,” I said.

“Are you one of the parahumans involved?”

“Yes. I think they've been calling me Inferno. I have members of the Empire eighty Eight that need pickup.”

“Which ones?” she asked.

“All of them,” I said.

For a long moment all I heard on the other end of the line was dead silence.

“What?” she asked. Her voice sounded shocked.

“I've got all of the Empire Capes here ready for pickup, except Purity I guess,” I said. “Some of them look like they are bleeding fairly profusely, so it might be best to make haste.”

“Where?”

“You've got my phone GPS location,” I said. “I'm not sure of the address. I flew here.”

Glancing down, I grimaced. “I think some of these guys are dead.”

It looked like the guys whose armor I had crushed weren't still alive. Kaiser, the twins, Crusader. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. For the moment I didn't feel anything other than grim satisfaction.

“Can you provide medical treatment?” the woman asked.

“Othalla can,” I said. “But some of these guys are too dangerous to revive.”

The truth was that I didn't want her to heal any of them. They all deserved everything they'd gotten. I held dad, whose finger was slowly healing and he still wasn't conscious.

“We have teams en route,” she said crisply. “ETA is five minutes.”

“You have done well,” the voice whispered. “Each of the men you ended has hurt hundreds, maybe even more. They would have hurt thousands in the future.”

It wasn't something he had to tell me; I knew that better than anyone. I had lived with the Empire on my doorstep my entire life, and I knew what they were responsible for.
The question was, what would I feel when this numbness faded, and how would my father take the news that his daughter had killed? Even if it was in defense of him, I suspect he would disapprove.

It didn't ultimately matter. He was alive and if that meant that a hundred Nazis had to die, that was a trade I'd make.
“It wasn't supposed to be like this,” Rune said. Her voice was thready, and she sounded like she was in shock.

“What wasn't?” Battery asked.

“We'd been talking about bringing the new girl in for a couple of days. After she did that thing with the ship everybody wanted her... that kind of power would make the Empire unbeatable.”

“So what happened?” Battery asked.

“Kaiser wanted to do the soft sell, send some kids to talk to her after that idiot cop let everybody know who she was. It's not a violation of the rules if you don't have a secret identity any more, right?”

Battery glanced back at the one way mirror. Piggot and the others were behind the glass, watching. Rune had seemed more vulnerable than the others, which was why they were interrogating her first.

“Thing is, the kids came back screaming that she was a Jew and that she was planning to take the Empire down. I didn't believe it. Who would be crazy enough to even try something like that?”

Rune laughed bitterly, and stared down at her hands. They were wrapped in steel mittens so that she couldn't make her trademarked gestures required to use her telekinisis.

“Stormtiger and Hookwolf started talking about how she was making the Empire look weak, and about how if we let it go we'd be making ourselves a target for all the other gangs. Kaiser didn't want to do it, but the others were listening.”

Battery nodded sympathetically. Suspects tended to be more open if you pretended to be sympathetic. It helped that Battery was white and female. Miss Militia was too ethnic and Armsmaster too intimidating. Assault didn't have the light touch that was needed for a good interrogation, at least not with a teenage girl.

“Everybody figured she was just a scared kid talking big. She was bullied at school... let a nig...er, black girl walk all over her for years. She's only had her powers for a few days! Even regular kids don't start killing until they've had a taste for it for a while. How dangerous could she possibly be?”

Rune closed her eyes and shook her head, as though to push the images of what had happened away.

“So Hookwolf and Stormtiger send some guys to pick up her Dad. It was just supposed to be a threat, you know? One of those, we can find your family any time so don't fuck with us kind of things.”

Rune scowled. “The old guy wasn't supposed to fight. He brained one of the guys with a wrench, and when they beat him it was like he was wearing some kind of armor. They had to beat him unconscious, and one of the guys got a little carried away, cut off his finger.”

“Kaiser just kind of rolled with it. Said to send it to her, make her stew for a while while we got everybody together. Either we'd intimidate her, or we'd get Fog to choke her to death.”

“We weren't even sure whether she controlled metal or was a telekinetic. Kaiser thought we ought to change to Kevlar to make sure, but nobody really knew. Hookwolf was pretty sure he was fine. She
should have been Manton limited, and his metal comes out of his body.”

“That apparently wasn't true,” Battery said, grimacing. She'd seen Hookwolf's body, what there had been left of it. It had been hideous.

“No,” Rune said. “We were just getting started getting ready, and then the roof exploded.”

“What happened then?” Battery asked, leaning forward.

“You saw what happened,” Rune said. She was silent for a long moment staring into space. “We were the biggest, strongest gang in the Bay, and it took her less than two minutes to take us out. She's a monster.”

She started to cry.

Battery doubted that Rune would have a sound night's sleep for a long time.

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“I suppose this means we should raise her threat ratings a little,” Assault said lightly.

Strider had been transporting the members of the Empire to other PRT headquarters around the country. It would have been too easy for the mass of them to break out all at once, which likely would not have pleased the Hebert girl.

At the moment everyone wanted to keep the Hebert girl happy.

Piggot glared at him, then shook her head.

“It's a bad sign that I'm more worried about a fifteen year old girl than about the gang war that's about to happen because of what she did,” she said, scowling. “She's a loose cannon, and we're hamstrung by that damnable lawsuit.”

“That's what we're hamstrung by,” Assault said, sarcastically. “Not by the fact that she beat a group that had us outgunned faster than I can say their names.”

Battery kicked her husband under the table. Everyone was stressed enough without his fanning the flames. Assault ignored her, however, to her displeasure.

“Also, we're in a headquarters made entirely out of metal sitting out in the middle of the Bay,” Assault continued. “Our Tinkers all have metal armor, and so do some of the rest of us. That's something I'd really reconsider after what I saw happen to Kaiser. It was like what happened when you step on a Ketchup packet.”

“Switching to using entirely non-metal technologies is something that will take a very long time,” Armsmaster said. He seemed to be taking what Assault said as something more than sarcasm. “Even though there are ceramic armors, the wiring, sensor components....there is metal in everything. I could try to create shielding, but I'm not sure how effective that would be against someone of this power level.”

“She's a problem,” Piggot admitted. “And worse, she's our problem.”

“Does she have to be?” Battery asked. “She only went after the Empire because they'd taken her father, the one person she has left in her life. It's not like she was looking for trouble. She hasn't even gone out for patrolling, which is what most heroes do their first time out.”
“She's actually been remarkably passive,” Miss Militia said. “Most parahumans seek out conflict like moths to flames. I know that most of you think she triggered with the locker incident, but she didn't even bother to report it and there's some evidence that she's had her powers for a lot longer.”

Battery nodded.

“She's got too much control of her powers to have just had them for a few days. She acts like she's had them for years.”

“There's no way someone with that kind of power could have flown under the radar for that long,” Dauntless said. “Powers just want to be used.”

“We talked to people at the craft show,” Miss Militia said. “She's been selling metal statuary for the past year and a half. There's a clear progression in her work, but all of it is similar in that it didn't seem like it was welded together, at least not normally.”

“There's something else,” Armsmaster said. “We found what was left of her father's jacket at his workplace. It's tinker work, a kind of magnetic gel armor that I have never seen before.”

“So she's working with a Tinker,” Velocity said. “Maybe we can use that person to get a little leverage.”

“I scanned her for tech when I went to bring the Empire in,” Armsmaster said. “I didn't find anything. She was talking to herself and I thought that she might be in communication with someone else. I checked the entire electromagnetic spectrum and there weren't any emissions.”

“So you're suggesting that she's the Tinker?” Piggot asked. She frowned. “I thought that Tinkers did not tend to manifest really strong other powers.”

“I examined the jacket,” Armsmaster said. “And its construction had a lot in common with the statuary. There were no visible welds and it looked as though the nanobeads inside the gel had been magnetically formed. More importantly, I think that it's technology that could be replicated by non-Tinkers, which is rare.”

Everyone was silent for a long moment. The number of Tinkers with replicable technologies was infinitesimal.

“Has anyone thought about the fact that she's not Manton limited?” Assault asked. “That means that anyone with metal fillings, metal joint replacements, anything is pretty much dead if they get into a fight with her, even if there aren't any other metals around.”

“She's unstable,” Piggot said. “She's clearly paranoid; her feud with Shadow Stalker and Miss Militia's meeting her at an art show was enough for her to sue us all. Worse, she murdered several men in cold blood, and as far as I've seen, she hasn't shown an ounce of remorse. If there is no response, what's to keep her from escalating?

“Perhaps we should use diplomacy instead of force,” Battery said. “We can always call the Triumvirate later, but if that's the first thing we do, it's likely that there will be a lot of collateral damage.”

“If a Kill order is issued there are ways that would involve less collateral damage,” Armsmaster said. “Poison, Fletchette from New York has a power that even cuts through Endbringers... this is not a situation that cannot be solved.”

“Are you suggesting that we assassinate a fifteen year old girl?” Battery asked incredulously.
Armsmaster shook his head. “She's not a fifteen year old girl. According to those who have faced her, she is a monster. Besides, I am simply pointing out that there are ultimate options other than turning the city into the kind of warzone that an Endbringer would create.”

“She's a scared teenage girl,” Battery said.

“She didn’t look scared to me,” Velocity said. “I heard about how she intimidated those cops, and all I can think is that it's a pattern. She promised not to do that kind of thing anymore and the very next day she's using her powers on kids at her school. If this was anyone else we'd have already hauled her in.”

“She's not anyone else,” Assault said soberly. “Does anybody here think she couldn't take Lung is she wanted to? We've let him run around free for years. Are we going to do anything different with her?”

Piggot scowled at him, but she didn't disagree with what she was saying.

“She needs to be managed. Once the rest of the country gets wind of this, things are likely going to get ugly.” Piggot said. “There are always idiots who want to poke the bear.”

“There is a worst case scenario,” Miss Militia said. As everyone looked up, she said one word. “Butcher.”

Battery watched as the color drained from everyone's faces. The idea of the Butcher with Taylor Hebert's power was terrifying. She would make the Slaughterhouse Nine look like amateurs, given the levels of power and control she'd already shown as a fifteen year old.

“We need a plan to deal with her before that happens. Does she even know about Butcher?” Velocity asked.

“We have to make sure she knows,” Piggot said. “Which may be difficult considering that Butcher may have jumped bodies by the time he comes here.”

It wasn't as though having a physical description would be of any use.

“How do we get her to listen to use then?” Battery asked.

“Maybe Dragon,” Assault offered. “If she really is a tinker who has tech than can be replicated, Dragon might be able to set her up with lucrative contracts. Her father isn't exactly rich. Think about it... the girl wants to be a rogue, isn't it in our best interest to let her? The more time she tinkers is time she's not running around blowing people's heads off when they make her mad.”

“That's... not bad,” Piggot said begrudgingly. “Dragon has a reputation among tinkers, one that we can use. We need good interactions with the girl wherever we can find them. She seems to be under the impression that we are the villains in all this and we need to convince her that we aren't.”

“Dealing with Shadow Stalker might help,” Battery said. “What's been done with that?”

“She's under house arrest,” Piggot said. “For her own safety mostly. There's no proof that she did leave the guns in the locker, although some of the fingerprints and serial numbers do match some of the busts Shadow Stalker is known to have made.”

“I'll talk to her,” Battery said.

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“It wasn't me,” Shadow Stalker said.

“Taylor Hebert thinks it was,” Battery said. “And a lot of the guns come from perps that you busted.”

“I didn't say the guns didn't come from me. I said it wasn't me that did it,” Sophia looked up. “I might as well admit it. Hebert's the big player now and Piggot's going to throw me under the bus.”

“Where did you get the guns?” Battery asked.

“I like to take trophies,” Sophia admitted. “I've got stashes all over the city. Even showed Emma some, the stupid bitch.”

“Are you saying that Emma Barnes was the one who put the guns in the locker?”

“It was overkill,” Sophia said. “You do something like that you've got to sell a story people will believe. A girl like Hebert brings a gun to school; it's not a surprise to anybody. It needs to be something cheap, something a girl like her could get hold of, but this is the Bay. Anybody can get a piece if they really want it.”

She shook her head. “Emma went nuts, though. I don't know how she got inside the school or into the locker for that matter, but she was the only one who knew about my stashes. It had to have been her, right?”

“I don't know,” Battery said. “Just holding onto the guns, tampering with evidence is a crime serious enough to revoke your parole.”

“I'm better off in juvie,” Sophia said. “They say Hebert crushed Kaiser like a grape. If I'm in juvie maybe she won't go after my family.”

“Do you think she might do that?”

“Hell if I know. I thought I knew Hebert, but I never would have thought she'd do... all of this, even if she got powers. She killed more people in two minutes than I ever thought about killing, and the question you have to ask yourself is where does she go from that?”

“You think she'll escalate?” Battery asked.

“Wouldn't you? Short of the big three there's nobody that can stop her, not locally anyway. She pretty much is the eight hundred pound gorilla in the room,” Sophia said. She scowled. “I still don't understand why I got the power to walk through walls and she gets to be an Endbringer.”

“She's not an Endbringer,” Battery said quietly.

“The stuff I've heard she's been doing, doesn't that sound like an Endbringer to you? If you can lift a cargo ship you can probably lift a building, and doesn't that sound like something the Simurgh does?”

“You can't reason with an Endbringer,” Battery said. She felt a little uncomfortable even talking about it. Most people avoided talking about Endbringers like the plague, fearing that it would somehow call them down on their city. Given the Simurgh's powers it was possible that it might even be true.

“You think you can reason with Hebert when she's got her mind made up?” Sophia asked. “Everybody thinks she triggered in the locker, but I can you that she didn't.”
“Why would you think that?”

“She didn’t act like she should have. She didn’t scream or beat on the walls or anything. She went in and it was just quiet. Somebody goes through that with those kind of powers, they’ll panic and blow through the locker, right? She just opened the lock and stepped out. Who has that kind of control when they are triggering?”

“When do you think she got her powers then?”

“There was always something about her, little things. She looked like she was taking what we had to give her, but she was never really afraid like she should have been. It was like she always had an ace in the hole.”

Sophia stared down at her hands. “I thought she was just pretending, that she was weak and just good at hiding it. Why else would she let us do everything we did to her? If she was this strong why not stop us? That's some Clark Kent level shit right there.”

Battery was surprised that Sophia even knew the reference. Many teenagers her age didn't. In a world with Scion, who needed Superman after all.

“Did she get off on it? Pretending to be weak and laughing behind our backs when we acted like we were the strong ones?” Sophia scowled. “What kind of sick freak does that?”

Battery didn't make the obvious comparison.

“This is only the beginning,” Sophia said. “And I'm going to be happy to be out of the bay when it all explodes in everybody’s faces. I'm telling my family to get out and you should get out too.”

“She seems like a nice girl,” Battery said weakly.

“She seemed like a nice girl for two years and then she murdered a whole bunch of dudes and didn't even look back. What else is she hiding?” Sophia asked. “How long is it before Piggot or Armsie or some other idiot decides they need to reign her in? You think she's gonna take that from anybody but maybe her pops?”

Sophia shook her head. “Just send me to juvie. I'll come by and check the crater that's left when she finishes with it when I get out.”
I should have killed Othalla.

She'd promised to heal Dad, but after two days he was still unconscious. Nothing the doctors had done had made the slightest difference. I couldn't help but feel that Othalla had left him in a coma intentionally, maybe as a form of revenge against me.

I'd been in the hospital by his side for two days, sleeping restlessly on a cot by the bed. Granddad's voice had been curiously silent. I would have thought that with all his knowledge of genetics and mad science that he'd have had some idea about what was wrong, but he seemed as puzzled as my doctors.

Whenever I'd heard about killing on television and in books, they always made a big deal about it, the same as they did with losing your virginity. It was supposed to be this life changing thing, something that stained the soul forever.

It worried me a little that I didn't feel anything. I felt numb, actually. It might have been that my worry for Dad overshadowed anything I felt about what had happened.

What worried me was the thought that it might be a delayed reaction. I'd walked barefoot in the snow once. It hadn't been one of my better ideas, but while I was doing it there hadn't been much in the way of pain. It hadn't been until I'd come back into the heat that I'd realized that my feet had been numb and I hadn't felt any pain because of it. Instead all the pain had hit me at once as my feet were back in the heat.

In the end all I could do was sit and stare at the monitor beeping in a regular rhythm, afraid to use my powers for fear of damaging some sensitive equipment.

No one came to visit me; not the police looking for statements or the PRT. The only people I saw were nurses and occasionally doctors.

That changed on the evening of the second day.

As the door opened quietly, I looked up. The nurses had kept a regular schedule, and most of them had been efficient, although some of them clearly knew who and what I was. I'd seen fear in their eyes, although most had been good at hiding it. Those who had shown the most fear had been rotated out quickly.

This wasn't a scheduled time though.

I was surprised to see a girl my age stepping into the room. She was wearing a robe with a large hood and a scarf covering her face. The robe was white with a red cross on it. She had mousy brown hair and she looked tired.

“I don't do brains,” she said as she stepped into the room. “I tried to tell them, but everyone seems to think that you're a special case.”

Panacea. She was the one Cape in Brockton Bay who was an even better healer than Othalla. Some people said she was the best healer in North America.

“Do I have your permission to heal your father?” she asked, her voice sounding bored. “Even though I probably won't be able to do anything?”
Was she letting me know up front so that I wouldn't get my hopes up, or was she actually afraid and trying to keep my expectations low so that I wouldn't crush her like a grape?

Unlike my nurses I couldn't get a good read on her, and the voice wasn't helping either.

I nodded permission, and she reached out and touched his hand. She frowned, and then did something. I could see his finger starting to grow back. It was weird and a little disgusting.

“It's a good thing he has a lot of fat stores,” she said. “It'd be a lot harder with someone who was thin.”

She held his hands for a good five minutes until the finger was completely regrown. Finally she let go of her hand and turned to me.

“Well?” I asked. “What's wrong with him?”

“Even though I can't do brains I can see them,” she said. She hesitated. “I don't normally talk about any of this without the permission of the patient, but everybody seems to think you should be an exception. It's like they think you'll blow up the hospital if you don't get the answer that you want.”

“Did they do something horrible to him?” I asked. I scowled, and the numbness began to be replaced by anger. If they'd done more than just cut off his finger, I'd find what was left of them and I'd make them pay.

Metal objects began to levitate around the room, and I had to consciously force them to drop back to where they were. I worriedly looked at the monitors, which seemed to be fine for the moment.

Amy took a step back.

“Have you considered anger management classes?” she asked. “I can see how people might get worried.”

Apparently my rage had shown on my face.

“It looks like he had an initial beating,” she said. “But I doubt they did anything to him after cutting off his finger. The fact of the matter is that nothing is wrong with him.”

“What?”

“I've healed his body, and he'd not actually in a coma. Have you heard about the part of the brain that determines whether someone has the potential to trigger or not?”

I nodded.

“His is active. My guess is that he triggered whenever all this happened, and his mind is still trying to deal with whatever new information his powers are giving him.”

“What does that mean?”

“You see it with Thinkers sometimes, if their powers are strong. They get so much new information and it takes time for their minds to learn to organize it,” she said. She shrugged. “I'm not sure how long it'll take him to wake up, but my guess is that the stronger he is the longer it will take.”

“It's already been two days,” I said. “Is that normal?”

I'd read about triggers, of course, while trying to figure out how being a mutant was different from
what everyone else experienced. The fact that Dad had triggered meant that what he'd gone through had been horrific. Had it been the beating, or had it been his fear that I was going to be murdered that had done it.

Had he seen me murder the other Capes and that was what had done it? It was a thought that I quickly shut down as unproductive.

“It means he'll probably be pretty strong,” she admitted. “It might be another couple of days, or it could be in a couple of minutes. I wouldn't expect him to be like this for more than a week total, and that seems unlikely.”

“So he's healthy otherwise.”

She nodded.

“I went ahead and corrected his vision. I reversed his male pattern baldness. It'll take a while, but his hair will grow back in. That'll give you time to get used to the change. He should probably lay off the cheese fries, though. He has a genetic predisposition for heart disease that I did my best to fix, but anybody who eats enough crap can get it no matter how healthy their genes.”

I was silent for a moment, staring at her.

“I really appreciate all of this,” I said.

She waved her hand as though it was nothing. “It's all part of the service.”

“No, really.” I said. “Dad is all I have left in the world, and you saving him is something I'll never be able to repay. If there's anything I can do to help you, name it.”

She was silent for a moment, staring at me. It looked as though she was debating with herself. Finally she took a deep breath and spoke.

“Do you really want to help me?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Think about what you're doing the next time you decide to go blundering around town like a bull in a china shop,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“Who do you think had to heal up the people you mangled before they sent them off to jail?” she asked. “And in the past two days I'd had to heal forty different gang members who were injured in the fighting.”

“Fighting?”

She stared at me. “Haven't you watched the news? Maybe even just looked outside? The gangs are at war. Even though the Empire no longer has any Capes, they outnumber all the other groups by at least three to one. The other groups don't have a lot of Capes anyway, so it's mostly gang members, and innocent people are getting caught in the crossfire.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

She stared at me as though I'd said something stupid.
“Did you know my sister is scared of you?” she asked. “She's not scared of anything, but she's been really quiet about you ever since she saw you carrying that boat.”

Glory Girl was scared of me?

“A lot of people are scared of you,” she said. “And for good reason. Someone with power like yours is like an elephant in a world of mice. Even if they don’t mean to be destructive they’ll blunder around killing people and destroying things unless that are very careful.”

“You don’t seem to be scared of me,” I pointed out. If anything she seemed a little rude.

“I’m the healer,” she said dismissively. “If you explode my head or... whatever it is that you do, what will you do the next time your Dad gets hurt?”

I stared at her for a long moment.

“Even the villains don’t come after me,” she said. “Because sooner or later all of you will need me.”

“They don’t try to hire you?” I asked, ignoring the implication that I was one of the villains.

“Well,” she said. “But if I went with one gang exclusively the others would go to war to get me back... kind of like what's happening now that you kicked one leg off of a three legged table. Why do you think I don't just heal heroes? I'm Switzerland.”

“I didn't start this,” I said defensively.

“But you finished it,” she said. “Except not really. There's a lot of loose ends out there, and there's ordinary people getting hurt. I wouldn't care, really, except that they keep sending them to me to get patched up.”

“You could turn her,” the voice said. “She is bitter in the role she has been forced into, stagnating to the point of madness. Give her a cause, an opportunity to use her powers in the way they were meant to be used and she would be yours.”

It hadn't had a single constructive thing to say in the last two days, and this was what it wanted me to do?

I ignored it.

“All I ever wanted to be was a hero,” I said.

“You think that matters to the person whose house got shot in the gang war you started?” she asked. “People playing cops and robbers is fun until people start getting hurt.”

She bit her lip. “I know you want to help, but just be careful. Not everyone is as tough as you.”

When she glanced at Dad I wondered if she was blaming me for what had happened to him. As though I hadn't blamed myself often enough anyway.

“Anyway, I've got a half dozen gang members to treat and then a guy with a weird rash to treat, so I need to be off. Thanks for not exploding my head.”

With that she was gone.

Is that how the rest of the hospital staff felt, that I was a problem? The Empire had been beating up minorities in the Bay, murdering people for as long as I could remember. I'd decapitated them in a
single evening. Wasn't cutting the head off the snake worth a little thrashing around?

Or was Amy spouting the Protectorate line, the one that led to nobody ever doing anything to threaten the status quo. Sure people were hurting for now, but the city had been bleeding for years, dying a slow, inevitable death.

“They deserved everything they got,” the voice whispered.

“Shut up,” I said as I settled down into my chair.

If Dad was really aware somehow, I wanted to be here when he woke up.

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“Miss Herbert?” A heavyset woman stepped into the room, followed by a tall African American man. There was something about her smile that I didn't like.

“Yes?” I asked.

I'd been waiting for the police to come to question me, maybe to try to take me in. I wasn't sure what I would do in a situation like that. Short of the Birdcage I doubted there was much they could do to hold me, and there was no way I was going to let them get me anywhere near the Birdcage.

“My name is Alyssa Jones, I'm with Social Services. This is Alex Winters.”

“What?” I asked flatly.

“Honey, I understand that your Dad is in bad shape right now. Are there any relatives you could go to stay with?”

“No,” I said. “All my relatives are dead.”

I could probably stay with Kurt and Lacey if I had to, but I had no intention of going anywhere with these people. Leaving Dad alone was a nonstarter.

Even my fake grandpa was technically dead... at least as far as I knew. For all I knew the original was still out there somewhere. The thought was startling. I'd assumed he was dead because I'd assumed he wouldn't have abandoned my mom if he wasn't dead.

“We're here to make sure that you have a place to stay while your father gets better,” she said. Her tone was cloying, and her expression was fake. I felt as though she was talking down to me.

“I'm not leaving this hospital room until my Dad wakes up,” I said flatly.

Who had done this? Was the PRT really stupid enough to think that I would follow some bureaucrat away from my father so they could kidnap him? How stupid did they think I was?

“You have to go to school,” she said. It was as though she hadn't heard what I said. “You need a bed and a place to stay.”

Staring at her, I said, “I can take care of myself.”

“You're fifteen,” she said dismissively. “I know that at your age teenagers think they are fully grown, but...”

“They didn't tell you who I was,” I said disbelievingly. “They actually sent you in here without knowing.”
Why would they send someone who was completely clueless in? I couldn’t understand their reasoning. At least a police investigation would have been logical. I’d have even cooperated as long as I didn’t have to leave the room. The odds of a disgruntled non-powered Empire member trying to get revenge were too high.

“What?” she asked, the confusion on her face obvious.

“You’ve heard about all the gangs fighting,” I said, staring at her. How long would it take her to make the connection.

“Your father wasn’t hurt in that, was he?” she asked. “It’s a terrible business; so many people getting hurt.”

“In a way he started it all,” I said. “The Empire caught my Dad and tortured him. I made sure they wouldn’t do it again.”

“What are you...”

With a glance at the equipment monitoring Dad, I took hold of change in my pocket and sent it orbiting around my head.

“I was the one who carried the ship over the city recently,” I said. “And I was the one who took out the Empire capes in less than two minutes.”

The fake smile on her face froze as she saw the coins rotating around my head. Even though she had suddenly become aware that I was a parahuman, I doubted she had any idea how much damage I could do with even one of those coins.

“Even if you were somehow capable of forcing me to leave here, which you can’t, what home would take me? The minute I went to school the remaining Empire members would firebomb whoever’s house I was in. I’m surprised that they haven’t already firebombed my house already.”

There was something about her expression. I groaned.

“They firebombed my house?” I asked. Somehow it didn’t surprise me. “Is there anything left?”

There had been pictures of Mom there, mementos, things I’d never get back. The helmet was there! If the voice was still talking to me that meant the helmet was still all right, right? Was this why it had been so quiet for the past few days.

“I am still functional,” the helmet said. “I was not aware of what was happening until it was too late. I have no power on my own, and most of my awareness is here with you.”

Her partner looked uncomfortable.

“We really can’t say. We haven’t been over there yet.”

“Who sent you?” I asked.

“I really couldn’t say,” he said smoothly. “Calls are anonymous to protect callers from reprisals.”

Was the Protectorate trying to annoy me to death, or were the remnants of the Empire trying to bleed me with a thousand small annoyances since they no longer had the power to do anything else to me?

Or was someone else trying to turn me against the government and against the Protectorate?
I summoned the helmet from its hiding place, presumably in the ashes of my family home. I could feel it flying through the air over the city. The last thing I needed was for someone else to get hold of it.

Whatever happened I was going to have some choices to make the moment Dad awakened.

Part of me dreaded him waking, because I was afraid of what he was going to have to say to me. Would he blame me for what had happened? Would he be relieved that I wasn't dead?

I had no way of knowing.

The one thing I did know was that a reckoning was coming for whoever was trying to destroy my life.

“In any case,” I said. “We're done here. I'm not leaving, and if you try to force me I don't think things are going to go very well for you.”

For some reason they seemed more than happy to leave. I seemed to be having that effect on people these days.

I settled back down to wait.
“It wasn't us,” Assault said. He held his hands up at my expression. “I swear. Official policy has been to leave you alone, give you a few days to cool off.”

“I'm not sure what to believe anymore,” I admitted.

Assault was pleasant and even a little funny, but part of me couldn't help but wonder if it was all an act. After all, the PRT likely wanted me to drop the lawsuit, and they wouldn't mind using a carrot along with whatever stick they had.

“We've been busy with this gang war thing anyway,” Assault said.

“I wouldn't have thought that would be a problem with their Capes gone,” I said.

“It's actually worse,” he said. “The Empire had over a thousand members, and now they've exploded into dozens of small gangs. They scatter like roaches whenever we show up, and it's like playing whack-a-mole; as soon as you take one down others pop back up.”

I stared down at my hands.

“Panacea seems to think this is all my fault,” I said.

He shrugged. “It would have happened eventually. The city was a powderkeg waiting for something to set it off. You just brought a flamethrower instead of a match.”

“So what do I do?” I asked. “I'm not leaving until my Dad is safe. They've apparently already burned my house down, so I don't trust a few security guards to keep the gang members from getting to him.”

“You do what you have to,” he said. “After what happened with Sophia, I'm not even going to try to talk you into joining the Wards.”

“You aren't?” I asked. That seemed a little suspicious. I would have thought that the powers that be would do anything to get me under their control.

“Oh, if anyone asks just tell them that I worked really hard to get you in,” he said, grinning. “Really convincing even.”

“So why aren't you?”

“You wouldn't be a good fit,” he admitted more soberly. “You scare too many people and you don't strike me as the type to follow the party line.”

“I don't get why I scare people,” I said. “Sure, I'm powerful, but...”

“Have you ever heard of threat displays?” he asked, interrupting me.

I shook my head.

“Animals don't usually kill members of their own species,” he said. “They usually start by posturing. If they can intimidate the other animal, then they may not have to fight at all. If they do fight, it usually isn't to the death.”
He stared out the window. “You know people aren’t much different? We just point guns at each other instead of roaring. Someone shooting at you is pretty terrifying, and a lot of times that’s all it takes to get people to break and run.”

“I’m not sure I...” I began.

“In World War II only about fifteen to twenty percent of the soldiers actually fired at the enemy. One percent of pilots accounted for forty percent of enemy fighters downed, which means that a lot of pilots never actually shot a single person.”

“I’m not sure what all that has to do with me.”

“Cape combat is all about posturing,” he said. “Who has more power, who can cow the enemy into doing what they want. Most Capes never kill anybody. The thing is, when the Empire faced you, they started posturing, expecting the same thing they’d always gotten, and you jumped straight to killing.”

“This isn’t a game,” I snapped. “They had my Dad. They’d hurt him.”

“Most of them don’t consider norms to be as important as Capes,” he admitted. “That’s just the way it is. They were playing cops and robbers and you went straight to war. That worries people. It makes you like that one percent of pilots, except that nobody really knows what side you are on.”

“I’m on the side of the city,” I said. “And on the side of my Dad.”

He stared at me for a moment then nodded. “I guess that’s fair. The thing is, even though they want you to join the Wards, being an ally to the Protectorate isn’t the worst idea in the world.”

“Oh?” I asked.

I’d been waiting for this pitch since Assault and the silent Battery had entered the room. Battery leaned against the wall and hadn’t been saying much. She didn’t seem afraid, though, which was an improvement over some of my nurses.

“We’ve got resources that you don’t,” he said. “You say you want to help people, and you can do a little tinkering. We can set you up with labs. We’ve got legions of lawyers that can make something like clearing out the ship graveyard not only legal, but popular. You can even work with Dragon if you’d like.”

“After the thing with Sophia, you think I’d trust any of you?” I asked. “You threw me under the bus because I was just some unpowered nobody, and she had powers that were useful to you. Why should I ever have anything to do with a group like that?”

“Sophia’s not the only criminal that was given a second chance,” Assault said soberly. “Most of them made good use of it. The fact is, mistakes were made. If we’d known what was going on we’d have put a stop to it.”

“Because it wouldn’t play well for the news?”

“For some of us, sure,” he said. “But most of us are good people who are put in a hard situation. We’re outnumbered three to one, and even if we went all out against the bad guys and won, we’d be left short during the Endbringer fights.”

“So it’s all a game?” I asked. “Just a show so everyone can think someone’s doing something?”
“Pretty much,” he said.

At my expression, he held up his hand. “The world is going to hell, and we're doing everything we can to keep it from getting worse. There's only so much we can do, though.”

“I can't live like that,” I said. “Watching the world circling the drain and doing nothing about it.”

“You shouldn't have to,” a scratchy voice said from the bed.

I whirled and saw my Dad was staring at me. He'd grown stubble, but seeing him awake made me rush forward to embrace him.

“Hey,” he said. “I'm glad you're all right.”

“They burned the house down,” I said into his shoulder. “There's nothing left.”

Assault and Battery had been kind enough to bring pictures. There wasn't anything left of the house; it had burned down to the basement. Once Dad was up and around I'd go back and take a look for myself, see if anything was salvageable.

“I kept copies of some of the pictures in a safe deposit box,” he said. At my look he shrugged. “We live in Brockton Bay. It was only a matter of time before someone torched the place.”

We didn't have money to replace the house though. I could probably get some fairly easily, but it would take time.

He felt for his stomach and frowned. He'd always been generally thin, but he'd been developing a small pot belly over the past few years, likely from the beer he drank when he thought I wasn't looking.

“Panacea,” I said. “She had to have some mass to grow your finger back.”

“Well, I'd have rather taken up running,” he said. “And you know how much I hate running, but this'll do.”

“Are you all right?” I asked, staring into his eyes. The trauma he'd been through, I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't the same man at all.

He looked away for a moment, staring at Assault by the window. “Are you?”

“I did what I had to do,” I said. Glancing back at Assault and Battery I said. “I'd do it again if I had to.”

Both of them tensed, but neither of them said anything. They worked really well together; their body language was in sync.

“It was my job to make sure you didn't have to do... whatever you did,” he said. “And I failed.”

His face was expressionless as he turned back to look at me. I couldn't tell what he was feeling, and that frightened me a little.

“I should have given you some better options,” I said. “Giving you the armor and nothing else was just asking for trouble.”

I'd been thinking about the weapons I could have given him over the past two days. My grandfather hadn't been one for building hand weapons; he'd never needed them. However, there were weapons
that I could buy, and if need be I could even make weapons with my grandfather's help.

As long as I had a power source that would support it, creating a miniature rail gun shouldn't be that hard. The power requirements had always been the sticking point anyway.

“I feel fine,” he said. “We should probably get out of the hospital before they take my kidney in payment.”

“Nobody's taking anything from you,” I said. “Never again.”

I turned to Assault and Battery.

“I appreciate what you've been trying to do, offering the olive branch and all. But I've got some things to take care of before I can do anything.”

Assault shrugged and handed me a business card. “Call us when you're ready.”

Both of them left the room.

When they were gone, I turned to Dad.

“I didn't want to say anything while they were here, but I know you're a parahuman,” I said.

I waited for him to deny it, but he simply sat looking at me without saying anything. In a better world I could have approached this with tact and understanding, but that wasn't the world we lived in.

Understanding his capabilities would let me know what I needed to do to protect him. If he was bulletproof then I didn't need to do much of anything. If he was just a Thinker I'd need to do a lot more. If he was a Tinker I'd have to provide him a lab.

“What can you do?”

After more than two days I figured he had a good idea of his own capabilities. Unlike my own experimentation with mutant powers, parahumans seemed to get a little more guidance with their powers.

“Right to it,” he said. He looked away again.

“I need to know so that I can protect you,” I said. “It'd be nice if you were bulletproof, but Panacea seemed to think you're some kind of Thinker.”

“I can see through the eyes of animals,” he admitted. “And control the animals I can see through.”

“What kind of animals?”

“Birds, insects, rats, cats, dogs... pretty much anything really.”

“And how many of them can you control?” I asked. “At once?”

“All of them,” he said “Everything in maybe a three block radius. Every cockroach, fly, pigeon, termite...hundreds of thousands of them all at the same time.”

I leaned back. No wonder his mind had struggled to deal with all that information at the same time.

“And it's on all the time?”
He nodded. “Assault and Battery are apparently in a relationship. I just saw her kiss him when they were outside of the range of the cameras. This hospital is a lot less clean than I would have liked; there are bugs everywhere.”

With a power like that I could have done a lot. It wasn't the bulletproofing I'd hoped for, but there was a lot of intimidation value in swarms of insects.

“It's not going to be like it was before,” I warned him. “There are people after us both, and I'm a lot better able to deal with them than you are.”

“I heard,” he said. “I've seen a lot more over the last couple of days than you have. There are people getting hurt close enough to the hospital that I could see them. I tried to help, but getting control wasn't easy.”

“You'll have to practice,” I said. “I can't lose you again.”

He was silent for a long moment. “What are we going to do about the house?”

I grinned, but it didn't reach my eyes. “I've been thinking about that for a while now. I'm assuming you don't want to leave the city?”

He shook his head.

It would have been easier to stash him somewhere. I had little doubt that I could have made enough money to support him until he got his feet back from under him.

“Then we have have two choices,” I said. “We can either hide, or we can double down and give the bastards who did this the finger.”

I thought about what I'd just said, then winced. Dad had already given them a finger.

He didn't seem to mind. “What did you have in mind?”

I told him.

***************

Thousands of pieces were floating in the air as the boat separated into its component parts. I was building something completely knew on the corpse of my old home, something that would be both a show of my power and a defensible structure should we need it.

I was building a fortress. The metal in ships was by necessity very thin, but it wasn't really what was providing the protection. I was using my control of electromagnetism to produce plates of graphene that were ten times as strong as steel. I didn't completely understand what I was doing, but the voice was helping me transform the sheets of carbon into something far more.

All of it was being done at three in the morning. Most people, even the criminals were asleep, and I wanted this done in the course of a single night, a demonstration of my power that no one in the city could ignore.

It would be an Iron Fortress, and while I had no intention of spreading out into the neighbors yards, at least not until I got the money to buy them out, the one direction I could build was up. When I was done it would be a structure visible all over town, much like the Rig.

Also like the rig, I'd have a force field to protect the place, although that wouldn't be done tonight. Instead I'd focus on the iron plating, and on digging earth and stone from the basement to add mass
to the structure on the bottom side. With a little work I'd have three feet of solid earth between two metal walls, with the graphene plates as added protection.

This place wasn't going to simply be a statement, it was going to have to be our home. I regretted losing the back yard, but we needed the extra space.

When I was done, the structure would be self sustaining. Granddad knew how to make solar cells that were better than anything we had, except possibly for some Tinkers who had chosen not to care.

The windows would be made of graphene, bulletproof and transparent. There wouldn't be that many of them anyway; mostly I'd use solar tubes to provide natural lighting. The exterior was the most important thing for the moment; I could always work on the inside as we went along.

As long as I had a shell to present the city by the morning, the message would be sent.

Doing it silently so that no one except the occasional insomniac out for a ride noticed what was happening would be an added bonus.

“Perhaps a skull motif,” the voice whispered in my mind. An image of what it was talking about appeared.

“And you wonder why everyone thought you were a villain,” I muttered. “No, I'm not going to put a giant skull on the from of the fortress.”

The fact that I thought it would be kind of cool looking was something that I didn't express. The last thing I needed to do was encourage him.

“Then a throne room,” he said. “You need a place to address callers from a place of power.”

Blackwell had always used her enormous desk and her office to intimidate the students. She'd used it against me often enough that I could see the value in it. If the Protectorate wanted to talk to me they could come to my place instead of forcing me to go to theirs. If villains tried to talk to me, I'd need the intimidation factor even more.

A throne room it was.

“Perhaps a throne like this,” it said.

An image appeared in my mind of a throne made of hundreds of blades. It looked uncomfortable to sit on.

“You think I don't know where that comes from,” I said. “But I actually read.”

The voice gave a mental shrug. “It hasn't been turned into a television show on this earth yet, has it?”

“It's a television show in your world?” I asked. “That's... kind of amazing.”

“You are perhaps not old enough to fully appreciate the show,” the voice said. An image of bare skin flashed through so quickly I wasn't even sure I'd seen it.

“Right,” I said. “I guess it would be like that. Wait...does that mean you've read the books that haven't been written here yet?”

“I have been warned in the past that giving spoilers is considered the act of a rude, inconsiderate fool,” the voice said. “Although considering that it was Toad telling me this, perhaps I should get a second opinion.”
“Never mind,” I said. “Can you help me with the electrical connections?”

“Certainly,” it said. Images began flashing through my mind, and as they did, my mind began to turn them into reality.

Dad was staying with Kurt and Lacey until this was finished; they lived close enough that he could use his bugs to warn me if anything bad happened to him.

By the morning, Brockton Bay would wake to find my Iron Fortress overlooking the city. It would send a message of overwhelming power, at least hopefully.

They'd burned my house down after I'd defeated their Capes, which meant they needed a lesson in power. Fortunately I had enough power to teach them a lesson they wouldn't ever forget.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, Admin_Prvlgs (Unverified Cape)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

♦ Topic: Brockton Bay v1.01 Patch Notes
In: Boards ► Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)

One Angry Man (Original Poster)
Posted on January 17, 2011:
I always thought the Heberts were good neighbors until they put a skyscraper up next to my house in the middle of the night. Now I can't sleep because of the lights they've got on the top of the thing for the airplanes. Just because the daughter is a cape doesn't mean that she shouldn't have some consideration for other people. It's not like she's an architect; what if the whole thing falls over?

(Showing Page 1 of 5)

► Waterbringer
Posted on January 17, 2011:
First! What is this, some kind of joke? You complaining about the chick who brought down the E88 capes all by herself? You have a death wish, buddy?

► Void Cowboy
Posted on January 17, 2011:
I went to school with her, and she's really very nice. I'm sure if you talked to her she'd turn the lights down or something.

► Beauty_Three (Cape Groupie)
Posted on January 17, 2011:
I think what she's been doing is admirable. She cleared the boar graveyard out to make that thing, which has to be a good thing for the city, right?

► Clockblocker (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Posted on January 17, 2011:
I don't know if I should be more impressed or terrified. Did anybody notice that she intentionally made her place ten feet taller than the rig? I hope she has some pretty good supports for that thing, because if she doesn't it's going to come down and people are going to get hurt.
Cutey_Pie
Posted on January 17, 2011:

So are we just going to argue about her urban renewal plan? Or is anybody freaked out by the fact that we have somebody who can juggle ships and build giant buildings at a whim? I've seen the other threads, and I know most people seem to think that she's on the side of the angels since she chewed through the E88 like a meatgrinder, but where was she when Empire Thugs broke into my grandmother's house and stole all her stuff?

Stalking_Scaramuchi
Posted on January 17, 2011:

She can't be everywhere, bro. We should probably be thankful for that.

Liehoarder
Posted on January 17, 2011:

We've already talked about her powers on the other thread, and we've rehashed what was known about her fights. Can't we focus on what's important here? She's flouting zoning laws. They are there for a reason. As far as I can tell she made the whole thing from recycled materials that she didn't even own. What happens when there's an electrical fire because she didn't use the right gauge of wire. There's no way that place is up to code. She's a fifteen year old girl; she's not a plumber or an electrician or an architect. I'll bet that place is a deathtrap.

Need_for_Speed (Cape Daughter)
Posted on January 17, 2011:

Maybe she's a tinker.

Kingless (Unverified Cape)
Posted on January 17, 2011:

Tinkers don't get really strong other powers like she has. I can see her maybe working with a tinker to build the thing, but it's still really impressive.

Winged_One
Posted on January 17, 2011:

Are you sure about that? I think you'd be surprised.

Vista (Verified Cape)
Posted on January 17, 2011:

I'm not sure what to make of her, really. She doesn't seem to want anything to do with the PRT, but she hasn't done anything villainous except for the whole building a fortress of doom thing. PRT is considering working with the city to see if they can get it up to code. I'm just happy I'm not the one who has to deliver the bad news.

White Fairy
She's done a lot of damage to Winslow. The school was already failing, and it loses funding every time a student doesn't come to class. With nearly the entire class of Empire kids calling in sick for the last few days I wouldn't be surprised if the school collapsed.

► Laser Augment
Posted on January 17, 2011:
That wasn't her fault. The Empire broke the code and they paid for it.

► Valkyr (Wiki Warrior)
Posted on January 17, 2011:
We're the ones who are paying for it. I'm staying at my aunt's house because the fighting is too bad near my old house. My family is considering keeping me home from school too until the fighting dies down.

► Xyloloup
Posted on January 17, 2011:
I think she should give the rest of the Empire wannabes a taste of what she gave the leadership.

► Clockblocker (Verified Cape)(Wards ENE)
Posted on January 17, 2011:
Hey, no need to call for hurting people. I understand that people are upset about the chaos, but this could be a good thing. We have a real chance to make a difference now, and we are rounding them up as fast as we can. The various gangs that used to be the Empire are bleeding members almost as fast as the ones we're bringing in. It shouldn't be too much longer before things are back to normal, whatever that is in Brockton Bay.

► Heckyes
Posted on January 17, 2011:
Why are you having so much trouble arresting some gang members without powers? I'd have thought you'd have had them rounded up in a day or two.

► PrudishP
Posted on January 17, 2011:
There's a lot of them scattered everywhere. There's only a limited number of PRT members and Protectorate capes in the city, and they've got to keep an eye out for Lung and the Merchants. We're lucky they're helping at all.

► Vague20
Posted on January 17, 2011:
It looks like she's starting to do something! There was a police shootout between about forty members of the Empire and the ABB outside my window. I was pretty scared, but looked outside when the shooting stopped. I actually have video! She just yanked all the guns out of everybodies hands at the same time and used something... I think it was a quarter to hit people that tried to run in the leg until the police came. She's terrifying.
Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On January 23nd 2011:
Hi Schoolhouse, let me be the first one to welcome you to PHO.

Wow. It's been less than a week and it seems like she's been everywhere. She's been crushing what's left of the Empire and she's hit the ABB several times. How long can it possibly be before Lung has to respond with force or lose face? I wouldn't be surprised if he sends Oni Lee after her to kill her in her sleep.

► WhiteKnight (Verified PRT Agent) (Brockton Bay PRT) (Emergency Contact)
Replied On January 22nd 2011
Hello Rock, let me echo Bagrat and welcome you to the PHO, sorry this is what brought you here.

It's probably best not to speculate about what Lung is going to do. Despite what people think, he's fairly savvy as a leader. Taylor Hebert has been fairly circumspect about targeting the ABB so far, focusing on the Empire almost exclusively. He has to know that, and there's a good chance that when everything dies down he can just fill the void. He doesn't have to do anything but wait, and she'll do all his work for him.

► Draconin (Hugger Extrodinaire) (Case 53)
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
Snipped

User received an infraction for this post: Please do not advocate actions that can bring harm to others.

While Taylor Hebert has so far limited herself to attacking villains, it is probably wise not to annoy her by begging her to attack whoever your favorite enemy is, no matter how annoying.-Tin_Mother

► Wolfy_One (Verified Cape) (Case 53) (Verified Fuzzy)
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
It's not like she's been assassinating anybody. That thing with people's legs could cause them to bleed out, but since it's gotten around most people have stopped running. There haven't been that many injuries even. She's doing what the PRT should have done a long time ago. All hail Empress Hebert!

► JackNabbit
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
I for one am thrilled. This is the first time I can walk the streets as a black man without being afraid that someone is going to beat me or mug me. Even the police are looking more cheerful now that the fighting is starting to die down.

► SailorRedSun (Unverified Cape)
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
She's still a teenager, and nobody is doing anything to reign her in. What happens when she gets into some kind of teenage drama and decides to kill someone? Will she get a free pass? From what I hear she talks to herself all the time. Is that who we really want running things in the bay?

► Ackton9033
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
I heard that a lot of the ex-Empire guys are leaving town. Between the pressure from her, the PRT, the ABB and the Merchants, it's just getting too hot to do business anymore.
FaxMachine (Cape Groupie)
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:
That's got to be a good thing.

Void_Cowboy (Banned) (Troll)
Replied On Jan 22nd 2011:
I just read that Medhall is closing its doors. That's at least six hundred people who are going to be out of work. There's been rumors that Medhall was Empire, but people kept banning me for saying it. Well, it's been confirmed by a local news report, which may be why they are leaving.

Enjoy another 7-day Ban. Sigh.

Lurker9001
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:
It's been almost three weeks and the fighting is over. But Medhall was the biggest employer in the Bay and with most of the Empire gone that's a lot of people who aren't going to restaurants, buying clothes, going to movies and all that. With the six hundred people who lost their jobs that's another two or three thousand people not contributing to the economy. That's going to be devastating to businesses in certain areas.

buryitnow
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:
There haven't been as many crowds at lunch as usual. Are we sure it's just the E88 people who are leaving? I've got a feeling that there were a lot of people sympathetic to the Empire that don't feel comfortable living in the shadow of a Cape who claims to be Jewish and has a hate-on for racists.

UnGone (Unverified Cape)
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:
I'd been thinking about coming down to the bay to help, but it sounds like you all went from being one of the busiest cape cities around to almost nothing. I haven't heard any Cape related news in almost a week.

Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:
It's quiet all right. Lung must have told the Abb to keep a low profile. She's bee holed up in that tower of hers for the past several days without any sightings. I've heard that she's supposed to be going to Arcadia soon, which is going to be weird for the kids there. I know they've been going to class with Glory Girl and Panacea, but it's still going to be strange sitting next to someone who could dump the entire school on your head if you say the wrong thing.
disgae96
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:

Yeah. The kid that asks her out on a date is going to have balls the size of Jupiter Forget your anniversary? Opps, your house collapses. Forget her birthday? Your car mysteriously ends up in the bay. It seems to me she's going to be pretty lonely.

SchoolhouseRock (Original Poster)
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:

There's got to be some Cape strong enough to date her.

WhiteKnight (Verified PRT Agent) (Brockton Bay PRT) (Emergency Contact)
Replied On Feb 2nd 2011:

Discussing the dating life of fifteen year old girls is disgusting, even if it is Taylor Hebert. I am proud to announce however, that the PRT has a production deal with her for the production of magnetic armor. A factory will be constructed in the Bay Area per her request, and it will likely employ one hundred people. Construction will begin in May and hiring will likely begin in November.

End of Page. 1, 2

Cybrain (Verified Cape) (Banned) (Wards ESE)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

Is it weird that I feel threatened by someone whose power is deigned to counter mine? I'm not sure if I know how to make anything completely without metal, which makes finding countermeasures for her difficult.

User has received a ban for this post: A public forum is not the place to discuss countermeasures for capes who are not known publicly as villains. Try cooling your jets with this 3-day ban

Cog (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

I've seen the specs on the new armor she's making for us. It's at least thirty percent better than the armor we have now at a similar cost. If she can make other equipment like that, I'm happy to have her working as a tinker.

WhiteKnight (Verified PRT Agent) (Brockton Bay PRT) (Emergency Contact)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

It just seems suspicious. No tinker ever has had a major power like she's got on top of being a tinker. It just doesn't happen. There have been some grab bag capes like that, but they have minor powers with Tinker as their specialty. I've got a feeling that she's serving as a front for someone else.

Cybrain (Verified Cape) (Banned) (Wards ESE)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:
That would make me feel better, actually. Right now I'm feeling a little inferior. As if working with Armsmaster isn't enough to make anyone feel incompetent. The man is a machine, I tell you.

► Cog (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

Let's keep Protectorate business in the protectorate.

► Bagrat (The Guy in the Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

How long do you guys think it will be before she starts attracting undesirable attention to the Bay. I saw that she made national news; I would imagine that its only a matter of time before undesirables start making their way here to test her.

► bunglejungle
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

She'll just stomp them into the ground like she did the Empire.

► WhiteKnight (Verified PRT Agent) (Brockton Bay PRT) (Emergency Contact)
Replied On Feb 4th 2011:

Let's not ask for trouble before it gets here. All you'll do is incite people to panic. Also, no parahuman is invulnerable. There is at least one person with the perfect counter to any power, which is why it is important to work in groups to buttress each others' weaknesses. Taylor Hebert has chosen to work alone, which has left her vulnerable to Masters and others with more esoteric powers. The consequences should she be mastered are obvious. Even if she isn't, the damage to property and lives from a major fight would be catastrophic. Why do you think we don't send the Triumvirate to set her straight?

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► TheBadCop (The Bad Cop) (BBPD)
Replied On Feb 6th 2011:

Has anyone noticed that the animals have been acting strangely? They have been leaving the city for the past couple of weeks. I can't help but feel a sense of foreboding.

► WhiteKnight (Verified PRT Agent) (Brockton Bay PRT) (Emergency Contact)
Replied On Feb 6th 2011:

The weather has been odd too. Lots of rain.

► Bagrat (The Guy in the Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied On Feb 7th 2011:

Oh God. Are any of you guys still alive?

► Bagrat (The Guy in the Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied On Feb 7th 2011:
Guys?
Building a tower turned out to be a lot easier than living in it. While it looked impressive, one thing I hadn't been able to do was provide any soft accessories. I'd made chairs of iron, of course, and I'd made them as comfortable as I could, but beds were another matter altogether.

Without a stove or microwave we couldn't cook. It was likely that I could have created something, but I couldn't help but feel that something commercially made would be safer.

Having electricity wasn't the same as having heating and cooling. There were a thousand small things that houses had to have that I hadn't had time or had the knowledge to put in my tower.

The first morning we had to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags Dad bought from Wal-Mart.

The funny thing about tall metal structures is that they sway. All buildings move; most moved only in minuscule ways and sometimes only a little worse during windstorms. The movements of most buildings is simply below the threshold of human perception. As they grew taller, however, that changed.

Buildings had a natural frequency, much like a tuning fork. Most of the time it was imperceptible to the human ear. Some people were more perceptive than others, however. Apparently I was one of them. Even though the voice assured me that most people would not notice the sway, I did, and it gave me the uncomfortable feeling that the entire building was going to collapse around me at any minute.

Sleeping was difficult that morning for more than one reason. I'd spent all night building the place, and I wasn't even tired.

It was exhilarating knowing I could create something even as flawed as this was.

While I resolved to do something about the swaying, I never got to it, and eventually I almost found it comforting, the same way I found the sounds of the crashing waves comforting.

Building bedframes of metal was easy. Levitating new beds from Wal-Mart got us more attention than I was comfortable with. Dad's money didn't go nearly as far as I would have liked. We had homeowner's insurance, but it would take time to resolve a claim and we needed these things now.

What surprised me was that Dad insisted on going back to work.

After everything that had happened I would have thought he'd have avoided the place where he'd been beaten like a plague. But he simply gathered what little clothes he'd managed to buy and he went back to work.

I decided that building sensors in his workplace would be one of my tasks. The last thing I needed was someone trying a drive-by shooting against him. Even though the Empire was on the run didn't mean they didn't hold a grudge.

Going back to school was going to be difficult. Part of me wondered why I should bother. My grandfather's avatar knew more than I would ever learn in a public school, and while that wouldn't be legally recognized it would be a better education all around.

"Education is not simply about facts and figures," the voice said disapprovingly. "It is about learning to deal with your fellow man."
“Like you did?” I asked sarcastically.

“I was rarely alone,” it said. “I had followers, lovers, allies and even friends. My life was full even if my goals were not always met. Can you say the same?”

I didn’t say anything. Even before Emma had turned against me I hadn’t had many friends. I hadn’t needed many. She’d filled that need in me, and my other relationships had been casual. That was why it had been so easy to separate me from the herd, to isolate me. It was because I’d never really properly been part of it.

“You will need friends and allies,” it said. “You will need to be a beacon to the people you wish to help, a source of hope, a light in the darkness. To be a leader you must learn to deal with people.”

“And school will do that for me?” I asked skeptically. “I doubt anyone will want anything to do with me because of what I am and because of what I’ve done.”

“I made the mistake once of assuming every normal hated mutants,” it said. I had a sudden flash of a man in a suit the colors of the American flag. “I learned that I was mistaken. It was a lesson that I try not to forget, even though it is not easy sometimes.”

Another flash of memory, this time of bodies burning in a pile, and of robots the size of Leviathan flying through the sky. What kind of world had my grandfather lived in? If he’d sent my mother away that had to mean that he could no longer protect her.

What had happened?

“I do not speak of it,” the voice said shortly. “The memories would sear your mind and scar your soul. It would create hatred that would twist you into someone you do not wish to be.”

The voice seemed more serious than I’d ever heard it, even when it had been advising me during the battle against the Empire.

Still, while Dad had left as I was going to bed, by the time I awoke it was almost time for him to come back. I was aware of the sensor in his shoe as it approached.

He looked tired when I saw him with fast food sacks in his hand. We didn't have a refrigerator either, although we did at least have plumbing. The fact that metal toilet seats were unbearably cold in the morning if you weren't used to them reminded me that I needed to put a heating vent nearby.

The entire structure was really meant more for show than for living in. There were a lot of stairs, and while I could float through the stairwells, it couldn't have been good on Dad's knees. An elevator was the next thing I needed to build. Fortunately the throne room was on the first floor so that most of the deficiencies weren't obvious to our visitors.

The first of them came shortly after our first meal.

“What the hell, Hebert?” he asked Dad as he entered the room. He studiously didn't look at me, presumably assuming that Dad could control me. “You put this crap up in the middle of the night? I already was having trouble selling my house; what's this going to do to the property values?”

I was disappointed to notice that he barely seemed to notice all the details I'd so carefully prepared. The twenty foot throne of swords, the lighting that was designed to highlight me and make me look both sinister and powerful. I hadn't had time to make much in the way of furniture, but that wasn't a problem on this level.
Petitioners should have to stand after all.

However, Mr. Simmons didn't even seem to notice the room he was standing in. He only had eyes for the two of us.

Mr. Simmons had always been a complainer. He'd complained about most of the people in the neighborhood, although we'd mostly avoided his wrath. The fact that he was willing to come to me and complain despite everything I could do both impressed me and made me wonder about his survival instinct.

“Talk to Taylor,” Dad said. “After the Empire burned the house down we couldn't afford to rebuild the house the normal way.”

“You didn't have to build a skyscraper!” he said. “Something normal, down to earth. I don't think my petunias are even going to grow because of the shadow this thing casts.”

The voice informed me that he was mistaken, and I wondered how my grandfather had known about growing flowers.

Besides, it was hardly a skyscraper. He was exaggerating.

“Houses in residential areas can be up to ninety feet tall,” I said. “I looked up the law.”

“This place is taller than that!” he retorted.

I shrugged. “How do you know? Have you measured it?”

It was taller than ninety feet, but I found a savage sort of enjoyment in seeing the vein in his neck throb. The man always looked like he was on the verge of having a coronary.

“There are rules!” he said. “You can't build something like this. You have to have inspections to see if it's up to code. That takes a long time.”

“Nobody's said anything to me,” I said.

Of course, if they had come to the house I'd been asleep so I wouldn't have known. A doorbell was another thing to add to the list, along with an intercom system.

“That's because you only built it last night!” he shouted. “This was a nice neighborhood before you brought all this trouble here, what with the burnings and everything.”

I didn't like his tone, and my voice turned decidedly frosty. “They burned my house down and this is my response. If they somehow destroy this one, I'll rebuild it even larger. I'm not sure you heard what I did to the Empire when they took my Dad, but I can tell you this. Whatever someone gives me, I will give them back five or ten times in return.”

He stared at me, and I realized that my hair was starting to float. I didn't care.

“I'm done letting people walk all over me because I was meek and turned the other cheek. That's done. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I will do what I have to in order to protect me and mine. The question you have to ask yourself is which side of that line you are going to be standing on when the dust settles?”

He stared at me and scowled before turning around and stomping out without saying anything. Not once did he seem to notice anything about the decor, and I felt vaguely disappointed.
Walking into Winslow after all this time was a surreal experience. It seemed strangely empty; the halls were considerably less crowded than they had been the last time I had come. The students who saw me quickly turned away, and I even saw two of them running into walls in their zeal to get as far from me as possible.

I wasn't quite sure why I was being ostracized like this. It had been a week since I had brutalized the Empire students in the cafeteria, and the thing with the Empire was clear self defense.

It was possible that people remembered how they'd treated me before they'd realized I had powers and were now worried that I was going to seek revenge. It was a silly worry. Short of Emma or Sophia starting up on me again, I was unlikely to go Carrie on the school.

It was also possible that they were worried about reprisals from the Empire, which would make a lot more sense. Empire underlings were rarely the best and the brightest; that tended to be reserved for their capes. It was possible that some of them would think that something like a bomb in the classroom would kill me. It wouldn't, but they had no way of knowing that.

From that perspective, staying as far away from me was probably a good idea.

“Ms. Hebert,” I heard a voice from behind me say. “I need to see you in my office immediately.”

I turned and stared at Blackwell. Short of the Empire, Sophia and Madison she was the one other person who was really on my list of least favorite people.

I shrugged and followed her back to her office. I saw the school secretary start as she saw me. She flushed and looked away quickly.

Stepping into her office, I compared her desk to my throne and I fought the urge to snicker. It undoubtedly worked to intimidate poor students, but compared to my twenty foot monstrosity it wasn't anything.

I sat down in my seat and crossed my legs.

“You've really caused a problem here, Ms. Hebert,” Blackwell said. “A third the school is boycotting, refusing to come in because they are afraid that you will murder them in their seats. I have spoken to other students who tell me they are having nightmares.”

“It's guilty consciences,” I said. “They realized that they thought they could step on someone they thought was unimportant only to find out that they were dead wrong. The funny thing is that this is the world we live in now, and people are going to have to learn to accept it.”

“The school was already financially strapped,” She said. “Now we're losing money faster than ever before. It's possible that we may have to close our doors.”

I looked at her with a cold look in my eye. “None of this would have happened if you'd done your job, you know. Personally I'd be happy to help bulldoze this place to make a parking lot. It wouldn't take me more than what, five minutes?”

She stared at me for a long moment with a sour look on her face. Pulling papers from her drawer, she handed them to me.

“Your acceptance to Arcadia came in. Hopefully once students realize that you are no longer coming here they'll consider returning.”
“I seem to have that effect on people,” I admitted. “Is it me do you think?”

“I’m sure the murder and mayhem that seems to surround you has nothing to do with it,” she said dryly.

I grinned at her as I rose.

“Feel free to take an excused absence today,” she said. “Your teachers have been happy to send homework to that monstrosity you call a home now.”

Without saying anything else, I walked out. Resisting the urge to give her the one finger salute as I left was difficult, but I could feel my grandfather's avatars disapproval at the thought. Apparently he thought I should be classier than that.

Just to be annoying I floated through the hallways on my way out, which seemed to panic even more of the students. I felt a sort of grim satisfaction. None of them had lifted a finger to help me in two tears of torment. If I hadn't known I had powers during that time it would have been even worse for me. I couldn't imagine how much damage it would have done to my psyche.

Fortunately I was perfectly sane and reasonable. Ask anyone.

Flying out of the school, I headed for the Boardwalk. There was a new ice cream place I'd been wanting to try, one supposedly with early hours for the tourist crowd.

Stepping inside I found what I wanted quickly. A double scoop in a waffle cone. I ignored the nattering from my grandfather's avatar about possibly getting fat. Apparently all the mutants in his world looked like supermodels with figures to match.

I didn't care. I sat on the boardwalk watching people go by, and for once no one seemed to recognize me.

A figure in a hooded sweatsuit began walking toward me. I casually strengthened my force fields. On my grandfather's advice I'd learned to keep light shields around me at all times except when I slept. When I knew something was likely to happen I could strengthen them.

Was this going to be an assassination attempt or someone attempting to sell me something?

I expected about a fifty percent chance of each. It was possible that it was a particularly brave reporter. The fact that I couldn't tell the gender made me think assassination.

The figure stopped three feet in front of me. I didn't stop eating my cone.

“You the one who offed Hookwolf?” she asked.

I nodded. No point in lying about it. Everyone knew. Was she a member of the Empire? I could tell it was a woman now, but a rather butch women. She had no visible tattoos, but her face was blunt featured with thick eyebrows and blondish auburn hair.

“Good,” she said. “He hurt dogs.”

“He hurt a lot of people,” I said. “Including my father, which is why I did what I did.”

She was staring at me as though she was trying to challenge me in some way. I stared back at her without blinking. After a moment she nodded and seemed to relax.
“They’re still hurting dogs though,” she said. “The Empire I mean. People too I guess. You don’t care about that?”

“I’ve been planning to do something about it,” I admitted. “I’ve just been busy.”

“I know where they’re fighting dogs,” she said. “Killing them. They’ve got a lot of guys with guns; three times as many as they had when Hookwolf was around. That something you interested in stopping?”

I frowned. “Are you a cape.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“Bitch,” she admitted.

For a moment I thought she was talking about me, then realized that was her cape name. Was she really that hard to deal with?

“You don’t think you can take care of it yourself?”

“People I work with bailed,” she said. “Say it’s too dangerous, ought to lay low.”

“Maybe they’re right,” I said. I looked at her for a moment. “Why do you care so much.”

“Dogs don’t deserve that,” she said. “Can’t protect themselves. I’ve got to help.”

“Sounds like you’re their hero,” I said. I smiled and she stepped back.

I finished my ice cream and I wiped my hands on my pants. “I guess I ought to get back to taking care of Nazi’s. Lead the way.”

It was possible that this was a trap. If it was, better to find out now than when they kidnapped my dad again. If it wasn’t, it sounded like the kind of thing I ought to be breaking up.

I could feel my grandfather’s avatar’s approval, even though it didn’t say anything. I suspected that attacking Nazis was always going to be one of its favorite pasttimes.

It was time to get to work.
Dogs

Bitch wasn't much of a conversationalist. She gave me a location and a time later that night, and she agreed to meet me there before vanishing into the crowd.

I thought about what I was going to do for a while. I suspected I knew who Bitch really was. There was a cape called Hellhound who was considered a villain, a member of a small time gang of petty crooks. Did I really want to risk being linked to her?

Ultimately it came to doing what was right. If she was being honest, and what little of her motivations were known suggested that she really was obsessed with dogs, then this was a legitimate plea for help.

The fragments of the Empire had been fighting each other as often as they'd been fighting the ABB and the Protectorate, fighting over caches of guns and ammunition, drugs and money. The larger fragments were doing anything they could to make more money. They needed the money to hire more men, to get more guns and to stay relevant.

I had no doubt that the largest gangs hoped that with enough money they could hire their own capes. It was a fool's dream, of course. Hiring a cape would simply mean that he'd take over the gang in a year or less. Not hiring a cape meant being chewed up and spit out by the gangs that did.

The gangs were dying, but it was an ugly death, and even a dead rattlesnake could still kill you. Their heads bit down reflexively and the venom was still potent.

In the end, I was the one who had created the mes, and I would have to be the one who fixed it. Starting out saving the lives of dogs who were being abused in ways that made what I'd experienced in Winslow look like a day in the spa? It was probably the most righteous thing I could do that didn't involve saving orphans or helping old ladies across the street.

I spent most of the day adding things I'd forgotten to the tower. The doorbell was something I should have thought about in the first place, and I added a garage for Dad's car so he didn't have to park in the street. After all, car bombs were still a thing.

I'd slept most of the day yesterday, leaving me today to show up at school. I fully intended to make better use of my time today.

Leaving the tower as being all metal wasn't going to cut it. There had been other materials on the ships, but they'd mostly been ruined by water and the sea air. What I needed was good hardwoods, tile, and maybe even paint and materials to make the upper levels feel more like a home than a prison cell.

The problem was that I didn't have money. I'd looked at what tile cost and it made me wince. Carpet was almost as bad. While I could probably improvise a stove or even a refrigerator, I doubted that Dad would want anything jury rigged.

Dad had put a claim in with his insurance company. Ironically the pictures from the PRT were helping there, substituting for pictures an adjuster would have made. He wasn't sure how long it would take to get money from there.

I could easily fly over the city and collect aluminum cans, but I'd heard that was one of the few ways the homeless had to make money. That wouldn't exactly endear me to the population.
Stealing scrap metal was a crime. There were enough abandoned buildings around town that I could strip and take the metal to Boston that I could probably become rich, but that would put me solidly in villain territory.

In the end I ended up dredging the bay for materials. There was a surprising amount of metal down there, from sunken ships to old, rusted cars to metal that people had just thrown away. A quick trip to Boston towing a ball of detritus behind me wasn't much of a problem.

I suspected that I had about five tons of assorted metals, and the recycling center in Boston paid me fourteen hundred dollars. That gave me an inkling as to how poor of a deal I'd gotten selling the ship in Brockton Bay, but it was cash money, and it was all mine.

I'd already started the basics for heating and cooling when I'd driven pylons deep into the earth. They were necessary for stability, otherwise the whole tower really would fall over. There was a huge mass of water beneath Brockton Bay, but the Pylons didn't go nearly that deep. Still, I'd be able to use the difference in heat between the earth and the air above to help cool my building. I'd already placed tubes to run fluids through the pylons where they would release heat into the earth and absorb some of its coldness.

I needed parts for the motors to make the heat pump work; I probably could have done it myself, but sometimes being off by even a little bit could cause things to fly apart. While my grandfather's avatar felt I was being too conservative, the last thing I wanted was to wake up in the middle of the night sweating because I was too cheap to buy a small motor.

There had been some parts in the ships, too deep for the looters who had stripped almost everything else that could be sold out of them, but those parts were deeply rusted and likely had molds growing on them that would be unhealthy to be breathed.

Legally I was supposed to let professionals deal with coolant chemicals because they were environmentally damaging and toxic. I didn't really have a problem with that, but I needed to get the engines for the system working first.

Eventually, if I got the money I decided that I wanted to make the tower entirely automated. There were risks with that, including hackers, but if I didn't connect it to the net I ought to be safe from anyone short of Capes with machine control powers.

Getting the parts I needed and constructing the air conditioner took me the better part of an afternoon. It turned out that most HVAC stores wouldn't sell directly to the public; they required that customers have HVAC contractor licenses. It apparently involved a sales restriction by the EPA. While it was possible that they were trying scare tactics, I was told that venting refrigerant in the air could result in a $20,000 fine and five years in prison.

Heh.

The thought that after the murders and reckless endangerment they could probably charge me for the thing I ended up trying to be forced into prison for was improper air conditioner maintenance seemed ironic.

I ended up going to a junk yard and buying parts that my grandfather's avatar assured me seemed sound.

Still, the project went well, and I was reasonably confident that it would pass muster. All I needed
was to get the money for the air conditioner guy.

I wondered if any contractors ever took trade; I'd be happy to build metal carports, sheds and put metal buildings together in return for people to lay tile and do other tasks that neither I nor my grandfather's ghost knew how to do. I'd talk to my father and ask him when I got the chance. It seemed like the kind of thing that might be in his wheelhouse.

Still, the evening seemed to come before I knew it. I went to the intersection Bitch had suggested we meet at. It was far enough from the dog fights that we were unlikely to be spotted, even by latecoming customers, yet close enough that it wouldn't be a lot of work to get there.

I'd decided against wearing my armor. Instead I wore a nondescript black hoodie similar to what Bitch had been wearing the first time I'd seen her.

She was waiting for me when I got there, even though I was ten minutes early. She had four dogs with her, and this time she was in costume. Her costume mostly seemed to consist of a dog mask, which seemed kind of lazy, really. Of course, I was in a hoodie, so what did I know?

“Wasn't sure you were going to show up,” she said.

“I said I would,” I said. It was true that I'd considered not coming for a variety of reasons, but in the end I just didn't care what anyone thought if I was spending time in the company of villains while doing good deeds.

It was strange. It had only been twelve days since I'd started all this with the locker. It felt like a lot longer.

“What do you mostly want to do?” I asked. “Save the dogs or hurt the people?”

“Both,” she said. “Dogs are more important though.”

It made sense. If we just saved the dogs, the people running the fights would just get more dogs. They probably needed the income to pay their people, and dogs were easy to come by.

Money was a major motivator. I'd done a little research this afternoon while waiting to be rejected by air conditioner salesmen, and I'd learned that sometimes twenty to thirty thousand dollars changed hands in a single major dogfight and that up to a half million dollars had been seized during raids. For that kind of money people would be willing to take risks. It would also be enough to keep them in ammunition and mercenaries for a while, and maybe even hire a Cape.

“Dogs it is, then,” I said lightly. If I had a choice, though, it would be both, and if they didn't have any Capes, there wasn't anything they could do to me really.

“What's the plan?” she asked.

“I'll go in alone,” I said. “The nice thing about being me is that most people outside of my school don't know what I look like by sight. I want to see what they are doing for myself so I can see how hard I need to hit them.”

“You need to hit them hard,” she said.

“There's hard and then there's hard,” I said. “I want to know which to use.”

“I'm coming in after ten minutes,” she said. “No matter what you decide.”
I could see that her dogs were already growing into monstrous creations. I wondered if Dad would be able to control them like that, or if they were somehow being transformed into something that was no longer animal enough for him to master.

“Not a problem,” I said.

With that I floated toward the intersection she'd indicated. It being held in a large metal warehouse, and although there were no lights showing from the outside, I could hear the commotion coming from the inside.

The first obstacle would be getting through the two bouncers at the door. Undoubtedly the people coming had a password that they used to get in.

Fortunately the building was mostly metal, and I could sense the metal in the bodies of the people inside if I strained hard. It was more difficult to detect because of all the metal around it being much more prominent.

There was an office not being used currently. It was a simple matter to float up to the second floor at the back of the warehouse and simply peel the wall away, creating a makeshift door. I closed it behind me, even though it had obviously been damaged and wasn't particularly airtight. I simply moved some filing cabinets in front of it and it was all good.

Stepping through the door, I saw that plywood had been set up to create groups of walls, forming an impromptu ring. Carpet had been placed inside the ring. For some reason they were washing the dogs, which seemed strange and incongruous.

“It is to ensure that the opposing side does not taint their dogs' fur with something noxious or dangerous in an effort to change the outcome,” the voice said quietly.

There were lines on the floor inside the arena created with duct tape.

What surprised me was how many people were attending. There had to be more than two hundred people in the room, and there was an air of excitement. I saw a lot of money changing hands, being collected by men who had other men with guns behind them.

I slipped quickly down the stairs before anyone could question me. I worked my way through the crowd.

I saw that there was a post in the center of the ring. They were attaching a small dog to the post. It looked like a French Bishon. It's jaws were taped shut and it was trembling in fear. I couldn't understand what they were doing with it.

“It is a bait animal,” the voice said. “They use it to encourage aggression in the fighting dogs and test their willingness to kill.”

I would have asked how he knew so much about dog fighting, but I was in the middle of the crowd now.

“They are often someone's pet, taken from a pound or stolen,” the voice said helpfully.

I stopped, someone bumping into my shield from behind. This was someone's pet? From the glimpses I could get of it through the thronging crowd, it looked terrified.

This wasn't going to happen, not while I was here. I'd told Bitch I needed to see for myself, and I hadn't even gotten to see the fight before I'd decided that it wasn't going to happen.
I froze as I rounded a corner and saw dead dogs being thrown on a pile. There were only three, but the sun had just set. How many would there be by the time the night was over with?

Someone slammed into me from behind. I could have stopped myself from moving with my force field, but I chose not to. Instead I stumbled forward.

“What were you doing up in the office, bitch?”

Three men were behind me, two with rifles. None of them looked particularly friendly. Apparently I'd been seen.

“Bitch is my partner,” I said. “I don't suppose you know who I am?”

“No,” the one who had spoken before. “But I know what's going to happen to you.”

“I really don't think tonight is going to go the way you think it is.”

Behind me a large Rottweiler was being released into the pen. It charged toward the terrified smaller dog only to suddenly stop for seemingly no reason. It strained against its collar, but the collar was made of metal chain, which meant it wasn't going anywhere.

“What the hell?”

“What's red, black and blue and really stupid?” I asked.

“What?”

“You and all your buddies. I took care of your leaders and you still run around like nothing happened? That's not very smart.”

He stared at me, still not understanding what I was saying. One of the two men behind him did though, and he started backing up.

“These fights are over!” I said loudly.

For a moment no one around me responded. Many probably hadn't heard me over the roar of the crowd.

An act of will and the speaker system suddenly put out a large squeal making everyone wince. I allowed myself to rise up into the air even as the doors to the warehouse suddenly slammed shut. I took control of the speakers; it was one of the first tricks I'd practiced when I was bored at home.

“You should all be ashamed of yourselves,” My voice said, coming over the speakers, even though my lips did not move. “The fights are over. Line up against the wall and surrender your weapons and you won't be hurt. Otherwise you won't like the other options.”

People stared up at me, and some people ran for the doors. The men with guns almost uniformly raised them and fired a stream of bullets in my direction.

There aren't really many safe places to shoot someone. The movies would tell you that shooting someone in the leg or shoulder are safe, but in reality there are major veins there and it is easy for people to bleed out.

I raised my hand and hundreds of bullets stopped in mid air in front of me. There were hundreds of them; many of the men had converted their weapons to fire like automatic weapons.
The firing went on for several seconds before the men realized they weren't doing any good.

A moment later I gestured, and hundreds of bullets dropped to the ground. A moment after that guns went flying up into the air. One man with a strap struggled as his gun lifted into the air, but he struggled and a moment later he fell.

“You have one last chance,” I said.

I waited, and most of the spectators moved to the wall. Most of the Empire men did not, probably fearing the reactions of their friends. Well, I’d warned them.

Coins began to come out of my pockets. I had a dollar in pennies there that were soon orbiting me in a cloud. I could have used bullets for this, but being hurt by the very money they were so desperately scrambling for seemed wonderfully ironic.

A moment later the coins exploded out in every direction. While most places on the human body were not safe to shoot or stab, the one place that was safest were the buttocks. They were composed primarily of muscles, didn’t have any dangerous arteries, and would be humiliating when the people had to heal.

I heard screams from beneath me as man after man fell clutching at his buttocks.

Moments later I pulled wire from the walls and used it to start tying everyone up. As I was finishing the wall exploded and Bitch came through riding her dogs who were now the size of cars.

“What kept you?” I asked.
“You're turning into a real pain in the butt, you know that?” Assault said, smirking.

“I try,” I said.

Apparently transporting the men I'd injured was going to be complicated by all the injuries to their buttocks. For some reason I didn’t feel particularly sorry for what I'd done. Once I'd seen the scars on the dogs I'd found myself wishing I'd done a lot more damage.

Bitch had found a large U-haul truck from somewhere, and I'd helped her crate up as many dogs as she thought were salvageable. Apparently she thought two in ten were not, because she'd left them behind. I hadn't understood at first until she'd told me that they'd likely have to be put down.

She'd taken the little white dog too. She said she'd do what she could to find its owner. She'd left with the dogs shortly before the PRT had shown up.

“Working with villains probably won't do your reputation much good, puppy,” he said.

“It was a good cause,” I said. “I don't suppose there's a bounty on any of these people, or if I can keep any of their money?”

“It's evidence,” he said. “Illegal to keep. That doesn't mean some vigilantes don't, of course, but it's technically illegal. You want bounties, go after Capes that have kill orders. Of course those tend to be the worst of the worst, people like the Slaughterhouse Nine. Those people, even if you kill them they scar your mind."

“I just want money for carpet for my new digs,” I said. “I can't make it out of metal, or, well, I probably could but it wouldn't feel right on my bare feet.”

“Armsmaster is interested in that armor you made for your Dad. I'll bet the PRT would be happy to buy the designs for it.”

I frowned, then said, “You'll have to talk to my lawyer. I'll make sure he knows that I'm open to it.”

“I'm a little hurt that you're more willing to work with villains than the Protectorate,” he said. He smiled to let me know he was sort of joking. “It's not like we have body odor or anything, at least most of us.”

“If I wanted to work with you I would,” I said. “I used to think I wanted to be a hero, but all this has soured me a little. What's the point in all the fighting? I'd rather do something that makes the world better.”

“And stopping criminals isn't making the world better?”

“Not if they're out the next day,” I said. I looked around. “How many of these guys are actually going to serve time? How many of them are going to make deals and end up on the street sooner rather than later? I'll bet half of them make bail before the night is done with.”

“Judges are getting pretty hard on ex-E88,” Assault said. “And bail doesn't get set till business hours.”

Responsibility
“Fine,” I said. “Stopping them from doing this to the dogs feels pretty good. But most of the time they’re just out there fighting other criminals, stealing from each other and just generally being idiots.”

“But they are hurting people in the meantime,” he said.

“Fine,” I said. “I caused all of this, so I'll finish it. Just make sure the police have the jails ready.”

Before he could say anything I rose up into the air.

“You need to come to the PRT to give your statement!” he called up to her.

“You want my statement, you come to my house. Not during school hours, though. And don't bother my father.”

With that I flew through the now open warehouse doors and I flew up into the sky.

Finding the Empire thugs wasn't going to be easy for the PRT because they didn't have permission to set up proper surveillance over the city. People thought it would be too much like being in a police state to deal with drones flying through the sky watching everything they did.

I didn't have those same limitations. All I needed was my ability to detect metal; moving metal. The Empire thugs tended to carry guns and knives on their persons much more than the average Brocktonite. While it was possible for an individual who was armed not to be a gang member, gang members also tended to collect up into large groups.

I could sense at least three large groups right now.

Well, curfew wasn't until eleven and I had some time to kill. Maybe it was time to clean up the city.

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The good thing about force fields was that blood slid right off of them. As I approached home I let the last of the blood vanish. The police were pleased with what I had done but told me the jails were filling up and they'd need time to process the gang members or maybe even send them to facilities outside the city.

The implicit message was that rounding up the gangs was great but I needed to give them time to process the thugs they already had.

I hadn't seen Dad all day anyway, so it was a good thing.

Entering the hall, the large iron doors shutting behind me, I flew up the stairs. Dad wasn't wearing his shoes; the tracker was still in them and I could detect the iron in his blood.

Reaching the room that was going to be his bedroom when we were finished, I peeked inside. He wasn't in bed; instead he was sitting in the dark in an iron chair staring sightlessly out to the world.

“Dad?” I asked.

He didn't respond.

Stepping closer, I realized that his eyes were open, but only white was showing.

“Are you all right?”

I reached out and touched his arm, but again he didn't respond. I shook him. Had someone done this
to him?

It took a moment, but he finally seemed to come back to himself.

“What's happening, Dad?”

“I was mindwalking,” he said after a moment. “Riding the minds of one of the seagulls on the bay. Flying is amazing.”

“I can take you flying for real,” I said, but he didn't seem interested.

Instead his eyes had a far away look. “You don't know what it's like to be one of them. They live entirely in the moment, no worries about the future or the past. They simply are.”

“They?” I asked.

“The animals,” he said. “The bugs don't have enough of a mind to really do anything with other but control, but the smarter birds and the mammals? It's amazing.”

I didn't like the look in his eye. It almost felt like he was impatient, like he was humoring me long enough that I would go away and let him go back to what he was doing.

“Have you eaten?” I asked. “I can go out and get something.”

Choices at this hour were limited, but I could probably find something even if I had to go to Boston. There were some all night diners I could probably find. While I still hadn't finished the air conditioning, I had set up the wifi.

I wasn't a barbarian after all.

“It's fine,” he said. “One day won't hurt me.”

I scowled at him. “Are you getting depressed again? I practically had to hand feed you after Mom...”

He shook his head. “It's kind of the opposite. When I'm in the mind of one of them everything falls away. There is no doubt, no depression, just peace. Well, except when something is trying to eat them; then there is some fear. But five minutes later they're fine.”

“Don't overdo it,” I said. I stared at him. “If you keep not eating you know I can make you eat. Don't make me do the whole magic spoons thing again.”

He grimaced. “I promise.”

As I left his room, though, I noticed that his eyes were turning white again.

*********

Showing up to Arcadia in the middle of the week wasn't ideal, but I'd already taken too many days off. I felt a strange combination of excitement and terror. I'd fantasized about coming here, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't be just like Winslow.

Even if it wasn't, there were going to be people terrified by me simply by the fact that I could do things and had done things that no one else could do. I would probably be the only one on campus who had actually killed someone, much less more than one person.

Would they accept me, or would I be as isolated as I had been during the final days at Winslow? The only way to know was to go to school and find out.
The one good thing was that these kids wouldn't know my face any more than the run of the mill Empire goons did.

Even from outside I could tell that the place was different. There was no graffiti, and the metal detectors at the door actually seemed to work. The building was four stories high.

Stepping through the main entrance, I headed for the principal's office where I would pick up my class schedule.

As I entered I frowned. Something felt off. It took me a moment to recognize what it was. The school had a Faraday cage built in! There was a grounded metal screen built into the walls. It would prevent cell phone signals from getting out. It would also protect against lightning.

It wouldn't stop me, of course. It didn't do anything for magnetic fields, which meant it hadn't been placed to somehow contain me.

Stepping into the office, a pleasant looking secretary looked up.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"My name is Taylor Hebert. I'm here to pick up my schedule."

She froze. Apparently she'd heard about me. I waited for the inevitable rejection, the fear that seemed to follow me everywhere I went.

"I heard about what you did with that dog ring," she said. "I think it's a good thing you were there. People have been torturing poor animals for entirely too long."

She had pictures of two poodles behind her at her desk. A dog lover; maybe I could use that. Having the secretary at Winslow against me hadn't made my life any better.

At my grandfather's avatar's prompting I forced myself to smile.

"Principal Harris wanted to see you before you started off to your classes," she said. The woman seemed friendly enough; maybe this wasn't going to be an emotional ambush like most of the visits with Blackwell had been.

Still, I couldn't help but feel anxious as the woman buzzed the Principal and sent me into her office.

The principal was a very small woman, possibly well under five feet. She was standing by the window staring out into the courtyard below where students were presumably still meandering in to the school.

As I entered she turned. "Miss Hebert?"

I nodded.

She gestured, and I took a seat. The seats were made of hard plastic. Presumably sitting in the principal's office wasn't supposed to be comfortable. Her desk was smaller than Blackwell's though.

"There are some issues that we need to discuss before you start school here," she said. "As you likely know, transfers this late in the semester are very rare. Several groups of people pulled a lot of strings to get you here."

I nodded, forcing myself to appear calm.
“Your grades in most of your classes are exceptional, but in other classes you fell behind,” she said. “Why is that?”

“There was an issue with girls taking my assignments,” I said. “And bullying me.”

She stared at me for a long moment. “And you had your powers when all this was happening?”

I nodded.

“That speaks well for your self control in ways that your later actions do not.”

“I didn't realize that it was so easy to kill people wearing metal armor,” I said defensively. “And I thought Hookwolf wasn't attached to the metal he generated the way he was.”

“That's not what I was talking about, but it's an important lesson. Ordinary people are fragile. There have been cases where even being hit in the temple with a fist by a girl of your size has been enough to kill someone. Given that, and given the fact that you can figuratively lift mountains with your powers, how much more careful will you have to be?”

I was silent, and I looked down at the desk. I wished I could argue with her, but nothing she said was a lie.

“We have guards posted,” she said. “But none of them could stop you if you get upset. There may or may not be Wards in the student body, but if there are, I doubt they could do very much to you. That means that it's up to you to act responsibly. Even though you are a teenager you have to act like an adult because your power brings with it real world responsibilities.”

Looking up, I said, “I'll try, but there may be cases where I don't have a choice but use my power.”

“If the school is attacked we certainly encourage you to use your power,” she said. “And we don’t have any kind of a blanket ban on power use unless it interferes with classes, terrorizes the other students or allows you to cheat.”

There went my idea about using my grandfather's avatar for help when it came to World War II.

“I wouldn't,” it said. “And our history was likely different than yours. I doubt you had a Red Skull or Captain America or any of the Nazi robots or war machines that we had.”

“I'm a good student,” I said. “When I'm not distracted.”

“We don't tolerate bullying here,” she said. “Not even the subtle kind. It would be very easy to use your situation as a kind of implicit threat.”

“I'm just here to learn. As long as nobody bothers me, I won't bother them.”

“And if they do bother you?” she asked. “Will you come to the authorities, or will you take care of it yourself?”

I hesitated. “I haven't had much luck with authority figures.”

“We'd like to give you a chance to change that. Most of the students here are not actively suicidal, but there are always people who like to poke the bear. It's a problem we had with Victoria Dallon for a while.”

In one way it was disturbing to think that there were problems even here, but it was a relief too. If she'd tried to claim that bullying didn't exist, I'd know she was lying. Teenagers were the same
everywhere, even if they were wealthy. There was always going to be a certain amount of jockeying for position.

“I don’t want you to think that I’m singling you out. I had this same discussion with Victoria Dallon and her sister. There’s a responsibility to having power. The stronger the power the more that will be required of you. Given the evident strength of your powers, everyone is going to expect a lot out of you.”

There was something about the woman's gaze that disconcerted me. It was penetrating and intelligent.

“Lifting a ship over the city made me worry about your judgment,” she said. “Had you been attacked by some hothead and dropped it you could have caused an incredible amount of damage.”

I looked down. While I suspected that I could have fought and at least held the ship up long enough to drop it into the street, there was no way to really know. I’d been more focused on sending a message and less worried about the impact that it would have on ordinary people on the streets below.

“All I can say is I’ll do my best,” I said. “If it turns out that I’m not a good fit here I’ll just have to home school.”

“I’m sure there is a temptation to do that anyway,” she said. She smiled for the first time. “Especially when you are dealing with real matters in the outside world. I doubt that you'll ever work in an ordinary job, and I'm sure you know that too.”

I tried to imagine myself working in a cubical somewhere calling people about insurance or home security or something, and I couldn't quite manage it.

“Given that, you might ask yourself why get an education at all?”

I nodded.

“What do you think the difference is between a supervillain and a henchman?”

“Power?”

“Partly,” she acknowledged. “But you'll notice that there are henchmen who are arguably more powerful than the people they work for. The difference is often one of intelligence and education.”

“Are you saying I’m likely to end up as a supervillain?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

She shook her head. “I'm just using that as an example since the Protectorate tends to be more opaque about their promotional structure. I think you'll find that it is the more intelligent and more educated who tend to rise there as well. Someone with power who doesn't have an education is just a thug, whether they are a hero or a villain.”

I could make several arguments against that, but I chose not to, especially as I could feel a certain degree of agreement from my Grandfather's avatar.

“An education can't tell you how to use your power, but it can help you decide whether you should. Isn't that worth at least some effort?”

I smiled tightly.
“I think you'll like it here,” she said. “I'll get your class schedule and I'll have someone show you the way to your first class.”

I rose to my feet and took a deep breath. It was strange that I worried more about facing high school than any number of enemy capes.

Was Arcadia going to be heaven or hell? There was no way to know other than going.

Why did I feel like I was going to war?
Walking into the halls of Arcadia I felt a sense of unreality. Nothing was like Winslow and it left me feeling off balance and uneasy.

Everything was clean and white and there was no graffiti on the walls. Even the students looked different. No one had tattoos or wore open gang colors. Everyone seemed strangely serene, as though they’d all drank something in the cool aid.

It was as though they lived in an entirely different world from the rest of the city, a world where gangs and supervillains and unpleasantness didn't exist. They lived in a bubble, giving them the illusion that everything was safe and normal. It was almost as though Scion hadn't even arrived.

Where was the fear, the furtiveness that even the popular kids at Winslow had seemed to have? It seemed too good to be true, like I'd suddenly walked into a neighborhood of Stepford clones.

For all I knew I had.

Maybe everyone here was really just a mask for the Wards, all from PRT families. Maybe they were all watching me, reporting on what I said and did.

“There will be some of that, at least from the Wards,” My grandfather's avatar whispered. “But do not become paranoid. That way lies madness.”

I sensed that there was a story behind its words. I couldn't tell if it was its own or from someone it knew. The important thing was that it was right. My face hadn't been disseminated to the news, probably for fear that I'd be angry about it.

These children wouldn't know me by appearance any more than run of the mill Empire members had. I decided that I'd better enjoy that anonymity while it still existed. I doubted that it would be there by the end of the day.

I'd never had that kind of luck.

I forced myself to lift my head high and step into the hallway.

“Taylor?”

I blinked.

“Taylor Hebert?”

The voice was suspiciously familiar. I turned and saw a girl running up to me. For a moment part of me wanted to blast her, imagining that she had a weapon on her. A quick check of the metal on her body didn't show anything unusual, although I imagined that a tinker could probably make something out of wood. Despite her looking familiar, it took me a moment to place her.

Her name was Sarah... something. I'd known her in elementary school. We hadn't been friends, exactly, but she'd always been friendly. She'd been friendly to everyone.

“Sarah... hi,” I said. “It's been a while.”

“Are you coming here now?” she asked. “I always thought you'd come here but I heard you ended up in Winslow.”
I grimaced. “Emma couldn't make the grade and I didn't want to be separated from her.”

She stared at me, then nodded. “How is Emma?”

“I don't know. Our friendship didn't last very long,” I said. I grimaced and looked away. “I don't like to talk about it.”

“Is that your schedule?” she asked. She glanced at it. “Oh, we have first period together! Maybe we can walk together!”

Her friendliness was disconcerting. It was as though she hadn't heard anything about me. Did the students at Arcadia live in their own insulated bubble? Were they so wrapped up in their own lives that they didn't pay attention to things as important as the fall of the Empire?

Or had they been warned by the administration to pretend to be normal around me?

While I didn't want to ruin this, whatever it was with Sarah, I couldn't let it go.

“I don't suppose you've heard anything about me,” I asked.

She looked at me and shook her head. “We should watch out, though. They say that some big deal cape is coming to school today... she's the one who beat the Empire all by herself.”

I coughed into my hand.

She stopped. “That was you?”

I shrugged uncomfortably. This was the moment of truth. Would she run from me in fear the way the Empire kids had?

“Wow,” she said. “And you look just like regular people. I'd have thought you'd have some kind of a throne or something.”

She grinned as she said it, as though it was a funny joke. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I actually did, and for the first time I wanted to curse at my grandfather for his taste in reading materials.

Maybe I could throw a rug over it if anyone came over. A very large rug.

The fact that she was willing to make jokes after what I had done was very encouraging. It meant that she was not so afraid of me that she thought I'd explode at a bad joke.

“I decided to wait on the throne till the end of the week,” I said. I forced a smile. “I wanted people to get used to me first.”

“You were always so fun,” she said. “I don't know why we didn't hang out more.”

Emma was the reason. She'd just always been enough. I'd had opportunities to go out with other girls, to have a social life outside of our Duo, but I'd always turned them down. I'd simply never seen the need.

I shrugged uncomfortably again. Hopefully this wouldn't be a pattern. It wasn't at all how I'd expected my first contact in Arcadia to go.

She led me through the halls.
“We need to hurry if we want to get one of the good seats,” she said. “Mr. Whitetower doesn't assign them, and the ones up front are always the best. He likes to do practical demonstrations.”

Given that chemistry was my first class of the day instead of my last, practical demonstrations might be interesting. I'd been looking to science classes to help me figure out applications to my powers for a while I really wanted to take a Physics class, but I wouldn't be able to get into it until next year.

We reached the room with time to spare.

I was getting my books into place on the long lab table when I felt someone sit on the other side of me from Sarah.

“Hi,” she said. “I'm Victoria Dallon.”

She was tall, and pretty and platinum blonde. She wasn't as pretty as Emma, but she was pretty enough to make me sensitive about my own looks.

“Aren't you a couple of years older than me?” I asked.

I immediately wanted to kick myself. The last thing I wanted to do was make enemies on my first day of school.

She flushed. “Science isn't really my thing.”

“Well, I just came from Winslow, so I'll probably be behind,” I said.

“Annnnyway,” she said. “My sister had a long talk with me and she wanted me to talk to you. I've got this aura... it makes people who like me like me more, and people who are afraid of me more afraid of me. I'm suppressing it now, but when I forget about it it kind of pops up on its own.”

“I'm not afraid of you,” I said.

“Right,” she said. “I don't know why I even thought it would be a problem. It was mostly Amy really.”

“It was probably good to warn me,” I said. “I don't think I'd care much for being mastered, and it might not go well.”

“I don't Master people!” she said. “Not really, I mean. I don't mean to anyway.”

That meant that she did.

I didn't particularly like her or dislike her, but I felt a certain uneasiness in the bottom of my gut. I suspected that her powers didn't work the way she thought those were.

“Vicky, you're leaking,” Amy Dallon said. She looked at me apologetically. “She can be like that.”

Victoria Dallon flushed. “I can't help it.”

“I'm not looking for any trouble,” I said. “I'm just here to go to a school where people treat me more or less like everyone else.”

Amy grabbed her sister and pulled her away. They ended up sitting at the back of the class, which made me happier. I was still irritated by the fact that Amy had chewed me out when she’d healed my Dad. Comparing herself to Switzerland had creeped me out a little, considering what had happened to it. Did she really think she was like a Simurgh victim, likely to explode at any minute and destroy
everyone around her?

Or had she been talking in the old meaning of the word? Maybe it had been a little bit of both.

The class wasn't as hard as I'd feared. While they were farther ahead than we had been at Winslow, even in the advanced class, I had helpful comments from my grandfather's avatar. He was apparently an amazing teacher.

The Arcadia teacher was better too. He wasn't as much better than I'd expected, though, probably because the Advanced class teachers at Winslow tended to be some of the few who were actually engaged.

Chemistry had always been a refuge for me, since none of my tormentors had the class and none of my classmates there had cared much about me. In the last few days, though, I'd felt the kids at Winslow pull away from me in all my classes. There had been an undercurrent of fear that had been unpleasant.

The anonymity was refreshing, but I knew that it wouldn't last. I felt a moment of regret at losing my secret identity. Life would have been a lot easier if I could have been anonymous. I felt a flash of anger at the policeman who had outed me. Sure, I'd threatened him, but outing me had directly led to all of this.

My lawyer had told me that he was currently suspended without pay; there was a good chance that the district would fire him. It was mostly a way to avoid having me sue the district, since the BBPD was sorely underfunded. Part of it was the poor tax base, and part of it was that funds were directed away to the PRT.

I separated from Sarah for second period English. By this point I was getting looks from people.

Apparently rumors had been going around that the newest Cape in town was going to be attending, and I was the only new transfer student.

Everyone was pleasant, though.

It was at third period when things began to change. I heard people whispering and I saw glances directed my way from everywhere. Despite how pleasant everything was, I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a mistake in coming here. Was this going to be as bad as Winslow?

After third period, I was approached by several people, two girls and a guy.

"We've been hearing rumors," the lead girl said. "Are you really the new Cape, the one who beat the Empire?"

I grimaced. "They had my father. What else was I going to do?"

"Wow, that had to bite," the guy said. He grimaced. "I don't know what I'd do if someone took my Dad."

"I do," I said. "And apparently it's not very nice."

"I'm Jake. This is Alyssa and Jane. We're kind of your welcoming committee and the town criers combined. If you have anything you want everybody to know, just give it to us and we'll make sure word gets around."

The brunette girl, tall and willowy, although not as tall as me said,"It's always better to get your own
message out. Nature abhors a vacuum. If people don't know what's going on they start making things up.”

“Yeah, leave it and some people will be talking about how you are a supervillain plotting to take over the school. Other people will be talking about how you and Glory Girl are secretly in love because someone saw you talking to her this morning.”

I frowned. “What if I don't want people talking about me at all?”

“You can't stop it,” he said cheerfully. “People talk. You might be able to make people be quiet in your presence, but once they are outside... “

I thought about it for a moment, then said, “Tell them this. I'm a rogue who wants to make the city better. That means I don't want to ride out in a silly costume and silly hat to fight people. However, if people come against me or people I consider mine, I'll finish things.”

“Is that a threat?” he asked. He was staring at me as though he'd seen a ghost.

“A promise,” I said. “I wouldn't mind friends, but people who want to take advantage of me do not need to apply.”

“So long moonlit walks down the beach are out of the question.”

“You asking?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Uh, not really,’ he said. “I'm kind of going out with Alyssa. If I wasn't I'm sure I wouldn't mind going flying with a Cape.”

Alyssa stepped on his foot.

“What? I said if,” he said, looking at her through the side of his eye.

“No need flirting with our future overlord,” she said. She smiled at me, then scowled at him. “Especially if she was a pretty girl.”

I wasn't especially pretty, but it was nice of her to say. I felt a warmth inside my chest, and I had a sudden random thought wondering if I could convince my grandfather or Panacea to do something about my... shortcomings.

Panacea probably had girls asking for it all the time, and asking your grandfather's ghost about breast enlargement seemed a little creepy.

“Let's go to lunch,” Alyssa said.

Another thing that was different from Winslow was the quality of the food. I'd always brought my lunch before, but given the state of our refrigerator (which was to say non-existent) I was depending on the mercy of the lunch lady gods.

The food was actually good here, not slop like was served at Winslow.

Sarah joined us at the table. Victoria and Amy Dallon sat all the way across the room, although Amy gave me a small wave. Was she trying to make amends for what she'd said earlier, or did she not even think anything about what she'd said?

I hated being a teenage girl. School seemed to bring the worst out in me. Out in the world I was a powerful Cape, someone who could dictate to the Protectorate as long as I didn't push things too far.
I was important in a way that I wasn't here.

“Everyone is looking at me,” I muttered.

“Most teenagers think that, and most of them are wrong,” Sarah said. She took a bite, then looked around. “You, however aren't seeing things.”

“You're just the newest thing to make the news,” Jake said. “You should have heard people talk when Vicky and Amy started classes. The one good thing is that nobody is going to keep asking if you are the newest Ward.”

“It's be like going back to Kindergarten,” I muttered.

“Hey, at least nobody wanted anything out of you in kindergarten. Now, though?”

As I sat quietly listening to them talk about school and relationships and all the small concerns of average high school students, I wondered when I'd become so separated from my peers that I couldn't relate. Was it when I'd gotten my powers?

No. I'd been a strange duck even before then. I'd been a cheerful child, but I'd always felt like an outsider looking in. Emma had been the only one who hadn't made me feel that way.

Would I ever trust anyone else enough to feel that way again, or would I close myself off, fearful of being hurt. I had a sense that it wasn't entirely my choice.

The day finished without incident. While I didn't make any more friends, I also didn't make any enemies. I wasn't sure how I felt about the day. Was this just a grace period before everything fell apart, or was I being paranoid in a way where I would sabotage myself before I even had a chance to make friends.

As I left the school I was getting ready to fly away when I heard a voice.

“Are you Taylor?”

I looked down. There was a girl, too young to be in Arcadia staring up at me. She was young, at least three or four years younger than me, far too young to be out of her own school, much less to be at mine.

I nodded.

“There's a ninety nine point seven percent chance that I am going to be kidnapped in the next three months. I have a feeling that I won't enjoy what happens afterward.”

“What can I do for you?”

“If I join you there's a ninety seven percent chance I will be safe.” The girl seemed absolutely convinced of what she was saying. I listened for my grandfather's avatar to agree or disagree, to use his supposed skills at reading people, but he didn't say anything.

“Join me?” I asked. It almost felt as though this girl and I were having different conversations.

“In the team you are forming.”

I stared at her, undoubtedly with a confused look on my face. I wasn't forming a team. I suppose I could form a team with Dad. Magnetic Lass and the Manimal King.
“Oh? That hasn't happened yet?” she asked. She frowned. “I get things confused sometimes. I've been having a lot of headaches lately.”

“Thinker headaches,” my grandfather's avatar supplied helpfully. As though I didn't know what it was myself. Now he decides to start talking. I wondered if he'd been sulking about my silly hat reference earlier in the day, considering that he could be described as a high tech version of the Hogwarts Sorting hat.

She stuck her hand out. “I'd Dinah Alcott, and I see the future.”
“This isn’t exactly the place to talk about this,” I said, looking around.

There were other students milling around, but no one seemed to be paying attention to me. That was deceptive of course. Everyone was paying attention to me but no one wanted to look like they were. I wouldn't be surprised if people were taking pictures of me right now and posting them to social media.

“No one is close enough to hear,” she said. “Eighty nine point five nine percent chance.”

“Just the fact that you are talking to me is likely to get people's attention,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Talking to you here and now drops my chances of being kidnapped by a good twenty percent all on its own.”

“Let's walk,” I said. “Is that how your power works? Percentages?”

She nodded. “But I only get a few per day. Any more than that and I get horrible migraines. I can sometimes get a glimpse of high percentage possibilities, but that costs me in terms of how many questions I can ask.”

We were quickly leaving the school. I wondered if this was some sort of trap; encouraging me to kidnap a school kid as an excuse for the PRT to attack. I mentally sought out all the metal in the area just in case and ran through some possible strategies.

“I haven't had my power for long,” she said. “And I don’t think I was supposed to be kidnapped for a few more months, but the numbers changed after you did the thing with the bus and the boat.”

“Who do you think is out to get you?” I asked.

“I'm not sure,” she said. At my look she shrugged. “My power doesn't work on people I don't know, and whoever it is uses goons to get me and doesn't reveal himself. I've seen it clear as a bell. I've been home sick from school with headaches trying to figure out a way out of it.”

“I'm guessing they want you for your power,” I said.

With a power like that you could make a fortune in the stock market, at horse races, in gambling. If you were paranoid you could ask whether you were likely to be attacked each day, and then how. You could even ask how likely a plan was to succeed and discard it if it wasn't likely to work.

“Have you considered going to the Protectorate?” I asked.

“I have a twenty percent chance of being safe there,” she said. “Joining the Wards doesn't help at all.”

“So what do you want from me,' I said. “And what do you have to offer?”

“Protection,” she said promptly. “And I can offer my power. I can ask seven questions a day before the pain gets unbearable. Four questions means no pain usually, unless it's unusually clear.”

“Have you considered starting a business?” I asked. “A question a day. I'll bet there are people willing to offer a lot of money for a single question, especially if you are as good as you seem to think you are.”
I paused. Was it possible that this was all a con?

“There is a ninety seven percent chance of an assassination attempt on you in the next ten minutes,” she said. “With a three percent chance of you having been injured before my warning.”

“And you’re standing next to me?” I asked. “We need to get you home.”

She nodded.

“Where do you live?”

“I’m the mayor’s niece,” she said.

“And you didn’t think that was important to mention? You had to have left school early in order to get to Arcadia on time. I’ll bet the people who were supposed to pick you up are worried sick.”

Before she could respond, I saw a car turning onto the block ahead of me.

It was a strange looking car, a station wagon with a chassis made of wood. It was in excellent condition, but it looked old, like something from the forties. I'd been to auto shows where I'd seen similar cars. Back in those days they'd used wood for auto bodies sometimes instead of metal.

If this was the people making the attempt, I wasn't sure what they thought they were going to accomplish. The engine was made of metal, and so were the hubcaps. I only needed a single nut to kill someone, and maybe less.

The men in the car were all dressed conservatively, with jackets and hats, possibly to hide tattoos. There were six of them in the car, and they were all casually talking.

It was possible that it wasn't anything, but it was also possible that the girl was right. I checked the car with my senses. None of the men had any metal on them, not even watches or rings. That seemed a little strange, but not terribly so.

Driver's licenses had magnetic strips on them, and there were small magnetic strips in money. None of them had either, which was very unusual. People not carrying identification, cash or credit cards seemed a little risky.

I turned to Dinah as though I was deep in conversation, and the car slowed slightly. I heard a strange series of snapping sounds.

Looking up I saw that all of the men were holding wooden crossbows pointing in my direction, and wooden crossbow bolts tipped in plastic were coming toward me.

They bounced off my shield, which worked quite well against things that weren't metal. From the expressions on their faces they hadn't known that.

I sighed, and a moment later the car was rising into the air as I lifted it by its metal undercarriage. I began to make the car spin, like the teacup ride at Disneyland. At first some of the men were trying to reload, but as I spun it faster and faster they lost their grips on the crossbows, which went flying.

“Are they supposed to puke like that?” Dinah asked, interested. “It's kind of cool how it flies. I kind of feel bad for whoever owns the car.”

She pulled out her phone and took a quick picture.

“I doubt it's theirs,” I said. “I was doing this so I could avoid getting blood on the seat or tearing up
the car.”

“Several of them had fallen unconscious. I made the car land on the ground with a thump. Cars in this era didn't have seat belts, and so they were lucky that they hadn't flown out of the car.

Not that I would have cared if they had.

My grandfather’s avatar grumbled in agreement, although I had a feel of vicious amusement at the puke.

Picking up my telephone, I dialed the PRT. I'd been dialing the BBPD because I'd assumed that non-powered members of the Empire wouldn't be PRT business. I'd been informed that because I was involved it made it a parahuman incident and the PRT people were the ones to call.

Did that mean the PRT would come if I was arrested for jaywalking? I wasn't sure.

“PRT,” the professional voice on the other side of the line said.

“This is Taylor Hebert,” I said. “I've got six men who tried to kill me.”

“Are they still alive?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “None of them are really hurt. They've blacked out from G-forces, but that's about it. You might want to bring some changes of clothes, though, they smell like puke.”

“We'll have vans at your location in five minutes,” she said.

If it had been my neighborhood or the Docks it would have taken fifteen. It might have taken longer if there were major traffic disruptions. Part of it was that that the whole reason the Wards went to Arcadia was that it was close to the Protectorate. They were nearby.

An ugly part of me wondered though if part of the reason was that the rich neighborhoods were considered more important, and my neighborhood was considered expendable.

“You could have set all this up,” I said as an aside to Dinah.

“With what, my piggy bank?” she asked sarcastically. “Even if I had money, how many people would take a twelve year old girl seriously when she was trying to put a hit out on someone?”

“True,” I said. “But maybe you're already working for a super villain, trying to con me with your innocent face.”

She stared at me. “Do I look innocent? What kind of an idiot would trust a child to try to lie for them? I can't even convince my uncle that I've done my homework when I didn't.”

“Do you have anything else to convince me?” I asked.

“There's a sixty two percent chance that someone will try to poison your food over the next four days,” she said. “I'm not sure where. When I ask, the numbers keep changing.”

“Meaning they probably have several places picked out,” I said.

It made sense. The remnants of the Empire wanted me dead. They needed me dead. While some portions were probably small and being withered away by attrition, I had no doubt that the remaining portions were consolidating power into a few large groups. Most likely they were groups that had access to the Empire's resources; money, drugs, prostitution. People tended to flock to success.
We talked for a short time, her telling me about her school life and her life at home. We talked a little business too. The Protectorate vans, three of them arrived shortly afterwards.

Armstrong and Miss Militia came riding up on motorcycles at the same time.

“What happened here?” Armstrong asked.

“They tried to shoot me with wooden crossbow bolts,” I said. “It didn't work, so I took them for a little spin.”

I pointed out the shattered wooden crossbows and the wooden shafts on the ground. One PRT agent moved to take pictures even as his compatriots rushed forward and took control of the men.

He looked at the men in the car, who were just waking up and he winced. “That's a classic car they just threw up in.”

“I was trying to be nice,” I said.

“Is that the mayor's niece?” he asked, staring past me.

Dinah moved closer to me.

I nodded. “She came to my school with a business proposition.”

“There's an all point's bulletin on her,” he said. “People are worried that she's been kidnapped.”

“That's what I told her!,” I said. “In fact I was about to take her home, whenever she tells me where that is.”

“Her parents are at the mayor's house,” he said. “We'd be happy to give you a ride.”

I shook my head. “I think I'll take her flying, as long as that's OK with her. Call ahead and let them know we're coming. I don't mind you following, assuming you can keep up. I'll even keep to the major streets instead of going straight if that's OK with you.”

He was silent for a moment, apparently listening in to the radio in his helmet. He murmured something then nodded. “That will be acceptable.”

A moment later we were in the air. The one thing I was unprepared for was Dinah's squealing in delight. Apparently she'd never gone flying before, and she wasn't one of those people who were terrified of flights. I doubted that I'd have trusted someone else to fly me; I'd have been afraid of being dropped.

Getting to the house that Dinah pointed me to didn't take very long. The mayor lived in this neighborhood.

There were men in the black outfits that seemed to be standard for every bodyguard in every movie anywhere. They all had earpieces. I wondered if they knew how easy it would be for me to drive the earpieces directly into their brains.

I winced at the thought. I occasionally had horrible thoughts and I usually tried not to dwell on them.

We landed, and I noticed that the men had their guns out.

“I'd put those away,” I said. “Unless you want things to go poorly.”
“Stand down,” I heard Armsmaster say from the curb. “She's bringing Miss Alcott back.”

The men nodded, and spoke into their microphones. A moment later we were escorted to the front door of the Mayor's mansion. It was rather large and ornate.

I found myself looking at it for design hints. I wouldn't be poor forever, and there were things I would need to do to impress people that didn't involve a stupid looking throne.

There was marble on the floor, which I liked. Decorations were sparse, but obviously tasteful and expensive. Apparently overloading people with art and fixtures was gaudy and would make people think I was uncouth.

“I would not let you choose a poor style,” My grandfather's helmet murmured.

Considering that his helmet looked stupid and his throne had been gaudy and overdone, I somehow found myself doubting that he knew what good home design was. Besides, he was really old; he'd probably have my place decorated like some kind of place from the nineteen sixties or something.

I found the Mayor in a large office with a man and a woman I assumed were Dinah's parents. Another man I didn't know was also in the room, along with the guards.

Her parents rushed forward. “Dinah!”

“This seems like a lot of effort to find a girl who's been gone for a couple of hours,” I said.

“There have been some worries about kidnapping,” the Mayor said. “It's good to meet you, Miss Hebert. I've heard a lot about you. These are Dinah's parents Michael and Angela, and this is her cousin, Rory Christner.”

“Was she the one who was worried about being kidnapped?” I asked.

“She'd been trying to tell her parents about it for a couple of weeks,” he said. “When she vanished from school, her parents came to me worried.”

“She came looking for me,” I said. I glanced at her and she nodded slightly. “She tells me that she is a precognitive and she wants my protection.”

The mayor stared at me, flustered. Had I just outed his niece to everyone in the room?

“I'm sure she has some stories,” he said. “I hope she didn't bother you.”

“She predicted an assassination attempt,” I said. “And came to me at the exact time it happened so she could convince me of what she could do.”

“If she is a parahuman, then outing her isn't in anyone's best interest.” Armsmaster said from behind me. “Your own experiences should tell you that.”

“She tells me that this is where I should out her,” I said. “Apparently there are some leaks in the PRT and letting the people who are after her know that she's under my protection increases her chances of not being kidnapped at all.”

“Is she under your protection?” the mayor asked.

“She made an interesting offer,” I said. I turned to her parents. “Have either of you considered letting
her start a business?”

“As what, a fortuneteller?” her father asked.

“She could make a lot of money,” I said. “The deal we’ve talked about is splitting profits fifty fifty and I provide protection and a place for her to do her work. Truthfully she could do it from home and I imagine we could get ten thousand dollars a question. Put half that away for her college fund, and she could go to any school in the country by the end of the summer.”

“Is that legal?” her father asked.

“Possibly,” Armsmaster said begrudgingly. “Although I think the Protectorate could offer better…”

“I have an eighty percent chance of being kidnapped as a Ward,” Dinah said, interrupting. “With Taylor it’s only three percent. I like the Protectorate, but I like not getting kidnapped more.”

“We won’t make her identity public like mine,” I said. She's been seen with me, so I'll probably make an appearance at her school. Officially she was trying to get me to make an appearance on the same day the Wards are supposed to show up, to talk about being a rogue.”

“You’re position isn’t quite the same as most rogues,” Armsmaster said disapprovingly. “While the PRT officially likes to encourage rogues, the reality is that rogues are rare for a reason. Most of them get snapped up by one group or another, forced to work for people who don’t have their best interests at heart.”

“I’ll make that clear,” I said. I’d heard the statistics on rogues the PRT used, and my grandfather had told me why those statistics were flawed.

The truth was, public rogues were rare for the very reason that Armsmaster noted. However, my grandfather suspected that the numbers for Capes were grossly underrepresented because those capes who didn’t want to get into fights would likely simply not use their powers anywhere anyone could see them.

It had apparently been the same with mutants. There had been a few highly visible mutants, but they’d been the tip of the iceberg.

“We’ll have to discuss it,” Dinah's father said, glancing at his wife. “Is your protection contingent on the deal?”

“No,” I said. “But it would be nice to make some money.”

“Um, you know that Rogues who register with the PRT can get a stipend,” Miss Militia volunteered suddenly.

“They can?” I asked.

That would have been good to know a couple of weeks ago.

“Of course, generally people who go out beating up on gang members aren't considered rogues,” Armsmaster said. “They tend to be put into one of the two categories.”

Right.

The mayor cleared his throat. “While I appreciate what you did for my niece, there is a matter we should discuss while you are here. About your remodeling project... there's been a few concerns.”
I suddenly realized that coming to the house of the chief bureaucrat in town may have been a mistake.
“We don’t really worry about whether your roof is going to leak or things like that. That’s between you and the contractor, and since you did your own work... it’s on you. Mostly all this is about whether the building is structurally sound and about safety.”

Big Mike was a former dockworker now owner of a private permit service. His company managed the paperwork for homeowners building new houses or remodeling, taking a lot of the headaches out of the permitting process.

There were apparently a lot more rules and regulations when it came to home construction than I’d thought. The mayor had been nice about it, at least, not demanding that I knock it down and rebuild it the right way.

I agreed to add more lights to the tower for airplanes; it was a sensible precaution since the last thing I wanted was airplanes hitting my house.

Furthermore I agreed to allow building inspectors in to check for code violations. Apparently there were things I hadn't thought about when building my house, some of which seemed like good ideas. I still didn't have fire detectors for example, and I wasn't sure if the rail height on my stairs would be adequate to keep Dad from flying to his death in the middle of the night while he was going to the non-existent refrigerator looking for a snack.

The mayor assured me with utmost sincerity that the inspectors wouldn't be spies out to find things in my house to prosecute me for.

I assured him that I had nothing to hide (other than my gaudy throne); all my crimes had been committed out in public.

Still, I was suspicious of the PRT or possibly some supervillain using the opportunity to put bugs in my house or worse. Big Mike was a compromise. Not only did he know my father, but he knew every building inspector in town. He’d know if they tried to slip a ringer into the mix.

I'd talked to Dad about it, and he'd agreed, but that we'd only allow inspections while we were there. He'd use his powers to keep an eye on the whole process, and I'd follow up to see if they left any little metal bits that they shouldn't.

“I think you’ll be fine structurally. Those pylons you put in are beyond what the code would ask for, and the mayor already agreed to give you a waiver for the building height and for not leaving enough clearance in the driveway.”

I shrugged. I hadn't wanted the thing to fall over during the next big storm

“I can already see some problems they'll want to address,” he said. “Your handrails on the stairs need to begin and end in the wall. The reason they do that is because if you have it open the way you do, purse straps and sleeves can get caught on it and cause a fall. There's been cases where firefighters went running up stairs and got fire hoses caught, pulling them down.”

I frowned. I could vaguely see why that would be a rule, although it seemed unlikely to be a problem in our house.

“You need carbon monoxide detectors and smoke alarms and they need to be properly placed. I've heard you like to tinker, and tinkers tend to have explosions so it's a good idea. Also, I've seen your
“Hey!” I heard Dad call out from the other room.

“Smoke alarms are how we know dinner's done, right?” I asked, grinning.

He laughed. I'd seen Big Mike at family barbecues before everything had gone to hell after my mother's death. It was actually good to see him again.

“The doors and windows can't require a key to exit,” he said. “I don't know exactly know what you've done with those front doors

“The big main doors aren't meant to be easy to open,” I said. “There's smaller side doors that can be opened easily.”

He looked at me skeptically.

“You may be able to blow a hole in any wall, but your Dad can't,” he said. “If the other doors get blocked how will he get out?”

I scowled. I had a feeling that this was going to be a longer process than I thought.

Floating silently, I dropped down to the floor of the warehouse. There were cameras covering all the doorways and I could detect traps that would undoubtedly slow most intruders down. I could have tried to deactivate them, but you never knew what tricks tinkers had up their sleeves.

It was easier simply to remove part of the metal roof, slip inside and replace it.

The benefit of my flight ability was that it was utterly silent. I moved quietly over the floor through the darkness. The only source of light was a big screen television which was currently split into two screens.

I could see piles of clothes on furniture, with pizza boxes and chines food cartons on the table. It looked like neither of the men who lived here knew how to clean, or at least that neither of them cared about cleaning.

“We really need to edit that last part out, dude,” I heard a voice say. “You remember how much flak we got for that Grand theft Auto thing.”

“Yeah, I'm tired of arguing about it.” the other voice said tiredly. “I just want to get this done and over with.”

Two men were sitting on the couch. One was typing furiously away at a laptop while the other had an ice pack on his head.

“You shouldn't have had so much Jaeger last night,” the first man said. “We've got to pay the bills.”

“I could help you with that,” I said, leaning over the couch.

The man with the ice pack flipped over the couch, landing in a defensive crouch. The other man simply turned his head and stared up at me.

Neither of them had masks.
“Dude! Not cool!” the man on the couch said. “You don't break into Capes houses and unmask them! What if we'd been naked or something.”

“I'd have told you to put clothes on,” I said dryly. “Do you spend a lot of time naked together?”

The two men glanced at each other for a moment, then shook their heads.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” the man who was standing demanded. “If you don't start talking I'll be forced to defend myself.”

“I'm Taylor Hebert,” I said.

The color drained from both men's faces.

“Are you here to kill us?” the man on the couch asked.

“What? No! Why?”

“We didn't really mean that You Tube video we put up, or all those memes we made, or the jokes or that thing where we shipped you with Shadow Stalker.”

“What?!?” I couldn't help but stare at the man on the couch. Was he an idiot?

“Or shipping you with Glory Girl, Panacea, Clockblocker and Armsmaster. Or saying that your favorite kind of music is heavy metal.”

Maybe I should have been checking the PHO.

“Armsmaster? I'm a minor you twit!” I said.

“Or saying that your favorite sport is Squash,” he continued.

I felt a headache coming on. “Maybe you'd better stop talking right now. I'd appreciate it if you would stop doing things like that, but that's not why I'm here.”

“Why are you here?” the man standing asked.

“To ask you to build me a poison detector, or if you've already build one to let me use your lab.”

The man on the couch sprang up suddenly. “A job? Why didn't you say so? That's something I haven't built yet. What's the pay?”

“I could not squish your heads like a grape for all the things you just told me,” I said.

“Don't be like that!” the guy who couldn't stop talking said. “We've got expenses too. Parts, materials... wait, you're a Tinker too? That is such bullsh... unfair.”

“Have you built one?” I asked.

“Yeah,” the man who I decided was Leet said. “Early on.”

I grimaced. I'd have preferred to leave this to them, but Leet's problem with devices exploding was well known.

“Take me to your lab then.”

“You can't come here and just demand to use my lab!” he protested.
“Technically you two are villains. I could just drag you both to the PRT and then come back and use your lab, or I could just do what I'm here for and leave.”

He froze and seemed to think for a moment. “Right. It's off to the lab then.”

The lab was apparently in a basement area under the warehouse, a space that had apparently been created through the use of tinkertech since the walls looked like they'd been melted organically. The space was much larger than the warehouse up top, and I had to admire the setup.

“So what do you want to do?” he asked. “I can...”

Leet had materials stored in bins, and after a couple of minutes I was ready to begin work. My grandfather was already flashing instructions into my mind. I began levitating pieces, thankful that Leet kept his laboratory much better organized than his living space up above.

I was levitating multiple pieces at the same time, putting pieces together and using my power to weld pieces together. Leet was standing beside me, staring opened mouthed.

In all it took less than five minutes, in part because I re-purposed some of Leet's equipment that my grandfather assured me was commercially available and not some monstrosity that Leet had created that was likely to explode in my pocket.

The final product was pocket sized, but I would have to remember to use it every time I ate. Even once would be enough to get me poisoned.

“Damn...” Leet whistled. “That's not even tinkertech. I think anybody could replicate it given the plans. You can make tech that is replicable?”

I shrugged.

“I don't suppose you need a lab assistant.”

I looked at him, surprised. “I thought you were dedicated to villainy, or You Tube or something.”

“You could probably use some documentarians,” he said, glancing back at his partner. “After all, the only thing most people know about you is the thing with the boat and the fact that you murdered a whole bunch of Nazis.”

“I only killed a few of them,” I said defensively. “I'm trying to be better about it.”

“That's why you need a public relations department!” he said enthusiastically. “The other gangs have had people talking them up for years and a lot of people have followed them.”

“I don't have a gang,” I said automatically.

“And what do you think you are going to accomplish without one?” he asked. “You can't be everywhere, and that's going to limit your ability to accomplish your goals.”

I stared at him. He'd been an idiot upstairs, but he was sounding a lot smarter now that he was in the lab. Was it part of his powers, or was he just situationally an idiot?

“Why would I want you guys?” I asked. “It's not like you guys have the best reputation. Wouldn't hooking up with you hurt my brand, or whatever you call it?”

He winced. “That's kind of cold.”
Uber stepped forward. “The nice thing about being a cape with a secret identity is that you can change that identity whenever you need to. We’ve done undercover work for other capes before, and we’ve never been caught.”

“Like who?” I asked.

If they were as stupid as they’d seen they’d blab, which would show I couldn’t trust them with my secrets.

He shook his head and smiled. “Part of the deal is that we don’t talk. We play clowns because that’s what gets us clicks on the internet. We’re really a lot more competent than we seen.”

I looked at them both skeptically. I could believe that Uber was competent. He gave off that kind of vibe. A rumble of agreement from my grandfather confirmed that feeling.

It was Leet that I was worried more about.

“I don't have any money,” I said. “I may have some soon, but it's not like I can afford you.”

“You haven't tried pulling gold from the ocean?” Leet asked.

“That's just a dream,” Uber said immediately. “Like, a thirteenth billion parts of gold per liter of seawater. She'd have to go through water a quarter mile on each side and a hundred feet deep to get one gram of gold.”

“She's strong enough to do it,” Leet argued. “Not counting rare earths, which are probably easier and more profitable now that I come to think about it.”

“Or she could just sell some of those designs she has in her head, the ones that people can put together without a tinker to help them,” Uber said firmly. “That would be a lot easier.”

“It takes time to get a patent and to sell people on the ideas,” Leet said. “By the time you go through lawyers and everything it could take months. Kind of like her lawsuit against the protectorate.”

“How did you know about that?” I asked.

My lawyer had told me that the lawsuit would probably take months unless the PRT decided to settle suddenly and so I hadn't been worried about it. It had never really been about the money anyway; it had been more about spitting in the eye of the Protectorate, and making it politically difficult for them to attack me, either in the media or in person.


“And does the Internet know the details?” I asked.

“A lot of speculation,” he said. “Something about bullying maybe... it's pretty vague. Most of the information everyone has comes from Void Cowboy, but he's pretty unreliable so everybody takes it with a grain of salt.”

Greg.

I scowled. He'd tried to get me to look at some of his posts, and I'd found them either inane or offensive. He was like these guys without the sense of self preservation.

“What else do you know?” I asked.
“The splinter factions of the Empire consider you Enemy number one. They think you are some kind of Jewish Hell Queen out to kill them all, and so several of the larger groups have offered bounties on your head. They're calling Capes in from out of town to take you down.”


“It's on the Internet,” he said. “I'd have figured that you'd know almost as soon as I did.”

“I don't spend all my time on the PHO,” I said. “I'm too busy with other things.”

“Like building a full scale Iron Throne right in the middle of your living room?” Leet asked. He looked overly enthusiastic.

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“One of your neighbors talked about it when he was complaining about your new Fortress of Doom,” Leet said. “He didn't know what it was, but he described it well enough that anybody who knows anything would know what it was.”

“Did you offer to work for me just so you could look at my throne?” I asked suspiciously.

Leet shrugged nonchalantly. “We take jobs all the time. Thinking we have ulterior motives is just a sign of paranoia.”

I sighed. Part of me thought hiring these clowns was going to be a mistake. Another part of me thought that I might have a use for them.

Dinah had said that I formed a group, and having one twelve year old girl wasn't exactly the definition of a team.

“If you work for me, I'm the boss,” I said. “And it's important that no one knows who you are. The last thing I need to be known for is working with villains.”

“Like Bitch?” Leet asked.

I ignored him.

“I'm not sure I trust you guys to do propaganda,” I said. “Although having you work as cameramen might not be the worst things. You could disguise your cameras, and people would think I was lifting them magnetically.”

“You'll need some cash flow before you hire a real PR guy,” Leet said. “Which is where the whole gold from the oceans thing comes in. There's two thousand times as much uranium in seawater as there is gold.”

“I'm not mining uranium,” I said firmly. Even though Scion had gotten rid of the nuclear weapons that didn't mean that people had forgotten how to make them.

Uber punched Leet in the shoulder. “Are you trying to get a kill order on all of us?”

“Magnesium then,” he said. “A cubic kilometer of seawater contains a million tons of magnesium.”

“Is it worth much?” I asked.

“About three thousand dollars a ton,” he said.
I stared at him. So he was saying I could pull three billion dollars of metal from the ocean?

“'The whole market is like seven million tons a year, so if you tried to sell that much you'd completely crash the market. Still, you should have no problems making money.’”

“'Why'd you start with all that crap with the gold,’ Uber asked under his breath to Leet.

“'Because it's gold!’” Leet said. “'From the ocean! That's way cooler than Manganese.’”

I was starting to see why these guys hadn't been particularly successful as villains. I realized that I was going to have to talk to my lawyer to see if he knew anything about mineral rights and who to sell the materials to.
Checking everything I ate with the device was a pain. It was inconvenient and I was surprised to realize just how often I ate throughout the day. It was a sign maybe that I needed to cut back a little, and I found that I hated having to be this paranoid every time we had a pizza delivered.

I did an experiment and found that I could indeed pull metals from the ocean, even if it took a lot of water to do so. I even managed to pull a little gold from the bay; it wasn't for the cool factor, but simply because I knew I'd be able to sell it at a cash for gold place a lot easier than something esoteric like manganese.

Pulling four ounces of gold from the waters surrounding the bay wasn't easy, but market value was something like five thousand dollars. I went with Dad to the cash for gold place, and they looked at us funny; apparently they were more used to buying gold chains and teeth and grandma's jewelry than gold nuggets. The results came back as twenty four karat and they paid us twenty five hundred dollars.

My grandfather suggested that we were being cheated and that I should shop around for a better deal, but it wasn't like the gold had cost me anything other than time and effort.

We got a microwave for the house and a refrigerator; we also bought food for the pantry that I carefully checked with my detector. It was possible that food inside the cans had been tampered with, but I'd check those when I actually ate.

Dad even took me clothes shopping when I could pull him away from whatever he was doing in the Animal-o-sphere. He didn't really bother to talk much about it, but he took the time off to go shopping with me, and it almost felt like old times.

That didn't mean that I wasn't alert. The last thing I needed was for Dad to be shot in a drive-by because I wasn't paying attention. It occurred to me that the faster I got rid of the remnants of the Empire the faster I'd be able to get back to going to school and living a relatively normal life... as normal as you could while living in a Fortress of Doom.

School proved to be easier than I'd expected once I settled in.

In the next two days I detected poison twice. Once was at Fuggly Bob's; someone slipped something into my Burger. I found Bob in the back being held hostage by several goons.

The next time was at school, when my school lunch was poisoned by a lunch lady whose family was being held hostage. The poor woman had been so pale white as she served me that I'd wondered if she was coming down with something, in which case I'd have reconsidered eating what she had to offer anyway.

There was a big production, with the police coming and the PRT and the school ended up being shut down for almost two hours. It wasn't exactly the kind of introduction I wanted to make to the student body.

The last thing I needed was to catch hepatitis or food poisoning because someone couldn't afford to take off when they were sick. My detector wasn't able to detect everything after all. After all, for all I knew there could be Empire sympathizer's spitting in my food in the back just to spite me.

I stopped eating fast food.
Stepping up my actions against the Empire was easy at first. I simply looked for large concentrations of guns. In the first two days I busted a dozen different safehouses and warehouses holding supplies. I wasn't sure which of the new groups they belonged to; it was possible that they only belonged to the two or three largest groups.

I didn't care. Every kilo of drugs I took off the street and every dollar I took from the gangs was money that they wouldn't have to hire people to poison me or attack me in my sleep or do other things that I couldn't even imagine.

It got harder once they scattered. There were a lot of people in the Bay who had guns; I could hardly pull in everyone who was exercising their second amendment right not to be murdered by the gangs. They also started covering tattoos and wearing hoodies.

In apology for his antics on the Internet, Leet offered me one of his old security systems. He promised that it wouldn't explode because it was actually from a commercial system that he'd redesigned. My grandfather looked it over and didn't see anything wrong with the design. Setting it up had given me a little sense of relief. I'd been afraid that someone would find a way to cut my throat in my sleep.

Making a nightgown of tiny chain links proved to be a nonstarter; I couldn't sleep with it. However, buying a comforter and then slipping the chain links inside, restitching it afterward gave me a small sense of security, as false as it probably was.

On the fourth day I'd just gotten home from school when I heard the huge front doors booming. Someone was knocking, hard.

Cautiously, I approached, looking through the small viewscreen by the door donated by Leet. I saw Glory Girl and Panacea standing outside in full costume.

Opening the door, I stared sourly at them.

"If you've come to fight, I don't feel like it," I said sourly.

"No!" she said. "I've heard what you are doing with the Empire and I want in!"

I stared at her, wondering what she could possibly contribute other than annoying me into attacking her. She was incredibly perky, and I wondered if she'd been talked into trying to be my friend by the Protectorate. After all the lawsuit was still pending, even if it was likely to take months, and they probably wanted to stay on my good side until it was over.

"I'm just here to keep anybody from being hurt permanently," Panacea said. She grimaced. "You're starting to get more of a reputation than my sister."

"Hey!" Glory Girl said. "I haven't torn that much up, and I certainly haven't held an entire ship up over the city."

She glanced at me and said hurriedly, "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"I don't suppose you have a place the Empire is meeting," I said.

If they had information on an actual location I might let them come, once. It was getting hard enough to track down the Empire offshoot gangs that I was willing to take any help that I could get.

Of course, the fact that they had to move in such small groups meant that the ABB and Merchants were moving in on them and rolling them up. They were hemorrhaging members; I knew if I could
just keep up the pressure I'd be able to be free of them within a week.

“Yeah,” she said. “A big meeting of the main gangs that are left. They are meeting outside of town, probably so that you won't find them.”

“OK,” I said slowly. A big meeting sounded exactly like the kind of thing that I was looking for.

“Tell me what you know,” I said.

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I worried a little bit about the holographic projector I was using to change my features. Leet assured me that he'd never built anything like it, but I wasn't sure I trusted him. I'd gotten him a supply of both Magnesium and Manganese and he'd promised to fence it in return for a portion of the profits. Tinkering was expensive, after all.

If it kept him from doing crimes, I was more than happy to contribute. After all, part of the reason I was doing all of this was to make the city the kind of place my mom and dad had loved once. Reducing crime was part of that, even if it wasn't the main thing.

The main problem wasn't that I was afraid of the Empire. The problem was that if they scattered like roaches I'd never have as good a chance to capture them again. Panacea was on standby with the PRT on speed dial.

It disappointed me a little to see that there were almost five hundred people at the rally, which was being held in an old quarry outside of town. I'd thought that I'd whittled their numbers down by more than this.

Besides getting all of them, I wanted to know what they were planning. If they were planning to hire some mercenary master, or kill my dad I wanted to know.

Right now I was wearing the form of a bald headed man emblazoned with numerous tattoos. I could feel my grandfather's anger at being forced to wear what were to him hated symbols. He'd tried to encourage a frontal assault, but I knew that wouldn't get me what I wanted.

Instead I made my way through the crowd carefully. I used my force field to fill out my form, so that people I was bumping into didn't feel a small female instead of a hulking man.

Three men stood up on a hastily constructed stage. One had a cordless microphone, probably tinker made. My estimate of their resources went up.

“My brothers, thank you for coming. My name is Herman Stein, and these men are Tom Harris and Eddie Smith. We are the leaders of the three largest groups remaining out of what was once the greatest organization in Brockton Bay.”

He paused, and looked out at the crowd, which had grown quiet. “We have lost many brothers, some through cowardly attacks and others through cowardice, but we have many new friends, drawn to the Bay to help the cause.”

Maybe I had driven more off than half. If more kept coming I might never be able to beat them. It'd be like playing whack-a-mole.

Better that I finish it here and now, or it would never end.
“We all know who the enemy is,” he said. “They claim she is just a teenager who is simply powerful, but no cape is that powerful without flaws. She was created specifically to destroy us, men who are simply trying to do what's right.”

“There is an organization, a conspiracy out there that is trying to destroy us, to replace us, to emasculate us. If they got their way the white man would go extinct. They are a greater threat than the Endbringers. At least the Endbringers are open about their intentions.”

There was the sound of an explosion in the distance; a moment later the man with the microphone had a sword sticking through his chest. A tall Asian woman was standing behind him. Her costume was covered in blades, and I wondered who she was. She contemptuously shoved him off her blade and grabbed his microphone.

“These men are fools,” the woman shouted. “Thinking skin color matters. All that matters is the willingness to kill, to fight and survive. Are you willing to survive, or will you die like the dogs that you are?”

The implication was clear. Work for her or die.

Asking a group of die hard racists that question as an Asian woman had to be particularly stupid.

I heard angry shouts all around me. Men lifted their fists, and some men lifted weapons, pointing them in her direction.

Fifteen men with submachine guns were suddenly facing us; I scowled and lifted my hand. The men opened fire, sending hundreds of bullets flying through the air.

All the bullets stopped, hanging motionless, and everybody froze. I switched my image emitter off and allowed myself to levitate above the people around me. I gestured and the barrels of the machine guns bent all at the same time, rendering them useless. The men who had been using them fell and began to dissolve into nothingness.

“As much as I hate to save the lives of these men, I can't let you massacre people,” I said. I grimaced. I could already hear people running in the distance. I was going to lose my chance to gather them all up.

She looked at me and she smiled. There was almost something predatory about it.

“The hero of Brockton Bay,” she said. There was something in her voice that I couldn't identify, a combination of dread and anticipation. “Such power. What is it like to have practically infinite power with the mind of a fifteen year old?”

“Beware,” my grandfather's avatar said suddenly. “I cannot read her. The fact that she knows who you are and still seems confident is enough to be cautious.”

She gestured and suddenly I fell to my knees as pain beyond anything I'd ever experienced filled my body. It was fire and ice and cutting and every physical pain I'd ever experienced and it was everywhere.

I dropped to the ground like a puppet who had her strings cut. I managed to keep my force field up, even as I managed to keep control of my bowels, but it was a very close thing.

The massacre resumed around me. I saw bodies beginning to fall all around me, and there was nothing I could do about it. Fifteen more men appeared, all identical and they'd gotten new submachineguns from somewhere. A group of Empire men tried to fight back, but the place was flat
without cover. It was a killing field and there was nothing I could do to help them.

“Pain is an illusion!” my grandfather barked out. “You can still fight!”

I wanted to shout at him that I wasn't some sort of infallible demigod like he had apparently been; I was a fifteen year old girl and it was all I could do to keep myself from peeing on myself. Standing up, making some kind of witty quip, none of it was possible.

My muscles were all locked together and it was hard to breathe. It was like I'd touched a live wire and couldn't pull my hands away. The pain was incredible and it only seemed to be getting worse.

The woman walked slowly toward me, her face contorted into an expression I didn't recognize. It was almost like she was grinning and scowling at the same time. Her body moved unnaturally.

“You can make it stop,” she gritted out. She didn't look like she wanted to say what she was saying, and I wondered if she was being mastered herself. “You have the power.”

She gestured toward her costume, covered in blades. “All it takes is one command. Kill me and it will all stop. You don't have to feel this kind of pain ever again.”

I shook my head, and the effort seemed overwhelming.

A moment later the pain was gone and there was an explosion where the woman had been. It didn't get through my shield, but I saw three people fall to the ground. I couldn't tell if they were injured or dead.

It bothered me that for the moment I didn't care. I was so relieved that the pain was gone that the blood and gore around me weren't really registering.

Some of the attackers were falling now as the Empire men fought back. It was chaotic, and I saw some men accidentally shoot their own people.

My body tightened as I realized what had happened. I hadn't done anything to her and she'd given me more pain in an instant than the Trio had in my entire life. I'd thought myself invulnerable and she'd cut me down more easily than Sophia ever had.

She was murdering people this very minute. She...

Looking around at the men running, I felt my sympathy drain away. They were a scourge on humanity, a waste of space. They were actively draining society and getting rid of them wasn't a terrible thing. Why had I tried to protect them anyway? Wasn't getting rid of them the whole reason I'd come here in the first place?

They'd hurt my father and not only did they deserve what they were getting, but I felt they were getting off entirely too lightly.

The people killing them were stealing my vengeance, though. I pulled the guns from their hands and made them explode into a thousand different pieces. Shrapnel floated in mid air as I began to float up into the air.

These people were all my enemies, and I had to deliver justice to them.

The metal floated around me. I saw the Asian woman tearing through the crowd with a sword, moving with the speed and strength that only brutes had. She looked up at me, her face covered in blood and she smirked.
She smirked!

Rage filled me and I gathered my will. She deserved to die more than anyone.

Men began to scramble to get out of the path between us. It wasn't just the Empire men either; people on the other side did the same.

I gathered my will, planning to turn the spikes on her outfit into an iron maiden. Killing her wouldn't just be justice, it would be insurance. If she was dead I wouldn't have to suffer through that pain again.

Before I could complete my plan, I felt something massively powerful hit me from the left side. While I had my force field up, I hadn't bothered to anchor myself and so I fell to the side.

I looked up, ready to kill when I saw Glory Girl laying on top of me.

“That's Butcher!” she said urgently. She grimaced. “If you kill her, she'll take over your body and all your powers!”

I looked up at the woman who had been doing everything she could to goad me into doing exactly that.

How was I going to fight someone I couldn't kill, who could teleport and from my vague memories of her powers had the abilities of thirteen or fourteen other capes?

“Well damn.” I said.
Dealing with an opponent that I couldn't kill normally wouldn't be a problem. All I'd have to do was cover her in metal until she settled down, leaving it to the PRT to get her out.

Unfortunately, this parahuman could teleport, which created an entirely different problem. She would be able to escape most of the big things I could do to her, and it was possible that her teleportation would be good enough to teleport her out of cuffs too.

Worse, I had a faint recollection that the Butcher had a whole lot of different powers, and I didn't remember what they all were. The teleportation, pain projection and anger projection were bad enough without adding other powers into the mix.

Glory Girl was still on top of me.

“What other powers does she have?” I asked.

Glory Girl frowned. “Uh... some kind of brute rating, immune to pain, can always hit at range... I don't remember them all.”

Right.

“Regeneration?” I asked.

“Not that I've heard,” she said. “I could be wrong.”

It meant that I couldn't count on her not bleeding out if I did certain things, in which case I'd have all sorts of nifty new powers as well as a whole host of insane voices in my head. That was something that I wanted to avoid.

The Butcher was almost as bad as the Slaughterhouse Nine in terms of what she was willing to do. There wouldn't be any kind of gentlewoman's agreement here. I wouldn't be able to talk my way out of this fight. I couldn't kill her or incapacitate her.

My options were very limited.

One option would be to make her wish she was dead, but with her being immune to pain there weren't many options for that.

“Heat,” my grandfather's avatar muttered.

I nodded as Glory Girl rolled off of me.

“Amy's safe?” I asked.

Butcher was living up to her name, shooting arrows with stone tops in all directions, hitting men where they would cause the most pain and incapacitation. She seemed to take a savage sort of pleasure in mutilating people.

“Oh!” Glory Girl said. “She can cause festering wounds. Mom went over her powers with us just in case she ever left Boston, but that was six months ago.”

I nodded and floated to my feet. I sent out a series of metal pieces to deflect her arrows.
She scowled at me and a moment later the pain resumed. It wasn't as debilitating this time; my muscles weren't completely locked up despite the fact that the pain was just as bad.

I lashed out, sending fragments of metal into the men with machine guns. I was pretty sure they were just projections since they all looked alike and all had vanished once before. They vanished this time too, which meant that I hadn't gotten the leader.

Nearby Nazi's grabbed up the submachine guns and turned them on the other members of the Teeth. This pulled Butcher's attention away from me and the pain vanished even as Butcher dove into the Empire men with machine guns. At least five of her own people had dropped, but now she was tearing into them. She was strong and she was fast, and none of them stood a chance.

I'd always wondered why Capes were treated as unbeatable by ordinary people. Most Capes were anything but bulletproof; given a determined assassin almost any Cape would fall. A bullet to the head would kill any cape that wasn't a brute, or who didn't have defensive powers like I did.

Butcher was different though. She really was everything the humans thought Capes were; she was a force of nature.

Fortunately I was one too.

Heat could be created with magnets by putting magnetic material in a high frequency oscillating magnetic field that made the magnets polarity switch back and forth fast enough to create friction. It was something I could do easily; now that I thought about it, I could probably do it myself and save myself the cost of buying an oven, although Dad did sometimes like to make a cup of hot cocoa on the stove.

In any case this had gone on long enough.

There was metal everywhere; guns and trucks parked in the distance, metal in the ground, metal on her costume. It was a surplus of what I needed. I gathered the materials; a glance back showed the vehicles disassembling themselves as the Empire men tried to pile into them. I'd done too much to let them get away this easily and this was the easiest way to stop them.

“You should have stayed in Boston,” I gritted out.

“What are you going to do hero? Kill me?” she taunted. She smirked again. “I doubt you want to know what I'd do to the world with your kind of power.”

She vanished in an explosion as metal flew through the air of the space she'd been in. She appeared next to us, trying to stab Glory Girl. The blade slipped off of her, but a punch to the gut immediately following made Glory Girl fall to the ground retching.

“People think I'm crazy, but I do my research,” she said. “Your little friend's force field vanishes for a little while after she's been attacked for the first time.”

Glory Girl didn't look like she was going to get up soon, so I concentrated on going after Butcher with metal. She was fast; every time I thought I had her she exploded and ended up somewhere else. Apparently a danger sense was an amazing thing to have in combat.

It didn't matter. The Empire men were throwing themselves on the ground as the flying shrapnel wounded some of them. It was a storm of flying truck parts that was gradually enveloping the entire bottom of the quarry we were in. I'd pulled fifty cars and trucks apart, which was a lot of metal flying around, and it was getting thicker every minute.
She was having to move faster to avoid the metal, and hopefully I was keeping her off balance to use her pain abilities or any abilities that required concentration. That was part of my plan.

Appearing next to me, she lashed out with her sword. I took it from her, bending it into a pretzel. She vanished in an explosion that had no effect on me.

Appearing at the top of the ridge, she looked down at me. Pain slammed into me again, but I didn't let it stop me this time.

Instead I slammed a slab of metal through the back of her knees at almost supersonic speed. Her skin was tough, but not that tough, and the flesh parted under my attack. Blood sprayed from the back of her knees, and I knew if I pulled the metal out she would die from blood loss.

Vibrating the metal, I caused it to heat up, cauterizing the flesh. At the same time I drove spikes into her flesh, holding the metal to the stumps that were left behind. She fell forward, her face staring at me from the edge of the pit with hatred in her eyes. Despite not feeling any pain the fact that I was crippling her had to be annoying to say the least.

I used other metal to yank her legs from the calves down back; a moment later they came off with a spray of blood. It would have been worse, but the molten hot metal was cauterizing the stumps. It was dangerous to do this; there was every possibility that she could go into shock and die from blood loss even if she wasn't in pain.

She reached out, pointing toward me. Instinct made me dodge, and an Empire behind me had a wound appear on his chest. It smelled terrible, rotting even.

Glancing contemptuously at me, she narrowed her eyes. Pain enveloped me, but it wasn't as strong as before. She was having trouble concentrating; not from pain of her own but because she was going into shock. Blood loss probably played a part in it.

She exploded away, but the metal I was bonding to her legs went with her, and I could sense it as she tried to teleport behind me.

Metal grabbed her arms and forced them behind her. Without any legs to fight with she fell to the side. The hatred on her face was palpable, but I could tell that she was close to losing consciousness. With that much damage to the body, pain wasn't needed to go into shock.

“You really shouldn't have come here,” I said.

A moment later blazing hot slivers of molten metal pierced her eyes, blinding her. Without being able to see me, I hoped her pain projection wouldn't be usable. I had no defense against it, or her rage power.

She exploded away again, but this time the jump was blind. She fell on top of an Empire man who screamed.

It was going to be a balancing act; how much to hurt her without actually killing her. Too much and she'd take control of me. Too little and she'd get away.

A moment later she disappeared again, and this time I could detect the metal vanishing off into the distance outside of my easy range. Apparently she didn't need her vision to direct her teleportation abilities.

I could hear sirens in the distance now, and so I put the metal I still had floating around me to good use. A hundred vehicles was more than a hundred tons of metal. Properly applied it worked very
well to tie Empire men up.

By the time the vans arrived I'd captured three hundred men. At least fifty lay dead, which meant that a hundred and fifty men had vanished into the hills around me.

Multiple members of the Protectorate had shown up as well; Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Assault and Battery, Velocity... they were all there.

“We were hoping you'd decided to cut down on the casualties,” he said, looking around.

“It wasn't me,” I said. “The Teeth decided to attack the Rally.”

“The Teeth?” he asked cautiously. He took the smallest step away from me. “What of their leader.”

“I sent her running,” I said. “After a fashion. You can collect her legs up on the ridge there, and I blinded her, but she's still alive. Glory Girl told me she was Butcher. I'm not sure she was, but she had a lot of powers.”

“Powers?”

“Pain and anger control, teleportation, strength and durability, perfect aim,” I said. “Maybe more.”

He nodded. “And you are sure she was alive? Sometimes people die of their wounds, and if she does...”

I could tell that he was uneasy around me, something that I hadn't really seen from him before. Before he'd been arrogant or cautious or sometimes simply businesslike. Now he smelled a little like fear.

Everyone had the same attitude; uneasiness combined with anxiety. People were giving me a wide berth, and I could understand why. If the Butcher died because of what I had done to her, I would be the Butcher. If I became the Butcher, Brockton Bay would burn.

“There won't be anything any of us can do about it,” I admitted. “I couldn't think of anything else.”

“Protocol with the Butcher is to disengage until a tactical plan to contain her is found,” he said. “Given that her abilities are always evolving it isn't easy.”

“She can teleport!” I said. “How do you contain someone who can teleport?”

“Water,” he said. “The hero she got the power from couldn't teleport underwater; the explosions are necessary for the process.”

“Can I get a copy of her known powers and methods?” I asked. “I suspect that she won't want to stay in the same body for very long, which means I'm going to have to face her again.”

He nodded. “Normally we wouldn't be as accommodating to a rogue who was suing us, but under the circumstances it's probably in everyone's best interest for you to have the information.”

“You don't want me becoming Butcher, I guess.”

He nodded grimly. “It's bad enough when it's just you. Even without being actively malicious you cause damage everywhere. Someone who wanted to cause harm would be worse... much, much worse.”
“I'm trying to cut the property damage and maiming down,” I protested.

Two PRT agents were on the ridge trying to decide whether to put Butcher's legs into a property bag or into a body bag. Neither seemed to be exactly the right size.

He looked at me significantly.

“I slipped,” I said. “And it wasn't like I had some kind of fancy Taser in my Halberd or knockout drug or something.”

“You should leave drugging people to professionals,” he said. “It's easy to get the dosage wrong and actually kill someone you did not intend to. Even most non-lethal weapons aren't as non-lethal as people think.”

“Are you guys going to be able to handle all these guys?” I asked. “Some of them ran for the hills and I'd like to collect as many of them as I can. They've been trying to poison me and if they are in jail I might be able to order a pizza again.”

He looked at me sharply. “I haven't seen any reports about attempted poisoning.”

I shrugged. “I didn't mention it. I've got a detector now and everything, so I've been fine.”

“Incidents like this need to be reported,” he said stubbornly. “The PRT has investigative resources that no single Cape has, and we might be able to find out who is doing it and stop them.”

“I wasn't sure if you would care,” I said. “It's not like we've had the best relationship so far.”

“The Protectorate and PRT stand for justice for everyone,” he said. “Even people we think are loose cannons. You mean well, and I think we all know that, and even if we didn't, it's our job. It's what we're here for.”

Assault was nearby, listening.

“Besides, we want to figure it out just in case we might steal a cookie or two while visiting.”

“I will not steal your cookies,” Armsmaster said. “Given that I have more self control than some people.”

He was so serious about it that it made me want to laugh.

“Well, I need to go Nazi hunting,” I said. “Nazis are a little like Pokemon; you've gotta collect them all.”

“Right,” Armsmaster said. I wasn't sure whether he'd gotten the reference or not, but he at least pretended that he had.

A moment later I was in the air.

Finding the fleeing Nazis was easier than I would have thought. Pieces of metal moving away from the scene were easy to differentiate from metal laying on the ground. A smart Nazi would have thrown away his guns and knives, but it was possible that members of the Teeth were still around, in which case they wouldn't want to leave themselves defenseless.

Because they were so scattered, though, it took longer than I would have thought. After two hours I'd only captured seventy five additional Nazis. Seventy five additional members had vanished into the wind; either smart enough to have ditched their weapons, or canny enough to have had a vehicle
waiting nearby so that they could get out of range.

After all, I could hardly be attacking all the moving vehicles I felt moving toward Brockton Bay.

The Empire's back was broken, though. After tonight, and knowing that the Teeth were moving into the area, I couldn't imagine that any of the remaining groups would keep all their members. While the smartest Nazis had already left the city, those who remained wouldn't just face me and the teeth; they'd be facing Lung and the ABB and the Merchants and the PRT.

They might stay around for a little while, but my bet was that they were going to bleed members.

By next week they would simply be a bad memory. I might even be able to enjoy eating out again.

My bigger concern was the Teeth. The Butcher would probably find a new body soon, and she would have a definite grudge against me. The Teeth were known for being a little crazy, which meant that Dad might be in danger.

Being immortal meant that you didn't worry as much about things like retaliation. They'd be more than happy to kidnap my father.

Landing with the last of the fugitives, I saw Panacea waiting. She was glaring at me.

“You let my sister get hurt,” she said. “She had internal bleeding from that punch to the stomach.”

“I didn't know that her force field would go down like that,” I said. I shrugged. “I wouldn't have brought her if I'd known.”

“And then you'd have been the next Butcher,” she said. She grimaced. “I don't think any of us are meant to do this alone.”

“I don't think I want to work for anyone else either,” I said. “I don't exactly work well with authority. I've been told by a precog that I'm going to form my own team though. We could always use more members.”

She stared at me for a moment, before asking, “Who do you have so far?”

“The precog I was telling you about, me and maybe Uber and Leet.”

The minute I said it I wondered if mentioning the villains was a mistake. After all Uber and Leet didn't exactly have a sterling reputation.

“That sounds... terrible,” she said. “Those guys are idiots. Besides... working with villains?”

“Don't you think people deserve a second chance?” I asked. “Especially when they haven't done anything terrible? Except that Grand theft auto thing, I mean.”

For some reason that made her look thoughtful.

She looked conflicted. “I couldn't leave New Wave.”

“Who says you had to. I read my dad's old comic books, and there were people there who were on like three of four teams at once. Besides, when was the last time New Wave did anything as a group? Isn't it mostly just you and Glory Girl these days anyway?”

She was silent for a long time before finally saying “I'll think about it.”
It wasn’t a no, which I took to be a good sign.
I wasn't really sure how the Butcher's powers worked. Was she a conglomeration of all the Butcher's who had been before her, or did she simply have voices whispering in her head, much the way my grandfather's avatar did?

Either way she was likely angry at me for the whole maiming thing, and she seemed like the kind of person who would be coming for revenge. What worried me wasn't so much what she could do to me, although it was possible that she could put me into so much pain that I had an aneurysm.

However, she seemed like exactly the kind of person who would go after Dad.

Worse, it was possible that she wouldn't be in the same body the next time I met her. If she was smart instead of crazy she'd be able to sneak up and attack before we had time to react.

The Empire was likely broken; those who were foolish enough to stay would be gobbled up by the other gangs soon.

I called Dinah.

“What are the odds that the Butcher will try to kill me or my Dad today?” I asked.

“Three percent,” she said. “The PRT took me for power testing yesterday. They seemed pretty impressed.”

I hadn't went in for testing myself because I didn't particularly want to, but testing her basically served as advertisement for whatever business arrangements we could make using her powers. Since I would be getting a percentage on every answer, at least until she felt she no longer needed protection it was in my best interest to advertise her far and wide.

“We'll get more money that way,” I said. “You'll have a college fund ready before you are twelve.”

“We met with your lawyer the day before yesterday and he went over the contract. He seemed to think thirty percent for you and fifteen percent for him was enough, is that all right?”

My lawyer really ought to consult me more about these things; maybe he was talking to Dad.

“Well, having somebody doing the legal work is probably worth the money,” I said. “Are you all right with my taking that much?”

“Considering what will happen to me if you don't help me, I have to be,’ she said. “Besides, I wouldn't be making any money at all if I was locked away in some dungeon somewhere and put on drugs.”

“Drugs?”

“Don't ask,” she said. “I don't like to think about the things I've seen. I still get headaches whenever I think about it.”

“So is there anything bad coming that I need to know about?” I asked.

“You have to ask a question that can be answered specifically,” she said. “I'm not omniscient. If my power worked like that I'd just ask myself “What do I need to know today?”
“Right,” I said. “What do I need to know today?”

“Not to annoy your precog,” she said irritably. “I'm making a habit of asking if you, I or anyone in our families is going to be attacked every morning; after what I heard about yesterday it's probably going to be important.”

“Yeah,” I said glumly. “At least the Empire is mostly gone.”

I'd enjoyed my first pizza in days after the battle yesterday, and it had been glorious.

“Keep your phone on you,” she said. “I have a bad feeling that I can't put my finger on; I didn't detect anything bad now, and the percentages get weird the further out you ask.”

I didn't understand how precognition worked, really, so I didn't know what questions I needed to ask.

“I have known precognitives,” my grandfather's voice whispered. “And the one thing I have learned is that the future is never preordained. There are many possible futures and they have to comb through those that are most likely. However there is almost always at least one course to victory.”

If that was true why had he lost so often?

“Well, I'm not exactly the best at business, so it's probably good that we have people who can do the work for us. Maybe ask if they are cheating us once every couple of months or so and we'll be fine.”

She seemed content with that, and after a little small talk we hung up.

Despite her assurances that there was only a three percent chance I would be attacked today, that didn't mean that I could assume everything was going to be fine. After all, the unlikely had an unpleasant tendency to happen around me.

In a better world everyone would be in awe of how powerful I was; unfortunately Brockton Bay wasn't that place. People seemed almost suicidally inclined to be jerks; everyone from Armsmaster to Panacea to my neighbors.

People were just too used to capes; once they decided you belonged in a category they put you there. Despite my declarations that I was a rogue some people had decided that I was a hero, which apparently meant that I wasn't at all dangerous.

Except accidentally, at least according to Armsmaster.

Well, hopefully I was done with killing people and cutting off limbs. I decided that I needed to talk to Leet about something to help me deal with Butcher. Maybe some kind of stasis field so I could drop Butcher off the face of the Earth and she wouldn't wake back up until I was long dead.

Apparently the sale of the magnesium and manganese had worked out better than he'd hoped. He'd even delivered several thousand dollars to me, which meant one thing.

Shopping!

I'd finally be able to get curtains, more bed covers, more of a wardrobe than a single week's worth of clothes, maybe even a washer and dryer.

It was really kind of horrifying how many things went into a new home and it made me wonder how people who didn't have family members to hand them down a lot of stuff dealt with it. A quick check
on Google showed that the rule of thumb to furnish a home from Scratch was twenty five percent of its value.

I had no idea how much my home was worth. Hopefully the tax assessors would be kind, although it might be hard for them to judge too since it didn't really fit into any of the usual categories.

Going to his room, I knocked on the door. There was no answer.

I could sense the metal in his body so I knew he was in there; I sighed and undid the lock on the door. He'd been spending more and more time in there. It was getting to the point where it was almost worse than it had been right after Mom died.

At least this time he wasn't losing himself in a bottle.

I sniffed as I stepped into the room. There was already a strange sort of stench to the room, which was odd considering that the place had only been built days ago. Wasn't he bathing?

He was laying on his bed staring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

“Dad?” I asked.

I shook his shoulder and he didn't respond. He was still breathing, and his eyes were still open and covered in a milky white film.

It took longer to wake him this time. Last time it hadn't been long at all; this time it took me almost three minutes. I was starting to wonder if I needed to call Panacea when he finally stirred.

“Taylor?” he asked groggily.

“How long have you been in here?” I asked. I realized suddenly that I hadn't seen him all weekend. “Have you eaten?”

“It's not important,” he said. “I can eat later.”

He looked thinner than he had; how had I not noticed it.

“What's so important that you aren't eating?” I asked.

“You have no idea,” he said. He stared off into space. “The worlds I've seen. There's so much to know, to understand, and there's so little time.”

“The Butcher is in town,” I said bluntly. “I cut her legs off yesterday, and I think she's probably out for revenge. I think you should probably watch out; if she can't get at me she'll probably come after you.”

He blinked at me uncomprehendingly.

“Also, we need to go shopping. You need to take a shower.”

“What?” he asked.

“Clothes, a washer and dryer, maybe some more deodorant. There's stuff we need.”

“You can take care of it,” he said. He looked longingly back at the bed.

“If you don't start moving your body I'll kill every animal in a ten block radius,” I said. At his look I
said, “Except the dogs and cats. And parrots. Have fun pooping on people's lawns and staring out
the window waiting for Miss Winslow to come home.”

It was an empty threat, of course. There was no way I'd be able to kill every insect, every earthworm,
every bird that flew through the area, even if I wanted to.

Still, it was enough to make Dad scowl and decide to go along with it.

“There's no need to start acting like your Grandfather,” he said grumpily.


He looked up at me. “I can hear through the ears of every insect, every bird, every animal. You think
I haven't heard you talking to him?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“I don't know if it's a ghost, or just some part of your power that you haven't seen fit to tell me about,
but I listen.”

Maybe I hadn't been as discreet as I'd thought. Still...

“Like you've been listening to me since Mom died?” I asked. “If I hadn't had my powers Emma and
Sophia would have made my life hell. Even with my powers they did, I just always knew I had
another out. If I hadn't who knows what might have happened?”

I might have dropped out of school, or triggered and become a supervillain. I might even have blown
up the entire school, and as I'd recently learned the authorities tended to frown on massive
destruction.

I suspected that if I'd triggered with some lesser power the authorities wouldn't have been nearly as
nice about it. No hero had attacked me, really, other than verbally, and the government hadn't come
to my house trying to either recruit me or arrest me.

They'd treated me with kid gloves and it was all because of my power.

“If you'd been there instead of... wherever you were mentally, I think I could have handled it better,”
I said. “But you barely noticed me. Kind of like now.”

I needed to make sure that the helmet was protected somewhere he and his animals couldn't get to it.
I could already feel the disapproval radiating from him, and I wouldn't put it past him to send roaches
trying to slip into any cracks and eat wiring, or maybe rats.

“I am made tough enough to survive the X-Men,” the helmet said. “Mere insects would not injure
me.”

I ignored my grandfather's avatar. After all, he'd been known to be wrong in the past. Given his
sheer power he shouldn't have had much problem conquering his world, unless it was filled with
capes of nightmarish power and ability.

“It was,” my grandfather's avatar said. “You cannot imagine the horrors of the Phoenix, Galactus, the
Beyonder, Squirrel Girl...”

Squirrel Girl? I'd have to ask him later.

“That may be true,” Dad said. “But did you ever try to talk to me? You act like I abandoned you, but
you were the one who never said a thing about what Emma was doing. You think I wouldn't have at least tried to do something?"

“What could you have done? Alan is a lawyer, Sophia had the PRT backing her...Madison was just kind of there.”

“He's a divorce lawyer, Taylor,” Dad said. “I've spent years negotiating with the real thing. You think I couldn't have done something? It wasn't like we were starving for money; your art projects saw to that.”

A few hundred dollars a month had made a difference in our finances. We hadn't ever really struggled the way we probably would have without it.

“The thing is, you never trusted me enough to take the chance that I might actually be able to be your father.”

“If you really believe I'm talking to my grandfather's ghost, why haven't you said anything before?” I asked. “If you disapprove of him so much.”

“Your mother said that he was always good to her,” he said. “And you think I've abandoned you, but I was always there. If you'd stumbled or fallen I'd have found some way to save you, even if I'd had to use squirrels to do it.”

“Squirrels,” my grandfather muttered.

“I don't need you to fight my battles for me,” I said. “And if there's something I can't handle I doubt Squirrels will make much of a difference.”

He stared at me for a moment with a hurt look on his face.

It was like he didn't understand that while I didn't need him for the big things, I still needed him to be there for me emotionally. He'd been a good dad once, before Mom had passed. I wanted that dad back again. The way he was now, it was like he was a zombie.

“I don't understand how running around in the trees as a squirrel can be so much more fascinating than living here in the moment.”

“Squirrels, birds, insects... “ he said. “They don't worry about failing their children, about not being good enough. They just worry about what's right before them.”

I scowled. “While you are off storing nuts for the winter I'm dealing with real problems. The Butcher is probably going to try to kill anybody I think of as friends, which fortunately isn't very many people.”

I'd made some acquaintances at school, but I hadn't really gotten close to any of them. Even Sarah... there was something that put me off about her. She'd approached me too quickly on the first day and I couldn't help but feel that she was hanging on to me the same way as Emma's groupies had hung on to her.

They'd been there to leech off the light of her reflected popularity. If it had meant bullying others to stay in her good graces, they'd have been all right with that. Would Sarah go along with it if I decided to bully others? I didn't know.

The thought that she might was part of what kept me from getting closer to her.
There weren't many other good candidates at school. There were a lot of people who were outwardly friendly, but part of me wondered if that was just because they were secretly afraid. After all, I was the girl who had held a ship over the city and defeated the Empire's capes in a single battle. Staying on my good side was just good sense.

Glory Girl and Panacea could have been my friends, but Glory Girl was a little too enthusiastic, and Panacea was kind of a bitch. Not that I'd have turned her away from my team, of course. Her power was too useful.

I'd have been a lot better off keeping my secret identity. Then I'd have been able to know who my friends were, and I'd have been able to not worry about villains murdering me in my sleep or killing Dad in retaliation for me cutting off their legs.

Not that I planned on cutting off a lot of legs in the future. That was apparently frowned on by polite society, or at least that had been the vibe I got from Armsmaster.

“I just want you to be here for me,” I said. “Here, now. I don't need someone to defend me. I need a Dad.”

He grimaced. “I'm not sure I ever was a good father.”

“Before mom you were the best. It's just that you checked out after she died.”

He was silent for a moment. “You know that I'm not ever entirely here, right?”

“What?”

“My power is always on; while I'm sitting here talking to you I'm also a bird sitting on a tree outside of Mrs. Johnson's house. She's having an argument with her daughter about not calling more.”

He took a breath. “Old man Smith is complaining to the PRT about the lights at the top of the tower for the fifth time this week. You probably shouldn't have specifically pointed them in the direction of his house.”

“He deserved it,” I muttered. “He's a jerk.”

I'd actually increased the brightness thirty percent on that side of the house just to spite him. I was a fifteen year old girl, and I could be as pettily vindictive as anyone else.

“There are a half dozen gang members down the end of the street,” he said. “They are talking to themselves about trying to talk you into a truce with the ABB, but most of them are afraid you'll turn them into the PRT or cut their legs off.”

Apparently that had already gotten around. I wondered for a moment if my reputation was turning kind of dark.

“If you can see all of that and still be here, why do you check out?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It's superficial knowledge if I go under. Right now I'm still me, and that's not exactly who I want to be. When I go under I am the squirrel, the bat, the bug. All my problems go away and I just am.”

“He's addicted,” my grandfather's avatar whispered. “Also, he's trying to get out of shopping.”

I scowled. “Take a shower. We're going shopping if I have to float you to town in your pajamas. Try
He stared at me for a moment then glanced back at his bed and sighed. “Fine. But I’m not buying you ice cream.”

I’d been buying my own ice cream for two years. Still, the comment hurt.
Ambassadors

Dad wasn't himself as we shopped. I could tell that he was distracted, and I wondered if this was all I was going to get for the rest of my life. Were other Thinkers like this?

I'd heard about Tinkers going into fugues, but the Internet was pretty vague about the daily lives of most Capes, outside of the usual celebrity junk; who was dating who, who had a new line of clothing out and the like.

But knowing whether your father's animal addiction was normal wasn't something easily found.

At least he was up and moving. The last thing I needed was to find out that he had bedsores or to come home and find him with flies flying all over him like one of those African kids from the old charity ads, before Africa had turned into a parahuman hellhole.

I was kind of vague about Africa really; in my mind it was pretty much a place like the old Mad Max movies, except everyone was black. Given all the parahuman warlords there it might even be true. Of course I could be wrong too; America had never been particularly interested in the rest of the world and it had gotten worse since the world had started falling apart.

Maybe I needed to expand my ambitions. I'd thought about improving the city and although it hadn't been long I'd made changes. Getting rid of the Empire was something, and the fighting was dying down already.

After all, with the large swathes of the city left undefended by the Empire, the ABB and Merchants were going to be too busy expanding to fight each other.

However, I'd heard that Medhall was closing its doors. They were a national corporation, but they'd chosen to keep their headquarters in Brockton Bay for more than twenty years. Losing them was going to cost the city jobs it couldn't afford.

My armor idea was going through the approval process, and I'd made it clear to the lawyer that I wanted at least one factory to be here in the Bay. Given that unemployment was so low, wages would be easy to manage here, and property values were low. Unfortunately, the review process for the armor, much like my lawsuit was something that was more likely to take months than weeks.

My lawyer had suggested that lawsuits sometimes took years, with big companies hoping that the people suing them would struggle financially enough that they'd settle for pennies for the dollar in an effort to get something.

Fortunately, money was beginning to come in. I was planning on making a second trip out over the ocean to gather minerals; selling them would give me money to pay my lawyer and to set up the advertising for my agency that I was opening for Dinah.

“What do you think of Oracle?” I asked.

He looked up from where he was staring at a pair of pants that were clearly too frumpy for him.

“For my company name?”

“There was a computer company named that,” he said. “They lost a lot of their upper management during a conference in New York when it all went down, but I think it's still around somewhere.”
I frowned.

“Insight solutions?” I asked.

He nodded. “It might work, assuming it's not taken. The main thing is to go professional. Go with some kind of a cutesy name and people won't take you seriously. You already have a disadvantage because you are a kid; the last thing you want is for people to treat you like one when you are trying to conduct business.”

I nodded. It seemed like good advice. Given that I didn't hear my grandfather's avatar complaining, I assumed that he didn't particularly disagree.

“Come up with at least three good ideas for names,” he said. “Odds are if you come up with something great someone else has thought of it first, and the last thing you want to run into is problems with trademarks and copyrights. Big companies have teams of lawyers whose job is to drag out legal challenges until they make the little guy bleed out.”

Right. I'd have to depend on my lawyer.

“You also need to start holding some of your money aside for taxes,” he said. “Otherwise both of us are going to have a nasty surprise next April.”

His face seemed to liven up as he noticed that I was actually listening. His expression sharpened from the vacant look he'd had since we left the house.

“You know, there's a lot of things we should have been talking about.”

Suddenly I found myself in the middle of the longest two hours of my life. Apparently Dad had an entire litany of things he'd been planning to tell me, but that he'd never gotten around to.

Apparently credit cards were a scam devised by the people in power to keep the underclass poor. I had to admit that a twenty percent interest rate sounded outrageous, but I still had a few years yet before I could even get a credit card. Did he think he wouldn't be around by the time I was eighteen?

Of course, the fact that I was starting to come into money might have something to do with it. Apparently Dad thought that everyone my age was an idiot with money; apparently he and everyone he knew had been all throughout his childhood and teenage years.

I suppose it was probably true for most kids my age, especially at Arcadia. I'd seen too many kids there who had spent a month's salary for a kid at Winslow's parent on some new phone or piece of jewelry.

But I'd been buying the groceries and doing the budget at home for the past two years. Unlike the other kids my age, I knew exactly how hard money was to make, which was why I had been supplementing the family income with art pieces.

A sudden thought occurred to me. Now that I was semi-famous, would my art pieces be worth more than they had? Maybe I could try something a lot bigger than I had done before, maybe even something life size? At the very least it would make conversation pieces for the throne room, which might distract from conversations about the throne. At best it might give me a little pocket money. Of course, pocket money was now starting to mean something different than it had when I was younger and poorer.

Maybe that was why Dad was lecturing me. I hadn't exactly been making brilliant financial decisions lately.
“And variable rate mortgages are a fools game,” he said. “They suck you in with low payments and then they’ll take your house later on.”

He hadn't stopped talking for an hour and I found the beginnings of a headache. Some of the advice was good, but some of it didn't apply to me much.

When was I ever going to take out a mortgage? It was three more years before I could even own property; I'd checked when I thought about building a secret lair. As a minor there were legal limits to what I could do. There were workarounds; I could have the property held by a corporation, but there would have to be at least one adult representative.

I wasn't likely to go to a payday loan place either; for one thing I didn't earn actual paychecks. I probably wouldn't Rent to own furniture either, not unless something went disastrously wrong.

Technically Dad could take all my money no matter how much I made. I didn't think he would, but the important thing was that he could.

As a parahuman, at least as far as the world was concerned, I actually had more rights over my money than most minors, but there were still limits.

Looking at my Dad babble on, I was happy to see him look a little more animated than he had. He'd been practically a walking zombie since he'd gotten his power.

I was going to have to devote time to my relationship with him if I wanted to make it work. In a better world he'd be the adult and make the first moves, but it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that it wasn't going to happen.

Being a better daughter was the only way I was going to pull him out of his shell. Right now he was pulling his shell in behind him and if I wasn't careful I'd lose him forever.

Still, he seemed a little manic, almost as though he was trying to get five years worth of advice into a two hour conversation. Was that because he realized how little we'd talked recently, or was it because he wanted to get it over with so he could go back to what he'd been doing?

We were pulling up to the tower in Dad's car when I frowned. There were three men standing in front of the tower. They were all of them Asian, and all of them were carrying guns.

The fact that they were all wearing red and green told me quicker than anything which gang they represented. No Asian who was not a member of the group would dare to wear those colors.

What was the ABB doing on my front lawn? Not that I actually had a lawn, but still. Were they planning to attack me? Hadn't they seen what I'd done to the Empire, not once but several times?

I'd have thought Lung would have wanted the honor of attacking me for himself. By this point did anyone think that normals had a chance against me?

Reflexively I put up a force field over the entire car and I considered telling him to turn around. I even considered making the car fly like that Disney movie I'd seen when I was young. I couldn't remember which movie it was, but it didn't matter.

“I know.” my grandfather's avatar said smugly, but it didn't enlighten me. I was starting to feel that my grandfather's avatar was a jerk sometimes.

“Oh, it's them,” my Dad said suddenly.
“Who?” I asked.

“Lung called earlier today and said he wanted to send some people over as ambassadors to talk about a peace treaty or something.”

“And you didn't think that was important?” I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “I was busy.”

“This is Lung we're talking about.”

“And he wants to talk about peace instead of fighting,” Dad said. “How is that not a good thing?”

“He runs prostitution rings,” I said. “And drugs and people get killed all the time because of him. Why shouldn't I just go and fight him?”

“If you don't take him down right away, a lot of people will get hurt,” Dad said. “Compared to the Empire he's pretty laid back as a leader and if you take him out other groups will move in to the city.”

I scowled. It sounded like the balance of power crap I'd been reading online from some theorists about how the PRT operated. Void Cowboy was especially vocal about it.

So what if it created a power vacuum. Did that mean you assume that crime would always be a problem or did you do something to make it better?

I didn't want to be part of the problem.

Still, I probably at least needed to talk to Lung. After all. I might be able to wring some concessions from him that might actually make the city better. If not I could always beat him up later.

I spared a moment to wonder how long they had been waiting, but I remembered my grandfather telling em that forcing underlings to wait was actually a show of power, much like the giant stupid chair and Blackwell's desk.

“I'll get out and talk to them,” I said. “But we're going to have to talk about getting my messages on time. Why did he call you instead of me?”

“He knows where I work and the number is in the directory,” Dad said. “Also it's kind of old fashioned to talk to the parents first.”

“We aren't getting married,” I said in disgust as Dad pulled to a stop. The hidden garage door began to open, automatically triggered by a device inside Dad's car. I stepped out of the car as Dad pulled inside.

“You came armed to meet with me,” I said as I approached them. “That doesn't seem very bright.”

“It's proof that we don't mean any harm,” the oldest of the three men said. “Any weapon we carry is a weapon you can use against us. Carrying them proves that we have no intention of betraying you, as we are hostages to our own weapons.”

“Also, it's freakin dangerous going through ex-Empire territory,” the youngest of them said. He looked vaguely familiar; I suspect that he was from Winslow. Unfortunately all gang members looked alike to me.

After all, you learned early on not to look at faces. They tended to be a little like dogs in that looking
them in the eyes could be seen as a challenge.

Had they brought him hoping to sway my opinion? It hadn't worked very well for the Empire, and they had to know that. The oldest man was in his fifties, and he looked reasonably wise, although how wise he could be and still be in a gang at that age I couldn't tell.

The oldest man bowed to me and the man and teenager behind him bowed. “May we introduce ourselves?”

I didn't say anything, simply staring at him.

“These are my associates Hao Wu and Harold Chang. I am Hao Jianguo, and I am pleased to represent the irrepressible Lung in these negotiations.”

His tone was pleasant, and I couldn't detect any sign of the condescension I usually felt from some of the Protectorate members when they dealt with me (mostly Armsmaster really, the rest of them were fairly respectful.)

“Forgive me if I do not invite you in,” I said. “But my father always told me that inviting strangers into one's house is a poor decision.”

He'd said that fifteen minutes ago, actually, and he'd mostly been talking about religious people and people campaigning for politicians. Door to door salesmen weren't really a problem in our area since everyone knew we didn’t actually have any money.

“Your father is a wise man,” the older man said. “Our discussion will hopefully be short.”

“Your boss wants to meet with me?” I asked bluntly. “Couldn't that have been discussed on the telephone?”

“You do not wish us in your house. Would you have come somewhere simply at the behest of a voice on the phone?” Jianguo asked. “Our presence is an assurance that master Lung is serious in his intentions. We are to serve as hostages, as proof that he means you and yours no harm.”

“Assuming that I believe that, what does he want exactly?”

“Assuming certain provisions are met,” the oldest man said. “First, both parties will agree not to attack the other on the day of the meeting. Second, that you will not tell anyone else about the meeting beforehand. Third, that the meeting will be held at Somer's Rock.”

“Where?”

“A restaurant owned by a deaf family. It is widely considered to be neutral ground by heroes and villains alike. Their disability is... advantageous when matters of discretion need to be discussed.”

“Why should I bother to even meet with your boss?” I asked.

“While you may not consider yourself to be a hero, it is thought that you wish this city well. Who out of the entire city has more power than you and he? The ABB has the one thing you do not, manpower. If you wish to make a positive change you will need allies, and we can be very good ones.”

“They seem sincere,” my Grandfather's avatar said. “Although it could be that they simply were not informed of their master's true plans. That is one of the best ways to fool telepaths; have them interact with fools who believe what they are saying.”
I nodded. I probably ought to add stipulations to show that I wasn't a fool or a rube, but I couldn't think of anything.

“If you have enough power you do not have to have any stipulations. This Lung has already made a major concession by reaching out to you. In doing so he has conceded a certain amount of power to you, something that has to gall him if he is as proud as his reputation makes him out to be.”

Pride was certainly something my grandfather would have known about.

“If he wanted you dead, he has the money and intelligence to do it the way the Empire should have; hired contractors with powers that act as hard counters to yours through several layers of intermediaries so it didn't get traced back to them.”

The way he said it, so coldly. Was it something he'd done in the past to an enemy?

“Fine,” I said. “But I'll set the time. I'll see him at five o'clock tomorrow at that restaurant, assuming I can find it.”

“It's on google maps,” the youngest said helpfully. “One star rating.”

The oldest man cuffed him on the side of the head, and I could see the resemblance now. Was the older man his father, his uncle, his grandfather? I couldn't tell, and it didn't really matter.

“Neutral ground it is,” the older man said, bowing to me.

They all turned and a women later a limousine that had been parked at the end of the street pulled up in front of my driveway.

I frowned. I'd just committed to a meeting with Lung with only one day to prepare.

What could go wrong?
The moment I saw the restaurant I decided I would use the poison detector on everything, possibly even the seats. Not because I thought that Lung would try to poison me, but because I suspected that the proprietors had been bribing the health inspectors for years.

Paint was peeling on the walls, and the bars on the windows were covered in rust, badly enough that I suspected anyone trying to get in would die of tetanus before they managed to actually crawl through the windows. It was bad enough that the rust had actually run down the wall, blending into the gray white paint.

None of the other buildings on the street were anything to write home about either. They all looked like little hole in the wall places, but the restaurant looked like the worst of them all.

Maybe if I hadn't had my art income for the past few years and had been used to eating much more poorly I wouldn't have noticed. Still, the place gave holes in the wall a bad name.

I closed my eyes and checked. Only three people in the place. And none of them were large enough to be Lung. None were carrying weapons, and there weren't any metallic bombs or unusual devices in the place that I could detect.

I'd arrived early of course. The moment I'd gotten off school I'd come directly here; arriving more than an hour early was only prudent considering that this could easily be an ambush. If it was I'd make Lung and the ABB regret that they were ever born.

Considering that Lung could regenerate I wouldn't even have to hold back, although the last thing I wanted was for Armstrong to complain about even more severed limbs.

Stepping inside, my impression didn't get any better. The entire place was dim, dingy and depressing looking. Dim yellow light from old flickering bulbs made the place look even worse, although my fear was that the reason that they didn't go with brighter bulbs was because brighter lights would have revealed even worse horrors.

What would my father have said about this place? He'd have been able to tell me whether the walls were actually fifty percent made up of roaches or not. Fortunately he was out of range for this.

The wooden floor was old and stained, with wooden counter tops. The curtains and tablecloths were dark green.

What irritated me was that all of it would be easy to fix; better light bulbs, a coat of paint, new table clothes... for less than two hundred dollars they could have made the place look like a real restaurant, and with that they might have had better business.

Of course, that might be the point. If this place's main draw was as a meeting place for villains, the last thing they'd want was a large lunch crowd. Maybe the whole thing was designed to push people away so that no one would be here when the real business was being conducted.

Even so, they could have simply been closed on certain days and kept the place as a real business the rest. I wasn't sure why it irritated me so much; maybe it was because it reminded me a little bit of the rest of the city.

People had given up on the city really. The people who had energy and drive had left the city a long time ago, with the only ones remaining with energy being the gang members.
I'd grown up seeing graffiti on walls everywhere, even in my school, and no one had the energy to clean any of it up. There was trash in the streets. That was partially because the city didn't have the trash revenue to clean properly, but it was also because people had lost a sense of pride in their neighborhoods.

I wanted to change that, but I wasn't sure how. I had vast amounts of power, but it did nothing to change the hearts and minds of the people, which was something I needed if I was going to make any kind of real, substantive change.

“I have no experience in community refurbishment,” my grandfather's avatar admitted. “Mutants rarely found peace for long enough to actually build communities.”

Maybe they'd have been better accepted if they had.

The staff was in the back. I wondered how they'd know if a customer came. Was the doorbell connected to a light in the back?

I quickly checked; the answer was no.

So the service here was probably bad too. It made me wonder if the whole thing was some kind of front, maybe for the Protectorate. After all, wouldn't the PRT like to know what villains were discussing?

Or maybe it was Coil or Lung himself who owned the place. I wasn't sure whether I should waste one of Dinah's precious questions on the answer. The one thing I wasn't doing was taking the whole thing at face value.

Before the waiters could return I stepped outside. If the attack wasn't coming from inside the building then it would probably come from one of the other buildings nearby.

For the next thirty minutes I wandered inside the buildings that were open to the public. Only once did I have to quickly leave once I realized what kind of establishment it was. As I went I started attaching small objects to various buildings along the way.

Magazines and videos covered the walls of that store along with strange toys whose purpose I wasn't sure that I wanted to think about. The over twenty one sign had apparently fallen off, and the whole place smelled strange in a way that I found revolting.

I hadn't realized that places like that still existed; I thought everything went through the Internet these days.

My face felt hot for at least ten minutes afterwards, and so I took that opportunity to slip inside the buildings that weren't open to the public. The number of rats and bugs in these buildings made me even more certain that I didn't want to eat at the restaurant just a few doors down.

Finally I found myself back at the restaurant.

Lung hadn't arrived yet. Undoubtedly he was planning on arriving fashionably late, a subtle way of establishing dominance.

I could do something similar, but I didn't want to.

Stepping back into the restaurant I sat down at a table. I kept my force field up; it was possible that
they were planning to gas me or use some other kind of non-metal trap. I had no plans on letting that happen.

Opening my hand I let a small object float up until it attached itself to the ceiling. It wasn't intrusive; considering the state of the ceiling and the lighting it blended right in.

I touched my glasses, and a moment later several different viewpoints emerged.

Leet swore that these wouldn’t explode and turn my face into a mangled ruin, but I wasn’t sure. Views from the several tiny drones that I’d placed appeared on my retinas. The drones would alert me if there was movement, and the muscle movements of my eyes would activate any particular screen.

There was movement now.

Lung appeared at the end of the block, followed by Oni Lee and the same group of three that had greeted me at the tower.

He was actually a little early, which surprised me. I’d expected him to have more pride.

“You are beginning to think like me,” my grandfather's avatar said.

Like a supervillain... was that supposed to be a compliment?

Who was Lung expecting to meet? A scared fifteen year old girl, or the monster that some people liked to make me out to be?

What was the play I needed to make. Would trying to intimidate him only enrage him and make him escalate, or would being too submissive lead him to try to take advantage?

I'd been wrestling with the question all night, and even my grandfather's avatar could only tell me to play it by ear. Apparently he didn't know enough about Lung to make any kind of good judgment.

Looking around I scowled. Screw this place.

My grandfather's avatar had told me that negotiations over a meal were considered customary in China; there wouldn't be any meal that either of us would be willing to eat in this place.

Getting up I stepped outside. Lung was already halfway down the block. He stopped, and Oni Lee stopped with him.

Technically neither of us were on neutral ground yet, and I could conceivably attack him.

I floated up to him.

“That place is a shithole,” I said. “Do you know some place that isn't made of roaches and spit, maybe someplace with good food?”

“Such a place would not be neutral ground,” he said after a moment.

“I doubt calling it neutral ground would make much of a difference if either of us chooses to violate it,” I said. “Either we choose to accept the truce or we do not.”

He frowned, then nodded.

“We could go to my grandma's restaurant,” the kid said. “She opens at six, but food should be ready
before then."

"The food there is good, and it's only a few blocks from here," Lung admitted. He looked at me. "You trust that it is not a setup?"

"I defeated the Empire in less than three minutes," I said. "If it is a trap I will make sure that you and yours go the way they did."

Hopefully I sounded more confident than I felt. After all, this was Lung, the Bogeyman of Brockton Bay. I'd been holding the PRT and Protectorate off for days, but he'd been doing it for years.

He looked at me and then nodded.

"Get us a table for six," he said to the boy. "In the back. With some privacy."

The boy started calling.

"We can walk and talk," I said.

I carefully pulled the cameras from where I'd placed them, levitating them out of sight. If anyone came to attack I'd know long before it happened.

"This wasn't the agreement," he said. "If you are fickle in this how do I know you will keep any agreement you make in the future?"

"You were the one who suggested we meet here," I said. "And we did. Nobody said we needed to stay."

"Any place I suggest will be suspect," he said.

We walked in silence for a more than a minute. My grandfather had warned me that this might happen. People were uncomfortable with silence and they felt the need to fill it with something, anything, and that could be used to lead them into a position of weakness.

Still, I was the first to speak.

"You aren't what I expected," I said.

"What did you expect?" he asked, turning his head to look at me. He was slightly over six feet tall and he was shirtless, with his only concession to Capehood being the metal mask he was wearing. I could see his eyes through the mask, but nothing else. Dragon tattoos covered his body, and I did my best not to stare at them, as much as I wanted to them. Some of the artwork was exquisite.

I respected him a little more for not changing the metal mask to something else.

"Someone who wouldn't listen to a fifteen year old girl," I said. "After all, given the way your people treat women I wouldn't have expected much respect."

"Power is all that's important," he grunted. He turned away from me and gestured to the city. "Would the city be like this if its people had any power?"

I thought about it and shook my head.

"Those who have power can make the river go around them, or even change the course of the river. Those without are bounced by the currents, helpless to change their own fate."
“I suppose you are the one who makes the river go around you,” I said.

He shrugged.

“Don't you want better for your people, for this city?” I asked. “The city is dying. In twenty years will there even be a city for you to rule over?”

“You are wrong,” he said. “It is not the city that is dying. It is the world.”

I shook my head, although I remembered an offhand comment Dinah had once made and I felt a chill go down my spine.

“So why not do something about it?” I asked. “It's your world as much as anyone's. If the world dies, so do you.”

“Are you trying to talk Lung into being a hero?” Wu asked incredulously. He'd already hung up the phone and he and the others were walking behind me. Oni Lee had vanished; he was now teleporting along he rooftops, which made hiding the cameras difficult.

Before Lung could slap him down I said, “And why not. He just said that power is what matters. He's one of the few people who have enough power to make a difference, so why shouldn't he be a hero?”

“I am no hero,” Lung said. “Heroes are a lie the weak make up to comfort themselves when the monsters come to the door.”

“So be the monster that protects the weak,” I said. “The wolfhound that protects the herd.”

He grunted but didn't say anything.

My grandfather's avatar whispered a suggestion in my ear.

“I've heard that being compared to a dragon in China is a sign that someone is esteemed and considered a person of great achievement. Someone who is lacking achievement and ability is considered a worm or a rat or some other lowly animal.”

He glanced at me impatiently. Considering that he'd named himself it didn't say a lot about the esteem he was held in.

“How do you want to be remembered if the world doesn't end?” I asked. “Because I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen.”

“What do you want for a truce?” he asked shortly.

Apparently Japanese or Chinese politeness... I suddenly realized that I didn't really know what ethnicity Lung was... didn't apply when he didn't like what I was saying.

“I can understand prostitution,” I said. “I don't like it, and I don't think it's really ever a choice that's made without some form of coercion, whether it is economic or emotional or whatever. Still, I realize it's probably not going away, and if so there will be people who try to regulate it.”

He didn't speak to me, but I could tell he was looking at me. Because of the mask I couldn't tell what he was thinking.
“What I can't abide is the sex slavery,” I said. “Kidnapping girls and women is wrong; in some ways it makes you as bad or worse than the Empire was.”

“I don't care about the gambling,” I said. “People go to Atlantic city and its totally legal, so why shouldn't it be here? Protection money on the other hand isn't something I like much.”

“So you are asking that we gut our business of some of our most profitable enterprises,” he said. “What do we get in return?”

“Respectability,” I said. “I've handed you half the city on a plate. I could do to you what I did to the Empire, and possibly even easier since you only have two Capes instead of more than ten. But with half a city under your control, you don't need to make women slaves. There would be plenty of business to keep your people occupied without that.”

“You would not find us such easy meat as that,” he said. His voice sounded irritated.

“You become a dragon with metal scales,” I said gently. “I've seen some of your leftovers on E-Bay. Against someone like me you wouldn't stand any better chance than Kaiser did... assuming I wanted you dead.”

He was silent for a long moment. “And you don't?”

“I think you've let yourself believe that the river can't be moved, that simply standing still is enough to show the world your power. But a rock that stands still will erode away eventually.”

I pressed the point.

“You will be assimilating areas that are primarily white,” I said. “Asians may be willing to accept certain things for cultural reasons that whites never will. You will spend all of your time fighting fires and forcing people to comply, and the PRT will be forced to respond when people complain, and they will.”

“So what is your solution?”

“Become heroes to the people,” I said. “Change the narrative. Right now everyone thinks you are thugs and punks, violent people who would rather shoot someone than look at them.”

“Some of us are,” he said.

I wasn't sure whether he included himself in that or not.

“You are a forward thinker; other Asians are content to simply be Chinese or Japanese or Korean or Vietnamese. You took all of these groups and welded them together into a bigger force. Now it's time to stop being ethnic and become an organization that accepts people of all races. You won't have the numbers to control the whole city otherwise, and then the new gangs moving in will chip away at you if you try to control too much.”

“It's only a matter of time before other gangs try to move in,” I said. “The Butcher is already here with her gang; others are sure to follow. If you continue with the old ways you'll always be fighting.”

“But if people are happy to see you there it will be harder for the other gangs to get a foothold.”

“Happy?” he asked. “Why would the sheep be happy to see the wolf at the door?”

“Because the wolf was protecting them from the hordes of monsters in the shadows,” I said.
We were approaching the restaurant in question. This place looked a lot better, and the food from inside smelled good too. I didn't detect anyone with guns inside either, and I didn't detect anyone in the cameras either.

“I agree to nothing,” he said. “But I am willing to talk. Would you ally yourself with us against the PRT?”

“I don’t like them,” I admitted. “But I'm trying not to be an outlaw. Still, what do you think your becoming a folk hero would do to the morale of the Protectorate?”

He chuckled. It was the first indication that I had that he might be a little amenable to my suggestion.

“The food here is good,” he said. “Hopefully the company will be better.”
“You have much in common, you know,” my grandfather’s voice said.

The meeting had gone well. Negotiating over the meal had proven to be the right choice. He’d relaxed a little and I’d been able to draw him out. I was still somewhat leery and cynical, though. It was easy for Lung to make promises, but it was considerably harder for me to verify that he was keeping them.

It bothered me, making a deal with him. He and his had done horrible things to women, having made slaves of some of them. Even the women who thought they were entering prostitution of their own free will were probably pressured into it, either by boyfriends or addictions to drugs or by simple economic need.

I’d flattered him on my grandfather’s advice while pretending to be a little arrogant; it was possible that I was actually more arrogant than I was aware of, but how would I know that?

“I don’t see how,” I said. “He’s a thug who uses women and kills people.”

“You have killed,” my grandfather’s avatar reminded me. “You are both proud, both somewhat petty. You both believe in taking two eyes and a hand in return for an eye.”

“I’m not petty,” I muttered.

“You put twice as many lights on the side facing your neighbor;” it said.

“The airport is on that side,” I said. “And besides, I’m tired of people trying to push me around.”

“Like the lawful authorities?”

“They know what they did,” I said sullenly. “And they keep treating me like a child.”

“You are a child,” my grandfather’s avatar said. “What would you say if it had been Emma who did all of the things you have done... killing people, delegating people, holding ships over the city.”

“I’d be trying to leave the city,” I admitted. “But I’m not like her.”

“The Protectorate will not like this alliance,” it said. “And it will not be long before it is known.”

“The city needs help,” I said. “And they don’t have the manpower to do what it takes.”

Outside of the gangs nobody did. True change required feet on the ground, something I’d thought long and hard about before agreeing to see Lung.

It still made me feel a little dirty. When I was younger I’d fantasized about being a hero, about being famous and rich and being able to save people.

Now I was faced with things that my powers couldn't fix. How did you save a dying city?

I'd moved the ships from the Ship Graveyard, but new business hadn't moved in immediately. While it was true that it had been less than two weeks it still didn't match my fantasies. There had been a time when Brockton Bay had been a jewel in America's crown, when there had been work enough for everybody.
Part of what I had tried to convince Lung to do was to funnel his money into buying and building legitimate businesses. Success bred success, and if he could revive the city, buying up land and buildings cheap, he wouldn't need to extort money from people anymore.

Lung the Landlord sounded a lot better than Lung the gang leader. I doubted that he'd have a lot of people reneging on their rents or damaging his property.

If I could get him to buy property, then the ABB would have reason not to tag everything. They might even ‘encourage’ people in those neighborhoods to clean up, maybe plant a few plants and clean up the place.

My knowledge of urban renewal was scant; I knew that it would take a lot more than just planting a few trees and cleaning up the place. Still, you had to start somewhere.

Even though the ABB had already ruined the lives of countless young women, if I could keep it from happening to more because of my agreement it might be worth it. I'd checked with Dinah; if I destroyed Lung the ABB would go underground and I'd never get all of them.

“There are no good choices,” my grandfather's avatar agreed. “There is only the smallest of many evils.”

Was this the slippery slope? Was this the deal that would have me sell my soul?

Was this how the Protectorate had sold theirs, reasoning that an intact Shadow Stalker was worth more than the lives of the children she was bullying? Pragmatism worth more than idealism; the end the only thing that mattered.

I'd pretended that what Lung represented didn't repel me because I needed his leadership to do what the Protectorate couldn't. Dinah had told me that something was coming that was going to threaten the city, and it was going to come soon. The fact that she couldn't see what it was, but could see the ripples that it made indicated that it was major.

I couldn't afford to be a hero if I wanted to save the city.

Not that I wanted to be a villain, but I had to wonder if this was how my grandfather became what he did; a series of bad choices and taking the easy way out instead of doing what was right.

Maybe I was fooling myself, worrying about dirty streets when something was coming that dwarfed anything the city had seen before. The problem was that while I didn't know what it was, there were only a few things that I knew of capable of destroying entire cities.

Endbringers, the Nine, Nilbog, maybe the Sleeper, although no one seemed to know a lot about him. Any one of those in my city would be a nightmare, but the problem was that I suspected they weren't the only things of that level out there.

It didn't even have to be from this universe; my mother had come from another universe, and whatever had happened there had been so bad that my mutant supremacist grandfather had sent his very human daughter away for safety.


“I will not tell you that,” my grandfather's avatar said. “You are not yet ready.”

“If I was squeamish I'd have already gotten post traumatic stress just from the things I've done,” I
said. “I've de-legged people.”

Actually, hiring a counselor might not be a bad idea; not for myself but for Dad. I was clearly fine, but Dad was showing worrying signs of addiction.

Were there self help groups for power addicts?

“I would not share the kind of pain I have to live with,” my grandfather's avatar said. “Not to anyone I cared about.”

I grimaced.

People were always trying to make decisions for me, probably because they thought I was too young to make decisions on my own. That probably happened to other fifteen year olds, but unlike other people my age I was perfectly rational and in control.

My grandfather's voice chuckled.

“What?” I asked irritably. “Do you have something to say?

It was conspicuously silent for a moment, then said, “The adolescent brain isn't fully developed yet. The reward center of the brain develops quicker than the rest of it, meaning that adolescents are more likely to take risks that are... not well advised.”

“I am not a risk taker,” I said, frowning. “I'm perfectly considered in what I do.”

“The ability to reason develops later,” my grandfather's avatar said. “Which is why many of the authorities see you in much the way you would see a toddler with a loaded gun.”

“That might be true of the other kids,” I said, “But I reason perfectly fine.”

“How would you know?” it asked.

“I've done fine so far, haven't I?” I asked.

Its voice was silent again.

“Fine,” I said. “But something terrible is going to happen according to Dinah, and I'm going to need an army to pick up the pieces. Lung has an army, and assuming the cities survives whatever is coming, he'll have his chance to rebrand himself.”

“And if he chooses to renege on his promises?”

“Then I'll cut him off at the knees,” I said. “Both figuratively and literally. I've given him one chance to turn his life around, I won't give him another.”

“Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord,” its voice said.

“He'll think I'm the Hand of God if he betrays me.”

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In the days that followed, Lung seemed to be a man of his word. There were reports on the news about sex slaves being released. Whenever the police raided the places they'd been released from the buildings were always empty and property records showed that the places had been owned by no one.
Whether the ABB had agents inside the records department, or whether they had habitually set up in abandoned buildings I wasn't sure. But the fact that the women were being released was a relief to me.

Of course, it was possible that he was keeping other girls and women hidden in more exclusive clubs. Without some kind of power or at least investigative skills there would be no way for me to know. Unfortunately I didn't have any of those.

What I did have, apparently was a contract with the PRT to produce plans for the new armor. Working on writing up the plans took several days; apparently doing something and writing out all the steps were something completely different, especially when powers created all kinds of shortcuts.

Still, Armsmaster looked over the plans, and apparently Dragon did too, and they approved them. I would soon be receiving royalties of fifty thousand dollars a month as soon as the factory was set up. I'd insisted that the factory be built in Brockton Bay, bringing back a couple of hundred jobs that had been lost when Medhall left.

Of course they tried to place the money in an account I could only access when I was eighteen, but I had my lawyer put a stop to that. Dad still had to sign off on everything, because apparently minors couldn't be held to contracts and they were afraid that I'd stop production simply because one of the Protectorate members was being an ass.

Apparently they weren't confident enough in their own people to be nice, but whatever. It wasn't like I was that vindictive.

Besides, the plant would start the revitalization of the city. It was a necessary first step.

I wondered if there were other technological secrets my grandfather could share. With enough of them the Bay could become a technological hub. Success tends to breed success, and so my hope was that when businesses saw that the city was starting to revive, they'd try to come here too.

The only problem was that the money wouldn't start coming in until the plant was built, and that would take a year. I had to console myself with the thought that change on the scale I was thinking of wouldn't come quickly. Incremental change would be agonizing, but it was the only kind of change that would keep long term.

I kept in contact with Uber and Leet, who were seemingly staying on the up and up. I even spent a couple of evenings helping them with special effects for their You Tube channel.

One day Leet came to me with an idea.

“How would you feel about looking for sunken treasure?” he asked. “You can feel metal, right? Well, I think I've narrowed the location of the Whydah Galley to a hundred square miles. It's up around Cape Cod.”

“What's the Whydah Galley?” I asked.

“The first shipwreck in North America, at least that people know about,” he said enthusiastically.

“Why were you looking up sunken treasure?” I asked. “I thought you were all about the science fiction.”

“Pirates!” he said. “Pirates are still cool. Arr...parrots.”

For some reason history had made murderous thugs cool. Nobody idolized Somali pirates before the
decline in the sea trade had made them disappear.

““The ship went down in 1717,” he said. “Almost everyone died. Black Sam Bellamy was the Captain, and they say it has the treasure from over fifty ships on board.”

“Even if we find it, what are the odds that some state or another won't just take it from us?”

“Salvage law and the law of finds,” he said. “We can keep it as long as it's not within three miles of the coast. There's some different rules if it was a privateer or a warship owned by a country, but he was just a pirate, which means it's open season.”

“It sounds like a lot of work,” I said dubiously.

“Four hundred thousand coins,” he said. “That's what they say is on board. Think of what you could do with all that money.”

“You do have the ability to make your force shield permeable to oxygen only,” my grandfather's avatar said.

“So what do you want for all of this?” I asked.

“Ten percent and take me with you,” he said. “I'll have cameras to document the wreck.”

“I'll have to talk to my lawyer,” I said. “The last thing I need is to be arrested for stealing valuable historical artifacts.”

Stepping outside I noticed that it was raining again. It had been raining a lot over the last few days, unreasonably so. I would have expected it in Earth Aleph; apparently they had more trouble with Climate change than we had.

After all, our fishing industries had taken such a hit by Leviathan that fish had had thirty years to make a comeback. Those fishermen brave enough to go out on the water made very good livings.

I wondered if there was some way I could sponsor fishing boats. If I made some money, maybe I could buy the boats and rent them to people who wanted to make a go at commercial fishing?

Maybe this buried treasure idea wasn't the worst idea Leet had ever had. At the very least it would be an adventure.

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“Wow,” Leet said. “I guess we won't need these rebreathers I made.”

I'd never expanded by force field into a sphere before, but it was remarkably easy. Making it permeable to oxygen but not the other components of seawater had been difficult. Getting rid of the carbon dioxide generated by two people was even more difficult.

Apparently my grandfather had somehow been able to make it work even in space, which suddenly occurred to me might be quite lucrative. The Simurgh had put a crimp in the whole satellite business, but there were still countries and companies still crazy enough to risk launching communications satellites.

Usually they did it from isolated areas, so as not to risk a visit from the Simurgh.
We floated over the ocean near Cape Cod. It was late in the afternoon, and I'd talked to Dad about what I was going to do. He just muttered something about all the animals leaving town and trying to figure out why.

It had still been raining when I left, and it was still raining here. Whatever storm front that had taken hold of the East coast wasn't letting up. Some of the streets were starting to flood. We were safe, of course, unless it was a hundred year flood, and even then I thought the first floor of the tower would be safe. After all, I didn't keep anything of value there.

I'd been extending my senses as wide as I could, and it was surprisingly easy here. Back in the city, there were so many sources of metal that it was hard to discriminate the signal from the noise. It was like trying to listen to a single conversation across a crowded room when everyone was talking at once.

Out here, though it was much easier. The ocean had an underlying amount of metallic materials inside of it, but that didn't hold a candle to the metallic source I was detecting now.

“Ok,” I said. “Here we go.”

A moment later we plunged beneath the waves.

“This was worth it just for the view,” Leet said, staring outside the limits of my sphere.

There were fish everywhere. The waters weren't as clear as I would have liked; I supposed that I'd have to go south to the tropics. Still it was impressive. Having the sphere meant I could see everything on all sides and below me, which was a view that couldn't be matched.

We plunged deeper, the water around us darkening. Like a submarine, I didn't have to put the oxygen inside the force field under pressure, which meant that we didn't have to worry about getting the bends coming back up.

Soon it was twilight all around us, and less than a minute later it was dark around us.

“You've got the lights?” I asked.

Leet nodded and fumbled for the devices at his feet. A moment later he lit a lantern at our feet and then pulled out a spotlight.

“Forty five million candlepower,’ he said smugly. “And I bought it off the shelf.”

“Don't point that thing at me!” I snapped, holding a hand up in front of my eyes. There were spots in front of my eyes.

It took almost a minute for my eyes to clear. There was sand everywhere, which made visibility limited.

We approached the wreck, and as the hull came into view, I felt sudden disappointment.

“It's a U-boat,” Leet said. “I didn't know any got that close to the United States.”

No treasure here. I felt unaccountably disappointed.

“Did you see something move?” Leet asked. He frowned and turned the spotlight over to our side.”

Suddenly we were slammed to the side. My head slammed into the side of the sphere and it was all I could do to maintain the sphere.
There was something huge outside the sphere. The spotlight had fallen to the bottom of the sphere, and all I saw was the bottom of a massive reptilian tail as it moved past with unnatural speed.
“Don't you have any kind of inertial dampeners on this thing?” Leet asked. There was blood running down the side of his face and he looked groggy.

I shook my head. “I'll just have to make sure we don't move the next time. What the hell was that?”

“Either Godzilla is real,” Leet said. “Or we need to get out of here and fast.”

Nice to know he didn't think we needed to leave quickly if Godzilla was real. Most likely that was because we'd be fast enough to dodge Godzilla at least until we could get away. If it was the other thing, the thing that neither one of us wanted to say out loud, it was likely that we wouldn't get away until he was ready to let us go.

“We should probably go,” I said.

He nodded.

A moment later the shield shuddered again, but this time I was ready for it. I held it steady.

This time there was a glimpse of multiple glowing red eyes staring balefully at us as they passed, almost too quickly to see, along with a massive body that seemed to go on forever.

Was Leviathan this large, or was my mind playing tricks on me?

I began to push the sphere upward, probably faster than we should have, and my legs trembled a little at the acceleration. Leet was on the floor of the sphere and he didn't bother getting up.

“I guess we know where Leviathan likes to spend his evenings,” he said shakily.

As we broke from the water a massive column of water slapped down at us. I managed to push through it though, and a moment later we were in space.

Looking down we could see a massive trail of water moving behind something that was slicing through the water at an impossible speed. Happily it was moving away from us; unhappily it was moving in the direction we came from.

“Where do you think it's going?” I asked slowly.

Leet looked at me, and said, “Our luck couldn't be that bad.”

I nodded and a moment later I began to head for shore. There was no way I was going to keep up with Leviathan's speed in the water, but the one thing I could do was warn people, and that would require my cell phone to work. Those mostly didn't work very far out to see.

I hit a button on my phone.

“Armsmaster here,” the curt voice on the other end of the line said.

“I'm up by Cape Cod,” I said. “I was treasure hunting and I just saw Leviathan heading in your direction. I'm not sure which city he's after, but I've got a bad feeling.”

“There's a theory that they are attracted to conflict between Capes,” he said. “There has been a lot of conflict here recently. Usually they stick to a fairly regular schedule; if this is what you think then it's
early by a couple of months.”

I could hear the sound of keys clicking.

He cursed under his breath.

“I'm checking the satellite feeds now, and I see what you are seeing. I'll alert everyone. I'm assuming that you plan to participate?”

“As soon as I can get there,” I said.

“Hurry,” he said.

As soon the phone went dead, I dialed another number.

“Dad,” I said.

“Taylor?” he asked. He sounded groggy, which shouldn't have happened during a work day. Was he skipping work?

“I just saw Leviathan and I'm pretty sure that he's heading for the Bay. Get to an Endbringer shelter, and make sure the Dockworkers know. We're going to need them afterwards if Leviathan hits.”

He suddenly sounded much more alert.

“Are you sure?”

“No. He could be hitting Boston or someplace nearby, but I don't think we have that much luck.”

“All right,” he said. “I can help from inside the shelter anyway.”

Right. Like dogs and cats and birds could do anything against an Endbringer.

“Be safe,” I said.

“Don't die,” he said. “They're going to want you on the front lines because you are so strong. You've been able to steamroll everything you've ever me, but this is different.”

He was silent for a moment. “I can't tell you not to go. I'm not sure I'm able to tell you anything anymore. But the one thing I can ask is that if you think you are going to die, get out of there no matter what you have to do. A dead hero is less valuable than a live pragmatist.”

“All right,” I said.

A moment later I switched the phone off and made my third and final call.

“Lung,” I said.

“Yes?” he asked curtly. “I hope you aren't calling to ask for more conditions?”

“I'm in Cape Cod and I just saw Leviathan passing by. I think he'd heading for the Bay. It could be to Boston, but I've got a bad feeling he's headed straight for you. Get your people close to the shelters, and have them help other people into the shelters. You want to change your image, this is the kind of first step that you couldn't pay for.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said, “And you believe this is true?”
“I'm sending my own father to a shelter and I warned the Protectorate ninety seconds ago. Hopefully you'll be able to get the word out in time to save most of your people.”

“All right,” he said. “I have faced the monster before, and I know what it can do. If the city is completely destroyed, then our deal is off.”

“Agreed,” I said. “No point in trying a campaign to win the hearts and the minds of the dead. Let's try to keep that from happening.”

He grunted and the phone went dead.

I handed the phone to Leet, who shook his head.

“I just uploaded the video to Uber for our YouTube channel,” he said. “He's going to alert all of our followers.”

“Weren't we going to try to keep our association a secret?”

“If Leviathan attacks, do you think it will matter?” he asked. “People have to know, and by the time they decide to sound the Endbringer Alarms, it might be too late.”

I nodded grimly. There were always people that couldn't make it to the Endbringer shelters. People who were immobile, or who couldn't walk well and who didn't have a vehicle. People trapped in hospital beds. It was often the weakest and least able to defend themselves who suffered the most, and in the aftermath it was the poor who would have the hardest time rebuilding.

At least with hurricanes people had days worth of warning. Endbringers often left people with fifteen minutes.

I'd have thought Dragon or Arm斯master would have come up with some kind of predictive program.

“We were moving as quickly as we were able now, the ground flashing by beneath us.”

“I'm gonna need stuff from my lab,” Leet said. “If I'm going to fight.”

“I hope you have some kind of giant mecha,” I said. “Or a space cannon, or a railgun or something.”

Scowling, he looked down at his fists and clenched them. “If I'd known this was going to happen I'd have built all of that. A glitter boy maybe or a gundam. Thing is, I don't usually go for big weapons.”

“Then you'll have to help get people to shelters and help with the wounded,” I said. I glanced at him. “You aren't planning to chicken out, are you?”

He stared at his fists for a long moment, then looked up at me.

“No. I'm going to do what I can. I just wish I'd had more time.”

“Don't we all,” I said grimly.

If I'd known Leviathan was coming, I would have been pumping my grandfather's...well, not brains, but whatever it used to think for plans for the defense of the city. I'd have also been asking him for tactical advice as well.

“You had to know you would eventually face off against them,” its voice said. “Beings tend to seek out and fight other beings of the same power level.”
As if I was as strong as an Endbringer. I knew I was strong, but nobody was that strong. Even Eidolon and Legend and Alexandria could barely slow one of them down, and that was working as a team. No one of them would be able to individually fight an Endbringer, and Eidolon was the most powerful parahuman in the world.

“The most versatile perhaps,” my grandfather's avatar muttered. “But his powers wouldn't hold a candle to many of the upper tier beings in my universe. Nathaniel Richards, Hope, Rachel Summers... any one of them would make this world tremble with their power.”

I'm sure he had to walk a mile to school every day through the snow and it was uphill both ways. Old people had a tendency to exaggerate for effect. Although... considering that he'd been in a concentration camp when he was young the school thing and the snow was probably an insensitive thought.

“I'm not sure what we'll find when we get there,” I said. “I may not have time to drop you by your lab.”

“No problem,” Leet said. “Uber is taking a truck to bring my armor to Protectorate headquarters. We'll meet him there.”

“Do you really think you'll be able to fight Leviathan with your armor?” I asked.

He snorted. “I've seen the statistics on the force Leviathan generates. He'd tear through my armor like tin foil.”

“So why go?”

His hands tightened into fists and he closed his eyes.

“I know people think I'm a laughingstock, that Uber would be better off without me. The thing is, I'm ok with that as long as I make people happy. I was always the class clown in school, even if I wasn't very good at it.”

Leet was essentially Greg Veder with powers I realized suddenly. Socially maladjusted but endlessly eager nonetheless.

“But my Mom lives in Brockton Bay, and all the people who were nice to me in school. I love the city, and I'm not going to let an overgrown lizard stomp it into the ground.”

He wasn't looking me in the eye.

“He is terrified, but doesn't want to show it in front of a girl,” my grandfather's avatar said. As though I couldn't tell that on my own. He practically stank of fear. Still, he was willing to step up when he was much much squishier than I was, and I had to respect that.

We were both silent as the ground sped by beneath us. Cape Cod was about seventy five miles from Brockton Bay, and the trip out had seemed like it had taken any time at all. The trip back seemed to take forever, the minutes stretching out interminably.

“Are you sorry you took up with me?” I asked, when the silence grew almost unbearable.

“It's not like you gave us a choice,” Leet said. He was silent for a long moment before he said, “But I like that you are at least trying. If you weren't here I'd probably be hiding in a shelter along with
everyone else. Or maybe not... I guess we'll never know.”

“Feeling afraid doesn’t mean you're a coward,” I said. “Everybody feels afraid.”

“Even you?”

I looked away. Putting a name to the feeling in the pit of my stomach would make it real, something I
didn't want to do.

“Maybe we need to talk strategy,” I said. “I haven't studied the Endbringer fights as well as I should
have. Does anybody have any idea what works against them?”

“Nothing?” he said. “I mean not really. People have taken chunks out of them, but they always show
back up again a few months later as good as they started.”

“Are they smart?” I asked.

There weren't a lot of videos of Endbringer fights, not that got distributed to the public anyway.
Seeing heroes being slaughtered wasn't apparently considered respectful. The authorities probably
felt that it would be damaging to people's morale to see how one sided the battles really were.

They might be right.

“They're smarter than people think. The Simurgh is a genius; I've seen the designs for some of the
things she's tried to build, and they are a Tinker's wet dream... if you like things that destroy entire
cities or states.”

The PRT had procedures for everything. If they'd had anti-Endbringer tactics, they'd have
doubtlessly distributed them. The fact that they didn't was worrying. Were they keeping them to
themselves, hoping that the villains got slaughtered, or were the Endbringers simply so adaptable that
no standard tactics would work?

Leet went over a few other things with me; things that he'd read online, speculation about
Leviathan's capabilities, possible tactics that might work.

Even at my top speed getting back home took fifteen minutes. I could maybe have gone faster
without the bubble, but I doubted it.

As we approached the shoreline of Brockton Bay, I saw that the Docks looked like they had been hit
by a bomb. Most of the buildings there were gone, and water was filling the streets. I could see the
bodies of animals washing away in the water.

A swarm of insects coalesced in mid-air. I could see them flying in from every direction.

I was horrified to hear a voice coming from the middle of the swarm. It was creepy as hell, and it was
a little hard to understand, but it was clearly a voice.

“Taylor, this is Dad,” the voice said. “Go to PRT Headquarters to get an Armband. Dragon will
direct you to where Leviathan was last seen.”

“There's no time for that,” I said impatiently. “Can't I pick one up from someone else?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “You can pick one up from the dead,” Dad said. “Of
which there are already many.”
I grimaced.

“I need my armor,” Leet said. He looked at me, then grimaced.

He touched something on his lapel, and a moment later there was a flash of light and he was gone. Had he prepared a transporter just in case I proved to be less trustworthy than he thought?

I shrank my force field until it was skin tight. It was stronger that way, and I suspected that I’d need all the help I could get once the fight really started.

“The last place he was seen was by Lord's Market,” my father's hideous, buzzing voice said.

I nodded.

“We're going to have a talk about just what you are able to do,” I said. “After all of this is done.”

He could talk with bugs?

Finding them wasn't hard once I knew the general area. As I approached what was left of the Market, I started seeing bodies lying everywhere. Most of them were wearing costumes, although no one that I immediately recognized.

Some of them were dressed like norms, though, and I wondered if they were people who had been too stubborn to get to the shelters or if they had just been too slow.

Leviathan was nowhere to be seen, but it looked like the heroes were picking up the pieces.

I gestured, and an armband detached itself from one of the corpses, rising up to me. A quick glance at it with my senses showed nothing wrong.

Slipping it on my arm, I was startled to hear a voice coming through the speakers.

“Slipknot up,” a voice I belatedly recognized as Dragon's said.

“Are you all right,” Dragon's voice asked. “We thought you were dead.”

“This is Taylor Hebert,” I said. “I just got here and I'm borrowing his comm. It doesn't look like he'll be needing it anymore.”

“Acknowledged,” she said. “Leviathan has currently gone underground and has not been spotted. There have been thirty casualties so far.”

“Is this normal?” I asked.

“Endbringer fights can't be predicted,” she said. “Trust me, we've tried. We think he's going to try to sink the city using the aquifer under Brockton Bay. We need to keep him hemmed in so that doesn't happen.”

She was silent for a moment. “While there isn't much hope of doing real damage to him, if you damage him enough he'll go away. We've got great hopes in you.”

“There are two buttons,” she began.

“Leet told me,” I said, interrupting her. “He found the schematics online. I say Hard Override if I need everyone to hear what I have to say, right?”
“That’s... disturbing,” she said.

“Long Range attackers are following Legend,” she said. “Those who can take a beating up close are under the command of Alexandria. Which group would you prefer to follow?”

Given Leviathan’s speed I realized that I probably shouldn’t get up close. It would be too easy to make mistakes.

“Legend,” I said.

“I will inform,” she said. “Proceed two hundred meters to the northwest and you will find the group of survivors.”

Meters... right, she was a Canadian.

I saw a group of people gathered in a clearing. There had been a building there once, now nothing remained but the outline of its foundation. They were busily working to bandage people who were injured.

“Taylor!” I heard a voice call out.

I looked behind me, and there, floating was Legend.

“Your advanced warning saved a lot of lives today,” he said.

I’d seen bodies everywhere. What was an Endbringer fight like when they didn't have warning?
“Leviathan has been spotted emerging at sixth and Elm,” Dragon's voice snapped out.

It sounded different, colder and more impersonal than it had when it talked to me before. I hadn't even had time to engage in any fangirling over the fact that I was face to face with Legend, and he was already gesturing.

“Follow me,” he said curtly. “As quickly as you can. Hit him and don't stop. Don't worry about damage to property; under the law Endbringer fights make everything fair game.”

It made sense; better to lose your car or your house than to end up drowned, or burned to death by radiation or worse yet insane and ready to murder the people you cared about.

He was gone a moment later and I struggled to keep up. Considering that he could move at the speed of light there wasn't much chance of that.

Still, sixth and Elm wasn't that far away. It was a residential district, so I reached behind me, grabbing up the shattered remains of metal warehouses. The metal behind me grew larger and larger, and I found myself wishing I'd left at least one of the ships from the ship graveyard alone.

Still, by the time I reached sixth and Elm I had enough metal detritus to cast a shadow over an entire block.

Alexandria and a half dozen other Brutes were fighting Leviathan, but he was unbelievably fast. It made me happy I was in the sky instead of down in the middle of it.

From what Leet had told be about the durability of Endbringers, I wasn't sure that any of the metal I had with me would be strong enough to penetrate very far into it. Worse, Leviathan's speed and agility meant that any force I brought to bear would likely be used against the other people who were fighting for their lives on the ground.

“If you can contain him the attacks of others would be more successful,” my grandfather said quietly.

Legend was already lighting him up, but the blasts didn't seem to be having much of an effect.

I gestured, and the metal behind me flashed through the air toward Leviathan, parting around those people who were fighting him.

Leviathan dodged to the side, but the metal was able to move faster than he could move, at least on land. He had a water clone, and some of the metal splashed through that, but I simply sent twice as much metal to hit them both.

Accumulating metal on his limbs wasn't easy. It was difficult to get purchase on his flash for one thing. I chose the hardest metals I could sense and I created spikes to sink into his flesh. They were followed by more and more metal, which I crushed onto Leviathan's limbs.

His head snapped up, and he looked up at me with eyes that were surprisingly green. Hadn't they been red before?

It brushed away at the metal that was accumulating on all it's limbs. I was crushing the metal as it encircled him, and doing my best to use the metal to slow the motions of his limbs. I had to be careful though, or he'd simply tear right through the metal.
Before I could get more than a ton of metal on each limb, I was startled by a missile flying through the air. It was moving fast, and before I could fully understand what was happening I was struck by nine tons of monster.

Leviathan could fly? Or was he so strong that gravity barely had an effect on him?

That was all I had time to think as I fell backward, plunging toward the ground because I hadn't had time to brace myself. I landed on the ground with the monster on top of me, and it clawed away at my shield, applying pressure like I'd never experienced before.

Up close he was surprisingly massive, and he did everything it could to keep me off balance. He smashed his head repeatedly into my face while he clawed at my sides. All the while his body pressed into mine holding me down onto the pavement.

I actually felt this pressure.

My shield held, though, and instinctively I pushed, sending Leviathan flying. Bits of metal flew off his bonds as he went, though.

Before I could fly away, he was on me again, but this time I was ready for him. I managed to stand, and I braced myself, and this time as he rushed toward me I did not move.

This time it was Leviathan that bounced away, for all that at thirty feet and nine tons physics should have dictated otherwise.

“As long as the beast is focused on you, it is not killing your comrades,” my grandfather said. Keep him occupied. Hurt him. Slow him down. That was how we were going to win.

I held my hand out to him and I gestured. It was rude and probably unnecessary, but the monster seemed to get the gist. It launched itself toward me, and I pushed myself toward it.

This time I put my power behind me, turning me into a battering ram powered by as much force as I could muster. Leviathan was the one who slid backward, sliding into a large building, and a moment later we'd both pushed through the walls.

I covered his eyes with metal, but it didn't seem to slow him down in the slightest.

“He sees without his eyes,” my grandfather's avatar said. “Given his hydrokinesis I would assume that he detects water much like you detect metal.”

A moment later he was gone, moving through the building and toward the others. Apparently I wasn't providing him with enough carnage.

“No you don't,” I muttered.

Metal from everywhere coalesced toward him. He dodged, but the metal went where I willed it, and much faster than I could move myself.

He lunged toward Alexandria, but I yanked back. The metal sheered away, but unlike me Leviathan had to make at least a token acknowledgment to physics.

More and more metal piled on. Alexandria launched herself forward to hit him, and she seemed to knock him back a little. I concentrated on piling more and more metal on. It was going to take a lot to
do what I needed to do.

As strong as Leviathan was, the weight of the metal was probably almost immaterial. After all, Alexandria could lift seemingly impossible amounts of weight, although most big objects she tried to lift would shatter under the pressure of their entire mass resting on her tiny hands.

I began launching pieces of molten metal at Leviathan, hard and fast enough to make small divots in his skin. It wasn't much, but it worked as a distraction.

Still, he was slowing. The metal got in the way.

“Lift him off the ground,” my Grandfather said. “He needs traction to move.”

Right. I should have seen that. It didn't matter how strong someone was; if they couldn't touch the ground they weren't going anywhere.

I began wrapping metal around his center of mass. He'd be able to tear through the metal on his limbs, but a harness of metal wouldn't leave him with anything to fight against.

He lunged toward me again, and I lifted him off the ground.

For a moment he struggled, moving his legs quickly and moving his tail. He tried to grab at the metal that was holding him, but I held his arms fast, and as quickly as he pushed though the metal I added more. I was pulling metal from the buildings nearby now. There was almost a thousand tons of metal on him, compressed as much as I could.

Leviathan's water clone lashed around, moving now in ways that its master was not able to.

“Light him up!” I heard Legend say.

A moment later all the parahumans around me began to pummel him with beams of fire and cold and light and darkness. It would have been impressive if it had looked like it was doing any good. Unfortunately it didn't look like it was doing much. Even Legend's beams, the best of all of them only seemed to be burning off the surface.

The water clone moved suddenly, and the light of Legend's beam was diffracted though the water.

My world exploded with pain, my shoulder hurting more than anything I'd ever experienced in my life. I lost concentration and Leviathan crashed to the ground.

He exploded into motion, tearing the metal off himself as he lunged toward me.

My force field had faded and I was barely able to bring it back up in time despite my pain. It almost looked disappointed as it hit my shield.

My shield was harder to hold than it had been though. Apparently whatever had happened to my shoulder was making it hard for me to concentrate.

He clawed at me, smashing me again and again, and this time I could feel my concentration beginning to crack. Sweat was pouring down my face and getting into my eyes. It burned, but I couldn't raise my hand to wipe it out of my eyes.

Leviathan grabbed my leg and it twisted, slamming me into Alexandria, who was rushing up from behind. She felt like she was made of something stronger then metal, and I felt my spine bend close to breaking.
Alexandria went flying.

The world spun around me as Leviathan used me like a club. The moment I lost control of my force field I was dead and I knew it, but my vision was graying around the edges.

“Get away from her you bitch!” I heard Leet's amplified voice cry out.

I was confused by now, but I thought I saw the Iron Giant running toward Leviathan. It was almost as large as he was, and rockets emerged from it, filled with some kind of plasma that I'd never seen before. They actually seemed to be doing damage to Leviathan.

Leviathan threw me at the Iron Giant, but Alexandria caught me, and a moment later I was moving through the air.

Leviathan was cutting through the Iron Giant like a mouse through cheese, but I could see the tell tale blue flash of Leet teleporting out of the Giant's head.

“Panacea will get you back into the fight soon enough,” Alexandria said as she landed on a nearby building. “Strider, one to transport, priority.”


A moment later I heard the sound of rushing water, and then I didn't know anything else.

Time didn't seem to have a meaning; it seemed like an instant before I woke up in a tent. I didn't know where I was and I was confused. My pain was gone.

Panacea was standing over me, staring at me like she'd never seen me before.

“You aren't right,” she said.

I flexed my arm, which felt fine. “That's what everyone tells me. What happened?”

“You were hit by Legend's beam,” she said. “That's the problem with having a force field you can see through. Legend could have stopped his beams from hitting you. But it happened so quickly he'd hit you before he had a chance to stop it, or at least that's what I've been told.”

“There are ways to overcome that kind of weapon,” my grandfather's voice said. “I will show you.”

An image flashed through my mind and I knew what to do. Legend wouldn't catch me the same way next time, accidentally or not.

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Ten minutes,” she said. Her lips compressed. “There haven't been a lot of wounded to deal with, and you were considered a priority case anyway. I had to regrow your arm and you didn't have a lot of extra mass to deal with, so I had to improvise.”

There was a large plastic barrel sitting beside the bed; it smelled like fish. Had she grown me an arm out of cod?

I flexed my fingers; it felt the same, and it even looked the same, even though I no longer had even a remnant of a shirt sleeve.

“That's good, right?” I asked distractedly. It was weird to realize that part of your body wasn't really
part of your body. “The small numbers of wounded?”

She shook her head, and I suddenly realized that I could hear Dragon’s voice through a speaker on the desk. She was reciting a litany of the injured and the dead.

I forced myself up.

“I’ve got to get back,’ I said. “I can make a difference.”

Part of me simply wanted to lay on the cot and stare up at the ceiling. I’d never really lost before, not even temporarily and Leviathan had used me as a club. The sense of invincibility that had been making me grow more and more overconfident over the past couple of weeks was gone.

I could have died.

The realization was chilling and horrifying.

No matter how prepared I thought I was, Leviathan would find something unexpected to use against me.

In a better world I wouldn't have to do this. I was only fifteen; I shouldn't have to be a soldier. Unfortunately there was no one else who could do what I could do. If Leviathan sank the city, all the Endbringer shelters would become tombs for the people inside. They were waterproof, but eventually the people would die of suffocation, like people trapped in the bottom of the sea on submarines, dead in the cold and the dark.

My father was one of those people, and my new acquaintances from Arcadia. I wasn't even sure I'd actually want Emma dead; I still hadn't had a chance to rub my success in the faces of her and Alan.

“Maybe you should rest,” Panacea said, staring at me with a look I couldn't interpret.

I shook my head. “People are dying, and if I lie here when I'm perfectly fine, then it's at least partly my fault.”

“I know how you feel,” Panacea said. She grimaced. “I'd better get back to work.”

Rising to my feet I stepped outside of the tent. The camp had been set outside of Brockton Bay, as far from the shore as possible. Leviathan didn't like leaving water behind, as it was his greatest strength. That didn't mean that he wouldn't, though.

“Where is the fight now?” I asked, tapping on my communicator, which I'd grabbed from the table.

Dragon's voice said, “Winslow high school.”

A moment later I was in the air. I looked down as I flew. Parts of the city had been utterly destroyed, while other parts were still in good condition. The wealthier parts of the city tended to be farthest from the ocean, which meant that the impact of this was going to rest disproportionately on the poor.

Winslow was a disaster area. There had been a time when I would have assumed that demolishing it and just starting over was probably the best thing, but it was different seeing part of it actually in flames.

Half the building had collapsed.
To my surprise Lung was actually fighting Leviathan. He was already almost twenty feet tall to Leviathan's thirty, and he was blowing fire in Leviathan's face, for all the good it seemed to do.

I wouldn't have thought he'd have kept with the plan with me incapacitated. Maybe he was playing the long game. Maybe he thought that he could win the hearts and minds of the populace without me.

The important thing was that he was here.

I started toward them only to find myself stopping. Leviathan had beaten me like a pinata; the last thing I wanted was to get up close again.

Nothing I'd done had worked. I could increase gravity, but that would probably hurt Lung more than it did Leviathan. Electricity would probably be useless.

Metal wouldn't penetrate far enough to make any kind of a difference. I could try to bind him, but he'd shrug it off almost as fast as I wrapped him up.

I couldn't think of anything I could do that would help, and as I sat helplessly by, I saw a single sweep of Leviathan's tail turn a man in a red and white costume into a red mist.

People were dying because of me.

I'd been arrogant, thinking I'd be able to solve the problems of an entire city. I felt my heart starting to race and I started to hyperventilate. My hands tightened by my side.

I was frozen with indecision. There had to be something I could do, something that would save everyone and justify my having a ridiculous amount of power that people with three times my age and experience could have used to win instead of just whining.

Experience was the one thing I needed that I did not have. My grandfather would have beaten this thing with one hand tied behind his back.

"It is your decision," my grandfather's avatar said. There was a hint of longing in its voice, though.

I lifted my hand, and I called.

From it's place hidden in the walls of the tower, my grandfather's helmet came flying. I hesitated as it landed in my hand. This was a major step. Was I ready for it?

Leviathan stepped on another brute, who screamed in agony for a short moment before going limp.

I put the helmet on my head.

There was a moment of connection, a click as my body suddenly began moving without my own volition. My posture changed; even floating in the air I'd been slumped, defeated before I'd even begun. My posture straightened into something that was martial and almost arrogant.

"HOLD, MONSTER!" I shouted. My voice somehow seemed magnified a hundred times, but I couldn't quite understand how I managed it. "WE HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS. ALL OF YOUR POWER WILL NOT SAVE YOU FROM MY WRATH!"

A moment later the real battle began.
History

A simple gesture of my hand and metal began to rise from the buildings around us. Buildings collapsed, and while there was no one inside I felt myself wincing at the damage I was doing. Hopefully I wouldn't have to pay for all of it.

Leviathan shoved Lung away easily, almost as though he hadn't been struggling with him before and he leaped for us again.

Another gesture and Leviathan's course changed as his localized gravity field changed enough to deflect him thirty degrees to the right.

Lung grabbed his foot and swung him around, smashing him into Winslow. I wondered for a moment if he was doing it as a favor for me; after all I was known to hate the school.

The metal around us coalesced, forming into three balls of metal that shrunk from the size of buildings to the size of a bus to a car.

My fist tightened, and they gelled into liquid metal, becoming spheres the size of bowling balls. I could feel the pressure as I compressed countless thousands of tons of metal into something the size of a baseball. The process generated an amazing amount of heat, enough that I could see the brutes on the ground backing away and squinting up at me.

Leviathan had shrugged Lung off, backhanding him hard enough to send him flying at least three blocks. He was coming for me again.

A gesture, and the balls slammed forward, striking Leviathan in the center of his mass and sending him tumbling backwards into the ground, creating a massive gouge in the foundation of Winslow.

“I am the hand of vengeance,” I called out. “The wrath of a God who never created a monster such as you.”

Leviathan tried to move forward, but the balls were everywhere, slamming into his legs and his arms, crushing his tail. They were doing damage too; each impact was causing his flesh to crack and crater, almost as though he were a statue instead of made of living flesh.

Still, there was something about the situation that didn't seem right. The monster acted like it was injured, but it didn't add up.

My grandfather apparently came to the same conclusion.

“He's not hampered by any of his injuries,” my voice said quietly. “A redundant physiology?”

It didn't make a difference in his strategy. At first it looked as though the strategy was simply to keep him off balance, but I began to see the pattern.

My grandfather was trying to see if there was any area of Leviathan's body that he tried to protect. Presumably that part would be more vulnerable and real attacks could be made there.

So far, though, Leviathan didn't seem to favor any one part of his body over the other, including his head. It was almost as though none of his body mattered.

“I don't think he has any organs,” I said.
It was strange talking inside my own head.

My grandfather didn't dismiss my observations, though. Instead he simply changed his pattern. More metal rose from the ruins of Winslow, from the cars and trucks all over the city, rising and moving to cover Leviathan.

It had been raining all this time, but suddenly everything stopped. The drops of rain in the air simply froze in place, and the sudden silence was shocking.

Leviathan hadn't made a sound during all of this. I'd expected a roar or a hiss or something, but he simply stared at me with a piercing expression. A moment later his tail whipped out, and water sprang toward me, the drops of rain coalescing in much the same way my metal had.

The water hit me and for a moment it actually drove me back, the sheer weight of it surprising and unexpected.

I chuckled.

“You've burned through your bag of tricks, monster,” I said. “Accept defeat with grace.”

I groaned mentally. Never taunt fate. Even though I'd never really been a hero of a villain I knew better than to risk everything like that.

People were suddenly screaming, looking behind me. I could see the flicker of force fields going up as people huddled under them.

Right; the tidal wave.

The world around me was suddenly a confused morass as thousands of tons of water slammed into me all at once. I did not move, and the water parted around me like the red sea around Moses.

I simply rose higher and did not let up on the assault. My expression never changed at the plight of the people around me; my only focus was on the monster in front of me.

It had managed to free itself from some of the metal around it by using water to blast away at it.

From what I'd read on the Internet, Leviathan shouldn't be capable to using water for detailed tasks like this. He was supposedly limited to being a blunt instrument.

He'd apparently been hiding at least some of his power all this time.

Suddenly I leaned forward. I could feel a smile forming on my face. Apparently Leviathan had made a mistake. I couldn't see it, but apparently my Grandfather could.

“I see,” my voice said. “The whole body is a puppet, controlled from the inside by the only part that is real.”

“What?” I heard Dragon's voice on the comm.

Had I been pressing the communicator without realizing it,. Or had my grandfather intended that to be a message that got out to everyone.

I heard Tattletale's voice over the communicator.

“She's right, although I don't know how she guessed it,” Tattletale said. “His skin is as hard as aluminum, and each layer down is a little more than twice as durable as the previous layer. All the
damage he's taken is superficial. It's always been superficial. I don't know why he'd pretended that it wasn't.”

I felt my power stretching throughout the earth's crust, seeking something; some combination of elements that I'd never seen before.

“Adamantium,” my grandfather's avatar said. “Unbreakable, unbeatable. A single bullet would conquer armor even as powerful as this monster has.”

Some of the elements he seemed to be looking for were missing, although most of them came roaring up through the earth.

“Pity,” I heard my voice saying. “I'll have to go looking for the last element before I meet with the monster's siblings.”

The idea dazzled me. An unbreakable bullet? The Endbringers would be ended.

That assumed the element he was looking for even existed on my earth and wasn't just missing from the local area.

“I can transmute elements if necessary,” my voice murmured. “But it would take time that we do not have now.”

My hand switched the communicator back on.

“I'd suggest that everyone back away from Leviathan. I'm going to escalate.”

One of the metal balls I was using to keep Leviathan off balance shifted and chanced, becoming a javelin with points that were of monomolecular thinness. More and more mass rose and was compressed into the javelin.

“I have to avoid compressing it too much,” I heard my voice speaking to Legend, who had risen up beside me. “Unless I want to create a black hole.”

“That would be... bad.” Legend said, staring at us.

My grandfather's avatar was exaggerating. It would take at least three kilometers of material collapsed into a pace smaller than a pea to create a black hole. I'd actually talked to him about it once.

Not that I wanted to create my own black hole or anything. That would be crazy.

Still, more and more metal was coming. Ton after ton was being pulled from the Brockton Bay landfill. I was a little disappointed that we hadn't done a better job at recycling.

Old refrigerators, stoves, rusted cars, all of them were being compressed into a javelin that was ten feet long. Its density increased exponentially, and I could feel the pressure; it wanted to expand back into its normal form. You couldn't simply crush several thousand tons of metal into a small space and not expect it to expand back into its normal form when you stopped applying pressure.

Still, Leviathan was slowly starting to get his bearings back.

Another wave was coming. I could see it in the distance, massive, bigger than anything that appeared on the planet naturally. Leviathan was determined to destroy the city, and if he couldn't do it in person he'd use his power to do it.
Metal broke off from the javelin I was assembling, a hundred tons of metal separating and forming into shapes that I didn't understand. They almost looked like amplifiers of some kind.

Each was the size of a small building, and three of them were settled onto devastated portions of the city. My power reached out and began to vibrate the amplifiers at a frequency that I could feel even through my force field. It was incredibly low, and it made my teeth ache.

It obviously affected the people around me even more as I saw brutes drop to the ground in pain. Leviathan didn't seem affected. Neither did Alexandria, or after a moment Eidolon.

For a moment it didn't look like anything was going to happen, but a ripples appeared in the middle of the waves heading toward us, and a moment later the waters collapsed.

Leviathan froze as the tidal wave vanished.

A moment later he straightened. He slapped away one of the balls that had been harrying him as though it didn't even exist.

“The monster shows his true colors!” my voice said. “No longer content to pretend, are you beast?”

Leviathan launched himself toward me; my grandfather tried the gravity trick again, but Leviathan simply had his water echo slam into it, redirecting him into his previous course.

Alexandria tried to intercept him, but he slapped her out of the air contemptuously. That fortunately shoved it off course, and I moved higher.

The Javelin had been completed. It now vanished into the distance. I stood, staring down at the monster.

“Your full might is no match for mine,” my voice said. “Care to test your mettle?”

Great. Include a pun; who wrote my grandfather's lines? He sounded like something from a cheesy comic book. Maybe it was a cultural thing; were villains in his world expected to sound like old serials from the thirties?

Next he'd be screaming about DOOOOOMMM!!!

Leviathan filled my field of vision; after what had happened the last time I would have certainly flinched. Under my grandfather's control I simply stood there impassively, as though my force shield was a sure thing against a creature that had thrown Alexandria as though she was a sack of feathers.

A moment before Leviathan would have hit us though, something came roaring across the sky faster than the eye could see. All I saw was a flash of light as something red exploded on impact, hitting the Endbringer in its center of mass.

The Javelin struck at a speed that made its outer layers molten, it's tip a single molecule across, forcing the following metal further inside the monster.

The sound as it struck made my ears ring, and the impact created a concussive wave that knocked down the brutes closest to the fight. I could see that people's ears were bleeding.

The Javelin sank only a foot and a half into the Endbringer.

I frowned.

“Finding the core will be a matter of time,” my voice said. I glanced around. “And I do not think this
city will survive the kind of battle that would take.”

Leviathan was scrabbling at the Javelin through its stomach. The Javelin held it in place in the air, unable to move in any direction.

“Everyone move as far back as you can!” my voice said as I hit the hard override. “If you do not want to die.”

Although the Brutes did not seem to be able to hear the command, those who still had their hearing communicated what they needed through gestures.

Another Tsunami was coming, this one twice the size of the last, and I doubted that the same kind of sonic trickery would work this time.

We gave everyone two minutes to get as far clear as they could, and then we began to twist the universe behind Leviathan in a way that felt wrong.

A moment later a portal opened in the sky behind Leviathan. Through the portal I could see the empty blackness of space.

Air rushed by with hurricane force; we shoved the javelin, pushing Leviathan toward the portal.

A moment later he was through the portal; before we could close it though, a massive impact struck us from behind. We tumbled through the air, and I saw a massive amount of water formed into the form of a fist.

Before we could react we were through the portal as well.

Suddenly there was utter silence; the only sound was that of my own breathing. We were spinning and as we did I saw what I thought to be the sun. From this distance it looked like a very bright star.

There was a planet below us. It was covered in ice, with what looked like many mountains covering it. It was small, at least as far as I could tell without anything to compare it to.

“Is that Pluto?” I asked.

My lips smirked.

We were being pushed further and further from the portal by the force of the atmosphere coming through it. I could feel us attempt to fly, but without the Earth's magnetic field there was nothing to grab hold of.

I started to panic. We'd be trapped in the void of space forever!

My grandfather simply released his hold on the compression of the Javelin, causing the whole thing to expand into its previous size.

The Endbringer was durable enough that this didn't immediately turn its body into a fine mist. Instead the Javelin expanded into the one direction actually available to it, flying back toward us at an incredible speed.

Newton's third law was in full effect. The expansion of the Javelin, which weighed a thousand times what Leviathan did in his normal state pushed back on him in the opposite direction at a speed that was much faster than the already tremendous speed at which it was coming toward us.

He was being sent in a direction past the orbit of Pluto.
I could see him trying to spray water in the opposite direction, but there wasn't enough water available to it to do much; the water evaporated away as fast as it was generated.

The Javelin flew toward us, now huge. Pieces of it broke off and pushed us toward the portal while the rest of it shoved past us.

It his us with a jolt that I felt even through my shield. A moment later we reached the rest of the anomaly and we were through.

The anomaly vanished as we flew through the air, landing in the bay.

The tsunami had lost its motive power from Leviathan, but it was still being propelled by the force of inertia.

I rose from the water and went straight up. I vibrated the amplifiers, and the wave partially collapsed.

“TAKE SHELTER!” my voice screamed through the hard override.

A moment later the tsunami hit.

It turned the houses closest to the docks into kindling wood, wiping out millions of dollars worth of property in the space of an instant.

If I hadn't hit it with the sonic frequencies I had it would have destroyed the whole city. As it was, it wiped out more of the city than I would have liked.

It took almost ten minutes for the waters to recede, and I wondered how many had died in Leviathan's last gesture toward humanity.

My beacon wasn't working. Apparently none of the others were working either.

“An unfortunate side effect of creating a portal that distance,” I heard myself say. “An electromagnetic pulse that will likely cause certain difficulties in the coming days.”

I found myself hoping that we founded the materials we needed for an Adamantium bullet soon. Doing more damage to a city than an Endbringer wasn't exactly going to help me reach the hearts and minds of the people.

Everyone seemed to be heading for the healers tents, possibly to get their ears looked at, so I formed metal stretchers from the remnants of the Javelin that had landed all over the landscape, creating so many craters that it looked like the moon.

I wondered if I'd killed anyone with that, maybe someone a little slower to follow the evacuation order than the others, or confident enough that they thought their powers would protect them.

There were more than forty people needing stretchers; half of them from damage from what my grandfather had done.

It took us ten minutes to reach the camp, and another thirty minutes before enough of the people in charge were healed to the point they could hear what I had to say.

“You opened a portal,” Alexandria asked.

My hands hesitated for a moment before I reached up and took the helmet off.

“Past Pluto,” I said. “On a path that will take it outside of the solar system. Even if he somehow
manages to slow himself using water and tries to come back, it'll take at least ten thousand years.”

My grandfather was helpfully feeding me the statistics I needed to know.

Alexandria was staring at me with a look that was unusually intense. I didn't like the glances she was making toward my helmet.

Everyone else was staring at me for a different reason. I saw mouths open and people sagging into chairs in shock.

Nothing humanity had ever done had more than superficially damaged an Endbringer. Getting rid of one permanently was big; at this point there was no doubt that I'd made my place in the history books forever, even if I dropped dead right now.

Suck on that Emma.

“Two more to go,” I said, smiling broadly at the assembled capes.
Planning

My tower had fallen on my neighbor's house. Fortunately, the same water that had knocked the tower over had destroyed all the houses in the neighborhood, so no one was likely to complain that much. At least the tower had pinned down some of his belongings.

That was more than my other neighbors had. There was nothing left other than the foundations of what had been their homes and a lot of scrap and lumber in the streets.

At least thirty percent of the city had been destroyed, and the parts that remained had been damaged in ways that would take years to repair.

My dream of revitalizing the city hadn't seemed unobtainable before, but as I looked at what was left I had to wonder if it wouldn't be better to relocate somewhere better.

Sending Leet's drones over the city while I was still in the heroes camp was just a precaution. The cell phone towers had mostly been destroyed. I had no doubt that the ones in the rich part of the city would be up soon while the ones in the poor districts would lag behind, or might never be repaired if people deserted the city in droves as seemed likely.

Glancing back at the assembled heroes, I noticed that many of them still seemed to be in shock. Endbringers had been the one constant in most of their lives especially as the average hero tended to be young. Heroes didn't often live to be old, and not simply since powers were a relatively new phenomenon.

“What are you doing?” Armsmaster asked.

I handed him my glasses.

He looked at them dubiously, then frowned. “This is Leet's work? I'm surprised you are willing to wear something like that so close to your face.”

“I keep my force field on under the glasses,” I said. “I'm not stupid.”

I didn't admit that I'd worn them under the force field until my grandfather's avatar had told me that would make any explosion even worse. That would be an ignominious end; my brain turned to chunky salsa by one of Leet's failed gadgets.

He scanned the device, then scowled. “The loss of property is worse than previous estimates.”

“Well, the whole city didn't sink,” I said. “But yeah, this is pretty much a disaster for the city. I was kind of hoping to get the city back on its feet again, but this...”

“Don't feel guilty for destroying property,” he said. “The world will thank you for what you've done, no matter the cost to this city.”

“I don't feel guilty,” I said sharply. “I'm just frustrated. Any time we seem to be getting ahead something comes up to knock it all down.”

“I've noted that,” he admitted. “I think your armored factory idea was a good start on helping the economy of the city.”

“It'll still happen,” I said. Staring out over the city I sighed. “I'm not sure it's going to make much of a
difference. There are going to be logistical challenges to dealing with a hundred thousand homeless people that I'm not ready to take on.”

“There's a reason the PRT exists,” he began.

“You don't have the manpower to do this,” I said, glancing at him. “Not and take care of your other duties in other cities. Assuming the United States government helps I'm still not sure its going to happen in time for some people.”

“We'll advocate with FEMA,” he said. “Although Endbringer disaster sites are sometimes underfunded.”

People tended to look at Endbringer cities as a lost cause. I tended to blame the Simurgh for that. New York was an obvious exception.

“Was there a reason you came over to talk to me?”

“We are gathering together a group to discuss and coordinate the recovery process,” Armsmaster said. “Strangely enough Lung was the one who suggested it, and he suggested that you might be interested in participating as well.”

I was silent for a moment. Apparently Lung was taking my suggestion to heart and was starting his plan early. Using the ABB to deliver food and supplies to people, while protecting their supplies would establish them as a legitimate authority in a city where other authority had long since broken down.

“There's been some disagreement about whether to include him or not, and some people are wondering about your input.”

“He's got eight hundred men,” I said. “Which is something none of the rest of us have. We need that kind of manpower if we're going to do what has to be done. That's my take on it. I'll be happy to talk to whoever about it.”

They still didn't know about my alliance with Lung.

Given that I was allied with the ABB and had destroyed the Empire, that meant that the only other major villain group in the city was the Merchants, assuming Butcher wasn't still floating around somewhere. There were still a few independent villains like Circus, and I suppose Coil was still out there.

None of them would be able to hold territory, not easily, which meant that we were the only game in town.

“In that case, there will be a meeting in thirty minutes,” he said. “It'll be at the third tent from the right, since most of the wounded have been cleared out.”

Panacea did good work. Also, as she'd said before, there hadn't been that many wounded, at least until I'd done my sonic tricks and whatever my portal had done to people.

With that he left.

He was treating me with more respect. It wasn't the fawning, awed looks I was getting from some of the heroes when they thought I wasn't looking, but it was more like he was treating me like an adult. It was nice not being patronized.
I had the sense that most of the heroes were a little reluctant to approach me. I wasn't sure if it was because of what they'd seen me do, or because of what they were afraid that I might do.

A fat man waddled over to me. He wore an ill fitting suit of armor, and he wheezed a little as he walked. It made me wonder what kind of hero that someone like that could possibly make.

“I once had a minion named Blob,” My grandfather's avatar commented. “He weighed almost a thousand pounds and his power was that he was so fat he could not be harmed.”

Sometimes I wondered if my grandfather's avatar might be embellishing things a little when he told me these stories. A man whose power was to be fat seemed a little weird.

“There was a hero who could grow stronger by becoming hugely obese,” it said. “Her team was mostly a joke, except when it had Squirrel Girl.”

Before I could say anything, the man had reached me.

“I want to thank you for saving my life,” he said.

I squinted at him. I didn't remember seeing him in the battle at all. Of course I had been focused on Leviathan, and most of the brutes on the ground hadn't even registered with me.

“He was crushing me when you knocked him off with one of your massive balls,” he said.

I stared at him, and he looked back at me silently for a moment, then smirked.

“I was just surprised that you didn't make them out of brass.”

“Are you secretly Assault in another costume?” I asked, semi seriously. “Because I haven't heard a pun that bad since...”

“Since you tested Leviathan's metal?” he asked, smirking.

I could hardly protest that it hadn't been me who'd made the pun. With my luck it was going to end up on T-shirts everywhere as a quote.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Chubster,” he said. At my look, he held up his hands. “I've got a sense of humor, so sue me. You live in a city with Clockblocker, Assault and Battery, so you can hardly say I'm the only one.”

I couldn't imagine living with a hero name like Chubster. In school, that would have been a nickname bullies assigned to you and taunted you with.

Had he been bullied and simply taken a name that had been a curse and tried to make something good out of it?

“It's not just heroes who have black humor,” he said. “Cops have it. So do doctors and paramedics. The kind of things we see day to day, it wears on a person. Sometimes you just have to laugh a little to get through the day.”

I stared at him for a moment, then nodded. That would explain a lot.

“I'm glad you aren't dead,” I said. “But I hope you can understand if I'd be happy if you were the last one to make the balls joke.”
“Well, the Internet is down,” he said. “So you might have some hope. But it won't be forever. I think you are about to have a degree of celebrity that you aren't used to, so I think it's important that you know it's good to laugh.”

I hadn't laughed in a long time, not really. The last time I could remember being open and happy enough to laugh was before Emma's betrayal. Even though I'd had my power to console me, losing her had damaged me.

Maybe the fat man was right.

“All right,” I said. “I'll think about it. Maybe catch a good movie in Boston when this is all over. I think we'll be busy for the time being though, so I doubt any of us will be doing a lot of laughing, at least right away.”

“When times are bad, that's when you need to laugh the most.”

Glancing back at the third tent, I sighed. “Well, I'm about to have a meeting with a bunch of people and I think it's going to be pretty gloomy. People will probably blame me for what happened.”

“I think you'll be surprised,” he said.

Taking a deep breath, I shrugged. “It'll be whatever it is.”

I heard a buzzing sound, and I glanced around. A swarm of bees was approaching.

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT TAYLOR?”

“Tone it down a little,” I said. “I'm here, so obviously I'm all right.”

I didn't mention having my arm blown off. It was fine, even if it was some kind of weird fish transplant.

Would that make me cannibal the next time I ate seafood? I wasn't sure.

Checking Dad's Endbringer shelter had been one of the first things I'd done with Leet's drones. It had been fine, but there had been a lingering worry that he might not have made it in time despite my warning.

It was a relief to have that small worry over with.

“Come up here as soon as you can,” I said. “The tower is on its side, and it doesn't look like I'll have time to put it back up for a little while.”

“Will do,” he said at a more normal tone, as normal as creepy bugs speaking could be anyway.

A sudden thought occurred to me. Loss of communication was a killer sometimes in situations like this; without phones people having heart attacks and medical emergencies couldn't get help. People couldn't be reunited with relatives. Responders couldn't coordinate with each other.

“How would you like to help put the city back together?” I asked. “Really help people I mean.”

“I helped people get to the shelters,” he said. “With my bugs. My powers seemed a lot stronger during the attack.”
It was probably the danger. People could do things when they were angry or afraid that they couldn't normally do. Did adrenaline work on powers?

“It can on some mutant powers,” My grandfather's voice said.

“People are going to need a lot more help,” I said. “You've led the Dockworkers all these years; we're going to need some leaders in the community who aren't gang members or thugs.”

I felt a little guilty for manipulating him like this, but he needed a sense of purpose. He'd been navel gazing for long enough that he was starting to have mold grow on him. Maybe this could be a blessing in disguise, as much as the pain and suffering of a hundred thousand people could be anyway.

“I'll be there when I can,” he said. “But it's a madhouse down here. I'll have to go by foot, and so it'll take a while.”

“How are you reaching this far then?” I asked.

“I'm getting stronger,” he admitted. “Which is weird.”

A moment later the swarm dissipated. It probably wasn't good to have flies and bugs near injured people anyway. If Dad got here in time I'd have him clear them out.

Chubster was staring at me.

“I live in a Cape family,” I said. “It's metal for me, bugs for him.”

“That's weird. Usually powers are more closely connected than that,” Chubster said.

I shrugged.

“I need to get going,” I said.

“If you are ever up around Los Angeles, give us a call. My daughter would probably like to thank you for saving my life. Oh, and probably for making it safe to go out in a bikini again.”

I allowed myself a small smile. “It was nice to meet you.”

Weirdly enough, I meant it.

I'd almost gotten used to the way people treated me, with fear and anxiety as though I was a bomb that was ready to go off. The glances I was getting from people now, an almost worshipful reverence made me deeply uncomfortable.

Chubster treated me like a normal person, and I appreciated that. Of course, it was obvious that he had courage. He had to in order to choose a name like Chubster and keep it.

I made my way to the tent Armsmaster had indicated, and I heard raised voices from inside.

“You've never shown any kind of civic responsibility before,” a woman's voice said. “Why now?”

I heard Lung speaking.

“I was in the camps after the fall of Japan, and I know better than anyone here what can happen when the world turns its back on a people. My nature tells me to protect my own people and allow everyone else to struggle, but new voices have convinced me that I am being short sighted.”
“You just want to consolidate power,” she said sharply.

“Of course, but is that entirely a bad thing? Most of the worst offenses by men nominally under my command were in response to racist attacks by the Empire. Left on our own we would prefer to be more of a civic pride group.”

The woman was silent for a moment before gasping out “Do you really think we'll believe that?”

I stepped into the room.

A heavyset red faced woman was leaning over the table with her hands gripping the edge. I didn't recognize her, but she had to be someone highly placed if she was willing to take potshots at Lung while he was within lunging distance.

Of course, the presence of Alexandria, Eidolon and Legend standing against the back wall of the tent might have had something to do with it.

“You'll pretend to,” I said. “Because we need the manpower if we aren't going to have a humanitarian disaster on the scale of some of Leviathan's bigger victories.”

The woman glanced at me and scowled.

“None of you have to tell me that it's very possible that me might have won the battle but lose the war. If we don't do something, it's not just that people are going to go hungry. They'll turn violent.”

“It happened in Japan,” Lung said. “And Japanese culture is much more... ordered than American. I fear that without Japanese discipline the death rate will be high here.”

“Like you care about how many whites die,” the woman said snidely.

“That sounded a little racist,” I said mildly. “Is there something you want to tell us?”

She glared at me, but didn't say anything else.

“Is FEMA doing anything?” I asked. “We need to get camps set up. People are going to need food, fresh water, and most importantly toilets. If they don't have them we'll have people getting sick faster than Panacea can heal them.”

“They are on their way,” the woman said. “But Endbringer attacks aren't like hurricanes. With hurricanes government has time to move supplies into place for a quick response time. Even with your warning, we had less than thirty minutes of warning, and its taking time for things to move through the chain of command. The governor has declared this a disaster area.”

“Making this a tent city isn't a good idea,” Alexandria said. “We're going to need Boston and other cities to take refugees.”

“How will we transport them?” Legend asked. “Strider may be powerful, but I suspect even he isn't up to the task of moving a hundred thousand people.”

“We should move the sickest people first,” I said. “People with diabetes, who have medical needs that require electricity- emphysema, COPD, stuff like that... if we don't do something they'll start dropping like flies.”

“How do we know they won't just be cheating the system?” the woman asked.

“We'll use the people we have to vet them as well as we can,” I said. “The ABB, the Dockworkers,
I've got a feeling that people know their neighbors. They'll know who is sick and who needs help.”

It wouldn't always be true, but it was the best I could think of, and I didn't hear my grandfather saying anything.

“Once that's done we need to get port a potties up here and we'll need tents, food, doctors... anybody who has organized a large outdoor concert can tell you some of the things you'll need.”

“I've been to Burning man,” Assault said.

“Of course you have.” The woman glared at me and Lung both. “I have deep reservations about this, but the one thing that you are right about is the need for manpower. I'll declare a temporary truce until all of this is over. That does not mean that you have been pardoned... you've pulled off enough crimes against humanity that you ought to be in the Birdcage.”

“I hope to prove that I'm a changed man,” Lung said. He sat calm and relaxed. “A businessman, and a community leader. Whatever I may have been in the past I'm turning over a new leaf.”

Lung was surprisingly good at lying.

“So we've got some planning ahead of us,” Legend said. “Let's talk about just what everyone is going to need to do.”
Apparently the others knew a lot more about logistics than I did.

My initial contribution was pretty much all I had to contribute. What did I know about organizing trucks and paying workers, directing volunteers to where they needed to go?

Many cities had plans in place for what happened in a variety of disasters, including hurricanes, fires, floods and the like. However Endbringer attacks were different. They were less predictable, and almost invariably city governments were completely disrupted.

The PRT had communication systems that would not take as long to repair as the communication systems of the Brockton Bay government. They had manpower and they had housing when many of the police were now among the homeless and displaced.

Lung, surprisingly seemed to know a lot more than I did. Apparently having been in a refugee camp gave him a very good idea of what things were needed and what potential pitfalls might arise because people didn't bring just one thing on time.

The needs were simple.

Food, water, shelter, medicine, toilets. Lights so that people didn't get killed in the darkness. Protection for the same reason.

Brockton Bay didn't have a police force large enough to help with this, and it would take time to mobilize the National Guard.

People needed transportation to shelters in the surrounding cities. Food alone was going to be a massive undertaking. Feeding a hundred thousand people was going to be a challenge all on its own; most people ate three to five pounds of food a day, which meant that they'd consume a hundred and fifty tons to two hundred and fifty tons of food every day.

That was a lot of Happy Meals.

Worse, people would have to load and unload all the food, and then distribute it to people so that everyone got food equally. Lung had seen food riots because some people thought that others were getting food when there was simply none to be had.

Society depended on trust, and when everything broke down you had to keep people's trust or everything would go to hell faster than you could manage it.

The one good thing was that Wal Marts and Sam's clubs from the surrounding five states were stripping their warehouses of water and food. They were loading the food into metal shipping containers, which they would apparently be happy to have me transport.

There weren't enough tents for everyone, but tarps could be used. Strider had agreed to transport groups of the most ill to surrounding hospitals, and Lung’s people would be out in the neighborhoods, letting people know where the shelters were going to be set up and that transportation was available for the ill.

Despite everything we were trying to do, people were going to die. Those with cars were already trying to leave the city and there had been traffic accidents. With the hospitals incapacitated, doctors were limited to what they could accomplish.
Panacea was making up for her previous lack of work.

Logistics as it turned out was incredibly boring after a while. Getting lost in minutia wasn't something I really wanted to do. With everyone's permission, I took a PRT cellphone, and set out to Boston for the first of the Big Box stores.

I was gone for four hours, and by the time I returned I had twenty storage containers floating behind me, filled with as much as the corporations could fill them with.

Brockton Bay was the first city ever to beat an Endbringer, and as such it represented hope in a way that previous cities hadn't. Most people didn't want to think about Switzerland or Japan or any of the other places ravaged by the Endbringers.

Being on record as having helped the Endbringer Ending city was probably going to provide the corporation with incredible public relations advantages, or maybe I was just being cynical.

Using the storage containers for shelters sounded like a good idea to me, but my grandfather informed me that they sometimes had toxic chemicals inside of them that weren't healthy, both from wooden flooring on the inside with chemicals for pests, and from paints with phosphorous and chromate.

As I reached the future site of the refugee camp, I began laying the supplies out in a grid pattern, spaced over the future sight of the camp. The camp was still sparsely populated; people were undoubtedly going home to see how bad the damage was and whether they could salvage anything.

That would change by nightfall, and so we needed to be ready. There weren't a lot of tents, and I wasn't really sure what was in the various storage containers, so I settled on setting them down randomly, spacing them out as wide as I could.

Looking back at Brockton Bay, I could see that the city was dark.

I saw an Asian kid waving from the ground. I dropped down to stare at him. It took me a moment to recognize him. It was Wu, the boy who'd come with Lung during our first meeting.

“What are we supposed to do with all of this?” he asked.

“It's supposed to go to the refugees. Get it to the people who need it, but make sure no one is hoarding or going back for more than their share.”

He nodded. “I'll spread the word.”

I returned to the healers camp, and as I landed I saw the mayor stepping inside the tent. He looked haggard and pale.

Stepping inside after him, I saw other people I didn't know. From the way they were dressed they were probably officials of the local government. All of them looked like they'd gone through hell.

“Communications are down,” a man I didn't recognize was saying. “We've been passing out as many walkie talkies as we can, but it's not much of a solution. It'll cripple our ability to respond to any emergencies, especially medical emergencies. There will likely be fires, too. There always are during this kind of thing, especially if the power and gas gets restored without anyone there. There's been enough damage that we could easily lose another portion of the city.”

“FEMA is taking it's sweet time,” another official groused. “They say it may take a couple of days to get the things they need together from Atlanta and get it here.”
“I could go down there and take it,” I said. “If we really need it that bad.”

“Who are you?” the official asked, looking down his nose at me.

“Taylor Hebert,” I said. I smiled sweetly at him. “Just get me a list and I'll go and pick up what we need. I've already delivered twenty storage containers to the site from Wal Mart and some of the other Big Box stores.”

Everyone in the room that I didn't recognize froze for a moment, staring at me. Some of them nodded respectfully, while others simply continued staring.

The official paled and he stumbled back. “I'm sorry I didn't...”

I shook my head.

The mayor stepped forward and said, “As much as I'd love to do an end run around the red tape, I suspect that stealing from the United States government won't do us any favors when it comes time to get the money we need to put things back together.”

“We need port-a-potties today,” I said. “And I'm not really sure what all the stores loaded the containers with; it might all be bottled water for all I know.”

“The weather report earlier today said it will be cold,” the first man said. “In the forties. We need heaters and power and a lot of things if people aren't going to freeze...blankets at least.”

“The best bet will be to take care of any traffic jams as quickly as we can. Anyone who has the means is trying to get out of the city until this all blows over. That means that the people left behind will be the ones who either didn't have money in the first place or who have lost so much they can't do anything else.”

The mayor shook his head.

“I'm afraid some of them won't come back. It always happens that way in Endbringer cities. Still, the more of them leave the easier it will be to take care of everyone else.”

I understood. Fewer mouths to feed, fewer logistics challenges. If they were in a hotel in Boston they weren't our responsibility.

Lung was no longer in the room, but the older Wu was. It occurred to me suddenly that Asians sometimes reversed their names. Was this man Wu's father or uncle? I could see a family resemblance if I squinted the right way.

“We will have a field hospital set up tomorrow within the camp,” the elder Wu said. “It will be set up to treat minor injuries and to be a central position for people with more serious injuries to go in order to be sent away for treatment.”

“You've got doctors?” the mayor asked incredulously.

“Field medics,” Wu said calmly. “Our former activities could sometimes be hazardous, and going to formal hospitals could be problematic.”

“I don't suppose these medics have any formal qualifications?”

“Some of them are licensed paramedics,’ Wu said. “The others will officially just be helping as volunteers.”
The mayor scowled, but he glanced at me and then didn't say anything.

I felt someone tap on my shoulder. I turned and saw that it was my dad. In contrast to the others, he actually looked better than he had in days. There was a look of determination on his face that I hadn't seemed in a long time. He stood a little straighter, and there was a confidence in the way he looked that hadn't been there since mom died.

Hugging him tightly, I held on for a while.

Finally I pulled back and looked at him.

“I'm glad you're all right,” he said. “And I'm proud of you.”

Glancing at the men gathered around the room, he said, “I've got the Dockworkers working to set up distribution in the southeast quadrant. That'll leave the Northwest and Northeast quadrant to the ABB and the Southwest quadrant to volunteers from the Red cross. They've already shown up and they seem pretty open to doing things our way.”

“I'm a little concerned about the border between our territories,” Wu said. “Our organizations have not always gotten along harmoniously.”

“I'll keep my guys under control. I'll keep the hotheads on the far side of the park. You do that on your end, and we shouldn't have much of a problem.”

As a ranking member of the Dockworkers Dad had a lot of experience with logistics I realized suddenly. After all, the Dockworkers had once been all about getting things to people who needed them efficiently.

What's more, people here were listening to him. Whether it was because he was the head of the dockworkers, or because of his association with me it didn't matter. People were giving him the kind of respect that he hadn't had in a long time, and he was obviously responding to that.

I patted him on the back fondly.

“If you all think of something I can do, send someone for me,” I said.

It was difficult knowing exactly what to do. I could build people houses, assuming I could find enough metal, but I doubted that most people would want to live in metal houses. My neighbor was an example of some of the people who would doubtlessly try to sue if I tried to build houses without asking them.

I could repair pipes that were broken, but would that be the best use of my abilities?

Leet might be able to devise something to heat the people and maybe even shelter them, but his inventions tended to explode, which wouldn't do much for our reputations.

“You could build Quonset huts,” my grandfather's avatar said. “They were used during the War for all sorts of purposes.”

Images and construction schematics filled my mind.

“Ok, but where will we get the metal? We'll need to build a couple of thousand of these by nightfall, so we can't go far.”

“We could probably get by with a thousand of them if we make them large; eighty feet by eighty feet
perhaps.”

“Still,” I said.

“Start with the debris from the destroyed buildings. If necessary you can cannibalize the tower. I
know you decided the throne was not in good taste.”

I scowled. I'd just started to like the tower; losing it now would leave me without a place to stay.

“Have you ever considered an asteroid base?” my grandfather's avatar asked mildly. “It takes care of
all of the problems with neighbors and the views are spectacular.”

“Even assuming that the people of the world didn't assume it was a declaration of war, it would be a
little hard for Dad to come home for dinner.”

“Islands are also nice,” my grandfather's avatar said. “Perhaps you can raise one in the bay and give
your father a boat.”

Scowling I lifted into the air.

It occurred to me suddenly that my grandfather could have used his power to control gravity to fly in
space. Why hadn't he?

“Flight by gravity control is less quick than by magnetism,” he said. “And I was afraid that the
monster had tricks we hadn't seen yet. I wanted to be far away before he had a chance to do
something unexpected.”

Ok, that seemed reasonable.

“Also, what we did was more dramatic.”

Wait. What?

“I hadn't had a body in a long time and I wanted to flex my muscles a little bit.”

“The next time you take my body, just take care of things. Don't do things just because they have
flair.”

I was beginning to see why he'd been defeated so many times. He'd probably stood around
monologuing until someone had a chance to bash him in the head.

Flying over the city, I began pulling metal up from the ruins of the destroyed houses. There were
thousands of houses that had been destroyed, but each house only had so much metal. I pulled metal
from wherever I could, although I didn't do anything to buildings that looked like they might be
salvageable.

It took me forty five minutes and five passes over the city.

A brick factory had been largely destroyed, so I used some of the metal to lift a large quantity of
bricks. At least half of the bricks had been destroyed, so I took what was left.

By the time I reached the camp ground more people were already arriving, most of them by foot. I'd
cheated a little by stealing metal from destroyed cars. People could declare them washed out to sea
and the insurance companies would pay, assuming there was not an Endbringer rider.

It didn't take long to build the first of the huts. My grandfather informed me that they were supposed
to be set up on concrete foundations, so I put metal stakes deep in the earth on each one to provide some stability. It hadn't helped the tower against Leviathan, but if we faced something like that again, everyone was dead anyway.

I didn't bother with doors on the end of the buildings; I was trying to build these as quickly as I could.

Within ten minutes I'd built fifty of the structures. I was already running out of material though, so I flew to the tower.

Disassembling it seemed like admitting defeat, but we didn't really have much of sentimental value inside. I'd simply have to build something better; I wasn't sure Dad had liked living in an all metal building anyway. I think he was afraid that a single lightning storm would be the end of us.

Like I hadn't compensated for that.

Pulling away the metal I looked down and sighed.

Returning, I was able to double my rate by building multiple buildings at once. Soon the Dockworkers were holding people back, and swarms of insects warned anyone who didn't want to take direction.

Building them all took three hours, including two more trips back to the tower. It used up most of the metal in the tower, but hopefully it would be worth it. I was sure Dad would approve. Preserving the city had been one of his goals for as long as I could remember.

I saw that Lung was keeping his word; Asian gang members were handing out food and water, not just to their own people, but to everyone.

They were keeping the peace too: I saw several intervening in fights that started to break out.

The floor of each hut was lined with brick; not only would this provide weight and stability, but I'd run an electric wire through the bricks and then under the ground. When electricity was passed through the bricks, they'd heat up.

It was a system my grandfather told me was sometimes used to take advantage of cheap nighttime energy.

I proceeded to build two windmills with the remainder of the metal, one for each side of the camp. They weren't as large as I wanted, but they'd have to do. With luck they'd provide power to warm the huts, and to provide power for at least some lighting and other things that the camp needed. The power would be intermittent and spotty, but at least it would help keep people warm.

A swarm rose up to me.

“There's enough for the people who have shown up... barely. We'll be in trouble tomorrow morning if help doesn't come.”

“Help will come,” I said. “I'm make sure of it if I have to go to Washington and talk to the people in charge.”

“Try not to get into a fight with the government,” Dad said. “We're going to need them if we're going to get through all of this.”

The old Dad would have sounded exhausted and depressed. Although he sounded a little tired, Dad
sounded motivated.

“I had to use the tower to make all of this,” I said.

Dad was silent for a minute. “Well, I guess that means we're sleeping in a hut tonight.”

“How do you feel about an island?” I asked.
“It’s her,” I heard the voices whispering.

A low murmur filled the crowd. As I walked through the crowd, people parted on both sides of me. The noise of the crowd quickly fell silent.

We were at the center of the camp. The main medical tents had been set up there so that no quadrant was any farther away than any of the others. It had also been turned into the inadvertent center of government.

A massive crowd had gathered here, angry people demanding things that the administration couldn't deliver. Looking around I had to assume that there were more than ten thousand people gathered, and from the sound of it people were getting close to violence.

“Who put a group of thugs in charge?” one man, angrier than the others was shouting. “A group of Chinks shouldn't be telling righteous citizens what to do.”

It was almost funny how quickly people stepped back from me. It might have been the fact that I was floating a foot off the ground, or it might have been that at least some of them had seen me put together the shelters earlier in the day.

In any case my reputation apparently preceded me.

The people I passed were staring at me in ways that even the Capes hadn't, as though I was some combination of the savior and the devil all at once.

I even saw a few people make the sign of the cross. Did they think I was that vindictive?

Lung was coming from the opposite direction. The people were giving just as wide a berth to him, but the expression on people's faces was less friendly. The ABB had done a lot of damage in their time, which was something that most people would be slow to forgive.

I had hopes that could change. Some of that would depend on how Lung handled the encounter we were about to have.

Reaching the center of the group, I saw that the mayor and his aides looked harried and anxious. If we hadn't shown up it was likely there would have been violence in spite of the mayor's bodyguards, all of whom had ditched their usual suits and were now wearing what looked like slacks and shirts that hadn't been washed in a couple of days.

Everyone else looked worse.

“I'm sure you don't mean to suggest that you followed the Empire,” I said mildly as I stepped behind the man. “Because their ideology is quite... dead in this town.”

He turned and stared at me.

“Who the hell are you, bitch?”

“Funny you should ask that,” I said. “It's the question I'm sure Kaiser had when he died, that Leviathan had when he was sent floating out into the eternal void of space forever. It's the question that a lot of people are going to have, and I've got one answer.”
He suddenly seemed to notice that my feet weren't touching the ground, which was why I was facing him eye to eye.

“I am a child of Brockton Bay. This is my city, and you are all my people... unless you want to be my enemy.”

A man standing behind him whispered in his ear and the color drained from the man's face. He stumbled back.

I turned and faced the crowd.

“Most cities attacked by the Endbringers get ignored, left behind by a people who don't want to be reminded of the guilt and horror they feel. People worry if they talk about the Endbringers that they will bring bad luck. Seeing a survivor simply reminds them that it could have been them... and it still could be.”

I floated up five feet and looked out over the crowd.

Projecting my voice over the crowd was easy; no one in the crowd was speaking at all.

“Does the rest of the world care about any of us? They should. People have always assumed that the Endbringers could not be beaten. Insurance companies consider them to be Acts of God, and governments often write off entire cities. The thing is, today we have proven that they are not invincible.”

I paused and stared out over the crowd. Lung was standing at the edge of the inner circle staring at me through his mask.

“They can be beaten, and this was the city that proved it. Brockton Bay isn't just one more defeat; it's a symbol of hope.”

One particularly brave soul piped up. “What does any of this have to do with us?”

“I plan to make this city the shining jewel it once was... the kind of place where people can live good, happy lives. Unfortunately that can't happen unless we work together. If we fight among ourselves the rest of the world will point and say that we aren't worth saving.”

“We're hungry,” one man said. “There was too much water and not enough food.”

“You can go a night without food,” I said. “Water is more important. There is a fleet of trucks coming from FEMA. If they choose not to come, then I will go to their warehouse, rip the roof off and take what we need. Whatever happens there will be food tomorrow.”

The crowd murmured among themselves for a moment.

“Nobody prepared for this,” I said. “And so services are slow to come. That doesn't mean that we are forgotten. I understand how upsetting it is; I lost my home too. But the only way we will get through this is if we all work together.”

“We've got gang members distributing the food. How do we know they aren't keeping the best stuff for themselves?” a heavyset man said angrily. “Or if not them, then the fat pigs that run the city? Everybody knows they take bribes.”

“The honorable Lung has spoken to me about his desire to turn over a new leaf. Despite that, I suspect that none of his men would like to make him angry. No one wants to awaken a sleeping
dragon after all.”

I glanced at Lung, who stared at all of us impassively.

“However, should there be complaints about anyone, bring them to the section chiefs. They are the ones wearing the green scarves. They'll make sure anyone mistreating others is kept in line.”

“And if they're the ones abusing us?”

“Talk to me or Lung,” I said. “If you think it's important enough. Of course, if you keep pestering us with unimportant crap, I think we'll both be... irritated. We all know what happened to the last being who irritated me... he's going on a one way trip.”

The crowd broke into conversation, but it was soon clear that the danger was over. I floated to the ground and approached Lung.

“Walk with me?” I asked.

He grunted.

For some reason he always seemed more eloquent with the PRT than he did with me. Perhaps it was because he enjoyed needling them and he did not want to risk needling me.

Or maybe he just didn't have that much to say to me.

“They will never accept me or my kind,” he said, as we left the crowd behind. “It is foolish to assume otherwise.”

“Your people did kidnap and enslave women, push drugs and force people to pay money or have their houses burned down,” I said. “That tends to stick in the mind a bit.”

“So why all of this?” he asked.

“Their houses are already burned down, at least metaphorically. They'll remember the people who helped them put it back together. The fact that the government and PRT isn't doing anything fast enough is an opportunity for us.”

I looked out at the sea of campfires in the darkness. It spread across the horizon. Using electric lights was limited to government areas, and a lot of people had resorted to the thing that people had always done, going to bed when the sun went down.

Enough people had stayed up to make the camp look like a sea of stars. There was more than enough wood for everyone to have fires, although I worried about the chemicals in the paint and varnish that covered the remnants of destroyed houses.

“People are looking for a lifeline, and if they see us as the ones who give it to them they'll follow us instead of the PRT and the government. If you ever wanted to be something more than just a thug and a warlord, this is your chance.”

It sounded cold when I put it that way, and in part it was true. I needed to create a movement if I was going to save the city. I needed to be people's guiding star if I was to make the city better.

My hope, though, was that individual members of the ABB would actually like helping people. Not all of them were soulless monsters. Many of them had probably joined because they had no place to go. Give them a chance to be heroes, to feel what it was like to have real respect and to be admired
instead of feared, and I suspected that a lot of them would go for it.

It might even work on Lung.

“‘You are more of a villain than I am,’” Lung said, looking down at me. His tone didn't sound critical; it almost sounded like he admired me. “‘After all, I was content to simply rule over my domain and never try for more, but you would eat the entire world with your ambition.’”

I held my hand up. “I don't want the world. Just a little part of it. Maybe an island somewhere.”

“You wish to save the Bay. How will you do that when the entire world is going to end? The only way that will change is if you save the entire world, which will mean you will need allies everywhere.”

“I've heard something about that,” I admitted. “But how do you know?”

“Isn't it obvious? We are coming to the end of days. Walk in any city and you will see a concealed horror in people's eyes. They laugh, but it is hollow. Why do you think I was content to sleep. If dying was inevitable, why fight?”

“Because it's not,” I said.

“I never believed that before today,” he admitted. “I find myself actually interested in what tomorrow might bring.”

“Problems if we don't get more toilet paper,” I said.

I'd managed to deliver one thousand port a potties at the last minute, taken from a dozen companies in the five states surrounding us. It was barely enough, but they were already getting disgusting, which was only going to make people more angry.

He chuckled. “It's always about toilet paper and the next meal.”

“They wouldn't be people if they didn't complain,” I said. “We've got to do something, though, or it's going to turn ugly.”

“Take what you need,” he said. “If the government complains, go to the press. Make them look like people who don't care about American citizens. They will capitulate.”

It was funny that I found myself agreeing more with Supervillains than with Superheroes, even though I'd always wanted to be a hero.

I glimpsed a face in the back of the crowd, one that was familiar in a way that made my heart drop into the bottom of my stomach.

What was she doing here? Was she stalking me, or had the affected area somehow included her house?

“I'll talk to you later,” I said.

I vanished into the darkness, something that was much easier because it was after all very dark in the spaces between campfires. I had no doubt that there would be crimes committed in this space; human nature was too ugly for people to simply work together, even for one single night.

The smart thing to do would be to stay together, but there were always people who were foolish, or maybe who needed to go to the restroom.
Still, I had a lock on the iron in her blood. I could feel her making her way rapidly away from the crowd, and I cheated and flew over several of the buildings I had made.

I dropped into a path in the darkness, one she was making her way up presumably to whatever hut her family had made their temporary abode.

She paused for a moment, gasping for air.

“Hey Emma,” I said mildly.

The moon came out, and I saw the blood drain from her face. She staggered back as though I’d struck her.

“D...don't hurt me,” she said.

“Why would I hurt you?” I asked. “Aren't we friends?”

“W...what?”

“We said we'd be friends forever,” I said.

She was silent, staring at me like I was the Simurgh standing in front of her, ready to pull her sanity from her head and make her into a living bomb.

“I beat Leviathan today,” I said. I paused. “You know, I think that's the first time anyone has ever got to say that and mean it?”

She still didn't speak, although I could hear her hyperventilating.

“You know how I got rid of him, right? I opened a portal into interstellar space, to a place where no hero or villain has been able to go. I dropped him into a void that doesn't have air, where you freeze on one side and boil on the other, and you can't even scream because there is no sound.”

I stepped forward and she swayed on her feet. I reached out and grabbed her arm.

She was trembling like a rabbit, and her eyes were as huge as saucers as she stared at me.

“Funny thing about doing something like that,” I said. “Somebody could just go... missing, and nobody would ever know what had happened to them. They'd just drift out in space forever with no one to mourn them. It'd be the perfect murder.”

I tightened my grip on her shoulder until it was almost painful. Leaning forward, I said in her ear, “And even if they did figure out who did it, what do you think they'd do to someone who'd gotten rid of one of the Endbringers?”

She fell to her knees and I patted her on her head.

“Asking for forgiveness is one of the steps, or at least that's what I hear,” I said.

“I...I'm sorry,” she said.

“Don't say that to me,” I said. “There's a whole line of people you've screwed over. It's funny; even Lung can turn over a new leaf. I'm working with the ABB to make the world a better place, and you are still here doing what you can to make everyone miserable.”

I heard her retching on the ground.
“There was a time when I thought about you constantly, thinking about what we had. Now? I'm going to put this city back together, and people are going to look up to me. You'll be back to where you always were... petty and spiteful.”

Stepping into the night I wondered why bullying always felt so much better than being a nice person. Were we inherently evil?

I hated that I was so petty. I should have been the better person and not taken out my anger on someone who was at the end of the day beneath me.

My shield stopped something being thrown at me from behind.

Emma screamed and scrambled to her feet, running toward me. I didn't look back, even when I felt her bounce off my shield, falling back into the puddle of puke.

“You aren't worth thinking about, really,” I said.

With that I rose into the air and headed out into the night.

There were enough people that wanted me dead that I'd built my own shelter with thicker walls than those of everyone else. After all, while the Empire was dead there had been a lot of sympathizers. I was sure that not all of the ABB was happy with the new direction their organization was going. Butcher could teleport; there wasn't much I could do about that, although I had recovered my chain mail blanket from the tower. My building had lockable doors too.

Our building was personal sized instead of a communal building like everyone else had, a luxury I doubted anyone begrudged me. The last thing I wanted was for one of my roommates to slit my throat while I was sleeping.

Dad was sitting around a communal fire with ten men I recognized as members of the dockworkers. He was laughing, and his laugh was freer than I'd heard in a long time.

He was looking better too.

He glanced up at me; apparently his bugs warned him what was going on at all time.

“Taylor!” he called out, this time with his human throat.

He gestured and the men sitting on logs beside him moved quickly to make room.

I landed beside them. They were roasting marshmallows of all things and making S'Mores. I knew most of them, even if only casually because they'd been over to our house for barbecues, back in the good days before Mom died.

“Taylor!” Kurt said. He was sitting on the other side of my Dad. “We all expected great things from you, but ending Endbringers wasn't part of it.”

I smiled and I felt myself relaxing.

It was funny. As time went on I felt more and more like I had a persona that I had to use in front of people. Even though I'd chosen not to bother with a mask it was like I was wearing one for the world nonetheless.

These people knew me from before, though, and despite the fact that I was practically an Endbringer myself, they considered me one of them.
I laughed and took a marshmallow with a stick on it.

It wasn't until a couple of hours later that I got up to head for my small hut. Dad and the others were staying up talking about old times, and one of the men was passing a liquor flask around. I had a flash of worry for Dad, but I suspected that he'd be fine.

As I approached the door to my hut, which was set well away from the fire, I realized that there was someone standing in the doorway.

I wondered why Dad hadn't seen them.

As she stepped out of the door and into what little moonlight and reflected light from the fire existed I blinked.

I couldn't make out who she was in the darkness, but I could recognize her voice the moment she spoke.

“Hello Taylor.”

Why was Alexandria standing at my door?
“You’ve been busy over the last few weeks,” Alexandria said. “Which is surprising, considering that you’ve had your powers for years.”

I could barely see her face in the darkness, but I shrugged anyway. I didn’t need my grandfather to know that she was trying to keep me off balance by stating something that I’d kept secret, even if it would have been relatively easy to deduce from my art sales.

I’d admired her for a long time. Once she’d been my hero; I’d had Armsmaster panties, but Alexandria was the culmination of what I’d dreamed of being. When I was younger I’d have squeed at getting to meet her, and I’d have been her biggest fangirl. Even now there was a trace of the old excitement, but I shoved it down violently.

The Protectorate always had ulterior motives, and she was one of their most important members. They’d left a bad taste in my mouth. I wondered if she was here to have me drop the lawsuit, or if she wanted me to join.

Neither one of those was going to happen. I didn’t care about the money anymore, but I was going to see Sophia in jail and Emma too.

Why had Emma been out of jail anyway? Alan had probably paid bail even if he had to mortgage his house. He’d always given her anything she wanted no matter whether it was good for her or not.

“People keep pushing me,” I said. “What did you expect me to do? There aren’t many individual people that I actually care about. Hurting them is really just hurting yourself.”

She was silent for a moment. I hoped she caught my warning.

Alexandria was supposed to be invincible, but I’d seen videos of previous Endbringer fights in which Leviathan had tried to push her head under the water and she’d worked awfully hard to make sure that didn’t happen.

If she needed to breathe it didn’t matter how strong she was. All it would take was a force field wrapped tight around her head like a plastic bag and she’d be gone inside of a minute. As long as I kept her from disrupting my concentration during that time, she was dead.

If that didn’t work, I could always give her the Viserys treatment. Molten metal over her head wouldn’t bother her, but in her lungs probably would.

Even if I was wrong, all I’d have to do was give her the Leviathan treatment. It’d take her a while to get back even given all her speed.

She stared at me and stiffened. She was rumored to have a thinker power. I wondered if she’d just realized that I knew how to kill her.

“People talk about Capes as though they are all the same, but that’s not true. There are definite differences between the power levels of someone like Chubster or Skidmark and someone like me. You’ve proven yourself to be one of the capes at the top tier.”

“So?” I asked. “I didn’t ask for this power.”

“But you have it, and that means you have responsibilities that other people don’t have.”
“That sounds familiar,” my grandfather's avatar murmured, but he didn't elaborate.

“Are you saying I haven't been living up to my responsibilities?” I asked. “Because if you know of any I'd like to hear them.”

“You've been working with villains,” she began.

“Like the Protectorate doesn't?” I asked. “It's an open secret that you use reformed villains... and sometimes villains that aren't even reformed, like Shadow Stalker.”

She sighed. “Aren't you ever going to let that go?”

“No,” I said. “You let that girl torture me for two years because she was useful.”

“Like you're using Lung?” she asked. “His men kidnapped girls and raped them. They've murdered people. They've done everything the Empire did, except that they didn't do it to you or yours. How is that any different from what you accuse us of doing?”

“Because I'm making them better,” I said. “Hiring Shadow Stalker wasn't the problem. The problem was that you purposefully ignored the fact that she was still hurting people. If you'd stopped her and turned her into a real hero I'd be first in line to applaud you.”

“What makes you think that we even knew anything about her?”

“Because that was your responsibility,” I said. “You knew she was a closet sadist, and yet you left her in the middle of a school full of children who couldn't defend themselves. If I hadn't been as strong willed as I am, she'd have been dead in an alley somewhere with the iron in her blood yanked out of her body.”

“You can do that?” she asked, startled.

“I can do more than that if I have to,” I said. “I'm not Manton limited, and if I want to murder someone it would be as easy as a simple act of will.”

She was silent for a moment. “You think it's not like that for me? I live in a world of wet tissue paper, where killing someone would be as simple as pushing just a little too hard. Neither one of us can afford to get angry, not if we want to remain human.”

“Who says we are?” I asked.

From my grandfather's perspective I wasn't human at all. I personally didn't agree with him; I suspected that his whole homo superior spiel was part of what had led the humans of his earth to reject mutants. Insisting that you aren't only different but actually non-human, and then complaining when people treat you as a non-human seemed like it wasn't the brightest strategy in the world. Not that I'd tell him that. He seemed really touchy about the mutant rights thing.

“That's not a road you want to go down,” she said sharply. “The whole reason the Protectorate exists is to keep humans and parahumans from going to war with each other.”

“I thought they were there to, you know, protect people?”

“That's just what we tell people so that they'll accept us,” she said. “We need them to see us as not only human but as more than human; otherwise we'll all be facing sniper bullets that will hit us before we even hear the sound of the thing that killed us.”
“It wouldn't bother you much,” I said.

“But it would Vista, or Clockblocker. Armsmaster has to be out of costume sometimes. The number
of capes who can't be killed by conventional human weapons is actually fairly small. Even most
brutes are in trouble if they are hit with an anti-tank weapon or a Hellfire missile. A nuke will kill
almost anyone.”

She stepped forward.

“Ordinary people outnumber us by eight thousand to one, and if they wanted to exterminate us, it
wouldn't be that difficult. That's the kind of genocide the Protectorate was designed to stop. Helping
people is just a benefit. It's a little like policing; the police are not legally required to protect anyone. I
can show you the legal precedents if you wish.”

“That seems kind of terrible,” I said. “So you are saying heroes aren't really heroes... they dance
around in costumes and play cowboys and Indians so regular people won't kill us?”

“I prefer cops and robbers, but yes.”

“So why bother with any of it if it's all fake?”

“It's not,” she said. “The Endbringers are real. There's a reason people give heroes and villains the
kind of leeway they do, and it's not just PR trickery. It's because the world is really under threat, and
we have to do everything we can to save it.”

“The Endbringers are a danger,” I admitted. “But they don't really kill as many people as humans do
to themselves.”

“They are a smaller portion of the real threat,” she said. “Didn't you ever wonder where powers
come from?”

I shrugged. “I assumed it was some kind of biological phenomenon.”

“Powers come from alien experimentation on the human genome,” my grandfather's avatar said.
“Giving humans the ability to manifest powers and mutants the ability to do so spontaneously. Aliens
experimented on humanity before we'd mastered fire.”

I tried to keep my surprise from showing on my face, but I must have failed in spite of the lack of
light.

“Uh...alien experimentation?”

“How did you know?” she asked sharply.

“What, that's right? There was a kid at my old school who had a lot of whacked out conspiracy
theories and that was one of them.”

“Do you remember anything from the day you triggered?” she asked. “After you triggered and
before you got your powers I mean?”

I shook my head.

“Pity. Very few people retain those memories. There are Entities who live in another dimension.
They send parts of themselves into people, granting them powers.”

“That... seems strange. Why would they do something like that?”
“To learn,” she said. “They aren't very imaginative, so they leech off the creativity of other species to learn how to use their powers in new ways.”

“That doesn't seem that bad,” I said. “So they give us powers and then they get them back when we die. It seems like a good trade.”

“And what do they learn if all the people they give powers to is make small statues and sell them at trade fairs?”

“How to make better statues?”

“There has to be conflict,” she said. “So not only do they make sure to send the parts of themselves to the most damaged people they can, but they also push them toward conflict. To make it even worse the have agents who push that conflict even further.”

“Endbringers,” I said.

“When they get what they wanted they destroy the world,” she said. “Not just this world, but all of the alternative versions of the world so that humanity will be completely extinct in every timeline that ever was, and that could be.”

I stared at her. I'd heard vague predictions that the world would end, but this seemed a lot more concrete than what I'd heard before.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“We fight back,” she said. “We've managed to kill one of them already, through an accident and sheer luck mostly. The other won't be nearly so easy to kill. He has a projection on this planet, pretending to be a hero.”

“Eidolon, right?” I asked.

She stared at me for a moment. “What?”

“It's kind of suspicious the way that he has every power,” I said. “But if he was the one who'd created them...”

“Scion, it's Scion,” she said hurriedly.

“Scion?” I asked.

Of course if had to be the most powerful parahuman on the planet. When people talked about power levels, it was generally assumed that Eidolon was the most powerful, but that was because people didn't even consider Scion or the Endbringers in the same category as all the others.

Apparently people were right.

“Scion wants to destroy the human race?”

“He's a projection,” she said. “But not completely. Part of his existence is here while the rest of his body is stored elsewhere on an abandoned earth, safe from anything we might throw at him.”

“How long do we have?” I asked.

“Two to thirty years, depending on a number of factors,” she said.
I stared at her, suddenly feeling numb. The entire world being destroyed, possibly in two years? It was like being told that you had a fatal, incurable disease.

It was almost impossible for me to process.

“There's a reason that we don't tell the public,” she said. “If people knew it was all going to be over they'd riot in the streets. There would be chaos... and what little we could have possibly accomplished would be impossible.”

“Does the whole Protectorate know?” I asked.

The thought that even little Vista was burdened with the knowledge of the end of the world was incomprehensible. She was just a child, a grade schooler most likely.

“No,” Alexandria said. “There are just a few of us who have been trying to find a way to stop the world from ending.”

“Why?” I asked. “I understand that you can't tell regular people, but surely... “

“How many people can truly keep a secret?” she asked. “Every person who is told is a risk, and if it becomes public the odds are that Scion himself will hear about it sooner or later. If that happens he will likely choose to end this little experiment sooner than later.”

I was silent, staring at her. “So you're the Illuminati, and you are here to recruit me.”

There wasn't any other reason she'd be telling a secret this important to a fifteen year old girl. If I was her, I wouldn't tell any secret at all to a girl my age. After all, teenagers were horrible gossips.

“And your father,” she said. “After all, he's been listening this entire time.”

Right. Of course he had been.

“I'm surprised you'd come to me, considering that I don't particularly love the Protectorate.”

“You care about this city and its people. If you didn't, you'd have never shown up to the Endbringer fight in the first place. If the world ends, the city ends too. You won't be able to hide on another world either.”

“We could make an ark,” I said. “I could gate us past the Simurgh, send us to another solar system. I know of some faster than light designs for starships.”

“Powers don't work past the radius of the moon,” she said. “Which is one of the things we wanted to talk to you about. Also I doubt there is time to build such a craft, and if Scion learned we were doing it he would start destroying the world early.”

The mutant thing wasn't something I really wanted to talk about. Maybe I could deflect her with something else.

“So you want me to become part of your secret society,” I asked. “And then what? I have no idea how to defeat Scion.”

“No one does, really,” Alexandria said. “But we have some of the best thinkers in the business, and every person who joins the fight is one more slim chance that the world will survive.”

That wasn't what she'd said when she was talking about secrets, but whatever.
“I'll have to talk about it with Dad,” I said. “But we'll probably say yes.”

Alexandria smiled for the first time.

“We can talk about what that will involve in a minute,” she said. “But there was something else we need to talk about.”

“Oh?” I asked.

I fought an impulse to check where I had hidden the helmet. I'd secretly dug a put under one of the buildings I'd made; not the one I slept in because that would have been kind of obvious. Seeing Alexandria stare at the helmet had made me uncomfortable, as though she knew what was happening.

“Do you ever have times where you don't remember what happened? Moments of lost time, maybe?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then you know whoever it is who is mastering you,” she said, staring me directly in the eye.

“Nobody masters me,” I said. I had a sense that she was planning to take my grandfather's helmet away from me, maybe even destroy it, and that was something that wasn't going to happen.

It was all I had left of my family other than my father. She was as much as suggesting that she'd kill my family, and I'd already warned her what would happen.

“This isn't something I want to talk about,” I said. “In fact, I feel a little threatened by your even bringing it up.”

I stepped closer to her. I was tall for a girl, but I had to look up to her. It didn't matter. If she took my family away I would end her.

The moment she realized that I was serious, I could see her position shift. It was subtle; in anyone else I wouldn't have even noticed it. But Alexandria was renowned for having control over herself, so even the tiny fraction of a step that she took backward was a triumph.

She didn't show it on her face, which remained impassive, but she knew I knew she'd blinked.

“I don't like being threatened,” I said.

“I'm just concerned for your safety. Someone with your kind of power under the control of someone else is a risk to everyone.”

“I'm not a risk to anyone who doesn't attack me and mine,” I said. “Of course, what I consider mine is growing from day to day.”

“Perhaps one day you will consider us to be part of that group,” she said.

I stepped back and forced myself to smile. “I'll help you with the saving the world thing though. I'm sure Dad won't mind. I'm guessing that you and the people you work for have a lot of influence and money though.”
“Are you asking for a bribe to help save the world?”

“I’ve got people here who are going hungry now. I know your people consider this kind of thing to be petty, but maybe greasing the wheels of the bureaucracy might make things better? After all, if I’m spending all my time looking for pirates' gold to help people get fed or to rebuild their houses I won’t have any time to help you with your vital work.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then said, “Sometimes I hate teenagers.”
Speculator

Caravans of trucks began arriving the next day.

Apparently Alexandria's group, whatever it was called had a lot more clout with the government than I'd thought. Red tape simply melted away, and the claims that FEMA simply couldn't get help anytime soon vanished in the wind.

Or maybe it was already going to happen anyway and I was giving credit to something that hadn't had to do anything at all.

I was grateful anyway. People had spent the night without blankets, and the wind had been spotty, which meant that the floors were only heated sometimes. The brick held the heat in for a while, but go three hours without power and things started to cool.

There were bricks that held the heat better, but I hadn't had access to any of that.

Still, people seemed grateful to me as the day wore on and they got over their awe of me a little. I helped move supplies faster so that other trucks could make their way into the camp faster. I also spent part of the day resolving disputes between neighbors.

I wasn't sure why people were coming to me; for all my power I was just a fifteen year old girl. Maybe it was the way both the Dockworkers and the ABB deferred to me. Maybe it was because I was more approachable than Lung.

Probably it was because the police and city authorities were still in disarray.

Although I'd stripped part of the city to build the shelters, there were empty shipping containers everywhere. I gathered them together and melted them, creating a communication tower in the corner of the camp closest to my sleeping place.

I then created small radios with my grandfather's help that I handed out to the Dockworkers and Lung. The representatives from the city didn't want a system that the ABB had access to, so I simply ignored them.

That this gave our forces more of an ability to respond to emergencies and in a way more authority than the city I was more than aware. It was almost like I was becoming a warlord in control of the city without even trying.

It bothered me less than I would have thought. People needed help now, not just when the government finished sifting through red tape.

There were emergencies too; people who were going into diabetic comas, people who had gotten mysteriously stabbed in the middle of the night, even people who had somehow fallen into the campfires. You couldn't have a hundred thousand people in a small area without having some kinds of injuries.

There was a continuous stream of people to the medical tents, sometimes being carried by members of the ABB. At least there the ABB medics worked in unison with the employees from the hospital.

Members of the Mayor's officer weren't stupid. They obviously saw that authority was slipping from their fingers, and so they came to me with a request.
I'd built a chair made out of metal; while admittedly it was overly large it gave me a view of the surrounding area and the back was high to protect me from getting shot in the back. Calling it a throne would have been an entirely unwarranted reaction.

The fact that the mayor was coming to me hat in hand however did make it feel a little weird.

“The laws say that only licensed electricians can work on the power lines,” he said. “Which in general is for very good reasons. But people need power if they are to get their businesses running again.”

“I'd like to help,” I said. “But what can I do?”

“We'd like you to be an electrician's assistant,” he said. “Bring a licensed electrician with you who is officially doing the work. Legally the work will be under his purview. Unofficially...”

“You want me to fix the power lines,” I said. “Are there even parts for that, or am I supposed to make unapproved parts with my powers?”

“They've been bringing materials in all day,” he said. He looked a little confused. “We didn't even get around to asking for them yet.”

I rose to my feet. Fixing power lines sounded better than listening to one more iteration of neighbor's arguing that one of them had stolen the other's dinner.

It quickly became apparent that it was not.

At first it wasn't too bad as I learned what was involved. I sat on my throne, which I had widened into a throne built for two with a man named Tony who was old enough to be my grandfather... my father's father, not my mother's, who was apparently older than dirt.

He'd insisted on my building hooks he could strap himself into, as though falling in an unsupported fall wouldn't kill him just as quickly as his falling out. It did mean I didn't have to concentrate on keeping him safe as much.

I'd wanted to bury the electrical lines and make all sorts of improvements, but he insisted that if the government didn't know where the lines were then sooner or later someone would dig them up by accident.

My grandfather knew how to make a smart grid, but Tony insisted that using standardized parts wouldn't confuse the people who came to work on the lines after me. Apparently that wasn't something that was safe for those people.

Still, I was able to repair lines at a rate vastly faster than an ordinary lineman, who would have had to have machines to relift power poles and who had to worry about whether lines were hot or not as they slowly climbed their way up the poles.

We started with the main lines that had been affected. Apparently power crews had been out assessing the damage for the past couple of days, almost as soon as the battle was over. Despite the lack of power and lack of communications they'd been making a list of what needed to be done by hand.

We started with the main lines, the ones that would restore the most power to the most people. Apparently in electrical work the biggest problem were the smaller branches, downed power lines that were dangerous but that repairing only helped a few households.
Those took forever to fix, simply because there were so many more of them.

We made sure that the hospitals and nursing homes got priority.

Replacing utility poles was the most time consuming part of the process. A crew might finish doing two in a day. I finished a hundred and sixty in ten hours. This apparently freed crews up to do a lot of other things.

Tony told me that replacing a transformer could take as little as two hours if the pole wasn't damaged. The power company didn't even have enough crews to handle all the poles I replaced in a day, but they did their best.

By the time I was done for the day, a quarter of the city was lit in a patchwork with power. There were still gaping areas of darkness, but compared to the complete blackness of the night before it was much better. The first area to get power back was the wealthy districts; I wasn't particularly surprised. After all, that was where the hospital and other necessary infrastructure was.

Besides, the poorest areas had been washed completely away.

The sight of the renewed lights seemed bittersweet to the people in the camps. On the one hand it was a sign that things were getting better, but they also had to deal with the fact that other people were resuming their lives while they were still stuck in a kind of limbo.

A quarter of the city was gone, and I doubted that the city would let me build metal houses, even if people would accept that. Still, what they had already was better than what some cities would have done. They were together in groups of ten or twenty at most, whereas most cities would have warehouses them in the hundreds.

Things were getting better, too.

Usually sending money was better than sending old clothes because workers had to sort through them and make them presentable. There was a huge backlog of clothes that mostly ended up going to foreign countries, ruining their own garment industries and helping keep them in poverty.

People were sending clothes and other things though, and this time it was actually helping. Nights in Brockton Bay were cold, and even the sometimes heated floors I had provided didn't help that much without blankets.

FEMA was providing Mylar blankets, although they were incredibly light and thin. They were better than nothing, though.

Still, city officials seemed to have a dozen things for me to do at all times, and I suspected that it was because they didn't want people seeing me as the authority.

I didn't mind, though. Repairing the transformers the next day went a little slower than putting up the poles, despite the fact that most of the time the previous day had been poring over a map to find the location of the next pole. Putting down the poles was simple, but transformers had to be checked for safety and efficiency.

Two hours work for a work crew could be done by me in two minutes, with five more minutes for the electrician to check my work. We got our rhythm down and repaired sixty in a ten hour day. We singlehandedly did more than the work crews, even though temporary electricians were coming in from other cities around the state.

Still, it was two long days in a row.
I was tired sitting by the fire that night. The dockworkers were off doing something; a last minute project for Dad. He'd sort of taken over my role as unofficial leader in the camp, and the Administration couldn't stop him because he was too useful. He could see problems happening and respond to them faster than anyone, and his insects were almost as intimidating as Lung, at least to some people.

MRE's weren't particularly tasty, but they were convenient. I could have slipped over to Boston for a real meal, but I thought it was important that people saw that I was suffering the same as they had.

I was staring down at my empty package when someone sat down on the log across from me.

Looking up, I was surprised to see Bitch.

I hadn't seen her in a while, not since the first time really. She was staring at me with an expression that I couldn't interpret.

"Don't ask me," my grandfather's avatar said irritably. "She's more difficult to read than an ordinary person."

"Hey," I said.

She stared at me for a moment, then said, "I hear you sent Leviathan on a one way trip."

"Yes."

"You aren't worried he'll come back?"

"Depends on if he can make his own water or not," I said. "There's not a lot of water in space, but if he can make his own he could use it like a rocket maybe."

"Then he could come back?"

I grinned at her. "Thing about Leviathan is that he's blind. It's going to be a real bitch to figure out where Earth is from all the way out there."

For once she seemed to get my humor. She gave a short, barking laugh.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Lot of dogs were killed in the fight," she said. "People are too busy to help, if they even cared in the first place."

"You want me to do something?" I asked.

"People say you are the one to go to for things," she said.

"Why don't you go to your boss?" I asked, probing.

I'd learned a lot about the criminal underworld since the last time I'd seen her, and my grandfather's avatar had some speculations about who the Undersiders really worked for, based in part on the targets they'd chosen and their amazing success rate.

"Don't work for them anymore," she said. "They didn't like me helping you."

Was it the Undersiders or their nebulous boss? Did he worry that Bitch's loyalties would be divided, or did he simply want to put as much space between me and him as possible.
“Have you considered working for someone else?” I asked.

“You killed them all,” she said. “Empire might have took me. Can't join the ABB... too white. Merchants might hurt my dogs.”

“You could work for me,” I said. “I've got some money coming in, enough to run a shelter, and I might even have enough pull to keep you out of jail. How would you like to be a rogue instead of a villain?”

“What would you want?” she asked, looking suspicious.

“Well, to start with you could help the Dockworkers keep the peace. Not everybody believes I'll hurt them the way Lung will, and so some people get rowdy. I don't want anybody killed or even seriously hurt.”

“So you want an enforcer,” she said.

“For right now,” I said. “I'm sure I can get the truce to cover you too while people are in the camps. Afterwards, we'll see about getting your name cleared.”

“I've killed people,” she said. “People don't forget.”

“So have I,” I said. “But you didn't know what you were doing, not the first time at least. We'll figure something out; I've got a pretty good lawyer.”

“Why would you help me?” she asked.

“Think about it like this; if I don't help you, you'll keep doing what you've been doing; stealing things and hurting people. If I do help you, you'll stop doing that and just start helping dogs. Which choice makes the world a better place?”

She stared at me dubiously. “People don't think like that.”

“Maybe the world would be better if they did,” I said. “People think that charity is just helping somebody else, but it's not just that. People in Africa starve a lot, mostly because of all the warlords and parahumans running around over there. When people starve, they get sick easier. The kinds of sick the Africans get is worse than the kinds we get over here, but all it takes is one sick guy in an airplane to make a lot of us sick.”

Her look was inscrutable in the firelight.

“So?” she asked at last.

“So if I went over and took care of the warlords over there, got people the kinds of food they need, would that be charity? If it meant that I didn't get some kind of horrible disease a year from now?”

“So... you help yourself by helping other people?”

“Right!” I said. “I hate the way Brockton Bay has turned into a cesspit of crime and despair. If I was an ordinary person there wouldn't be a lot I could do about it. But I'm not ordinary, and there are things I can do. I could turn around and move to New York because fixing a city that's hurt this bad is too hard, but that's not what I'm all about.”

“Some dogs have to be put down,” she said.

“But what if you had a dog that could get better,” I said. “that just looked really bad, but was strong
underneath. Wouldn't it be wrong to kill a dog like that?"

Reluctantly she nodded.

"I look at you and I see a dog like that," I said. "One that's been beaten down by the world, but that is really good at heart. A dog like that can be loyal in ways that an ordinary dog might never be, and loyalty is really important."

She was silent for a long moment.

"I'm going to need some things," she said. "Dog food's not cheap, not for a lot of dogs."

"You'll need a building too," I said. "Something that's large enough to take care of the dogs, with enough room that they can run. Does it have to be inside the city?"

She shook her head.

"I think they'd be happier with a little greenery, and I don't think Brockton Bay is going to be green for a long while."

Trees had been washed away when houses had. The nicer parts of town still had trees, but the poor districts wouldn't for a long time. There had been a time where there had been lots of abandoned warehouses for her to set up in; those times were long gone, especially since the warehouses had been by the docks.

"I can build a place no problem," I continued. "The refrigerator won't be up to spec, and I'll have to send some people out to put Freon in it because of some stupid government regulations."

"Didn't think you'd worry about things like that."

"Trust me," I said. "You can thumb your nose at most of the government, but parts like the EPA and the IRS you'd better play nice with. Just ask Al Capone."

She looked confused.

"He was a gangster, like eighty years ago? Prohibition? None of it rings a bell?" I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. What matters is that you pick your battles for things that matter, and this whole Freon thing ought to be left to the professionals anyway."

Shrugging, she stared into the fire. She looked as bedraggled as all the other survivors did.

"I'll even pay for the land. The one good thing about all of this is that a lot of people are going to think that Brockton Bay is worthless, and the land is going to go for super cheap. I'll prove them wrong."

It might not even be a bad idea to buy up some of the land by the docks. I wouldn't try to cheat poor people, but a lot of them hadn't owned their own homes anyhow. If my urban renewal projects went off the way they hoped they would, then the land price would skyrocket.

Even better, if I decided to build another tower I could make sure that I didn't have any more crabby neighbors around me.

Taylor Hebert, land speculator. Why didn't that sound weird?

I had an image of myself dressed like the guy on the Monopoly game, including the monocle. I snorted to myself.
Maybe I'd get rich enough to buy myself an island.
For the first time in a week I smelled food that wasn't an MRE. Hot pizza filled my nostrils, and I could see people lining up around the corner. It was my first venture into capitalism, and it was already paying off.

“I would not have thought of this,” Lung said.

He was standing beside me, and we were sharing the very first pizza that had been made on the site.

Taking a bite, I shrugged.

“People needed something to make them feel better,” I said. “Buying old carnival concessions stands wasn't that expensive, and it makes being here a lot more tolerable for people.”

I had fifty different concession stands spread throughout the camp. Each specialized in one kind of food. Some sold pizza, others sold burgers, others Chinese food. None of the foods required a lot of work, but they were all fresh and hot and the smells made the camp feel a little more like a fair than a dismal place where people had been left to die.

Paying for them had been easy. I'd been going out each morning, pulling different minerals from the sea. Leet told me which were most prevalent and which were most profitable and I started with those. I varied minerals so that I would not saturate the market for any one, although Leet seemed to think that wouldn't be a problem for at least some of them.

“It solidifies your hold on them as well,” he said.

He was holding one of the work chits I'd made. People were going crazy with nothing to do, and most people didn't have enough money to buy pizza or burgers. So I gave them things to do, paying them in the traditional form with pizza.

I'd considered paying them in beer as well, but Lung and my grandfather both had nixed the idea. The camp was close to a powder-keg as it was. Adding alcohol to the mix was a recipe for disaster.

Letting three of the oversize metal coins I'd created float in the air in front of us, I rotated them. On one side of them was my face, done in detail enough that it would be difficult to counterfeit. On the other was a denomination.

The ABB and the Dockworkers were sharing the running of the food stalls.

Taking a bite of pizza I looked at him.

“Somebody was going to have to do something. Why not me?”

I'd made a second set of work chits with Lung's face on them; mine was on the back of these. They were less valuable, something which clearly irritated Lung, although he seemed pleased to have his face on money.

People were already trading the work chits among themselves, trading blankets and MREs and even extra work for a chance at pizza and some recourse from the dreadful sameness that was their lives now.

“Sending them out into the city in work crews was a good idea,” he admitted. “It gets them out of
here and it gets them to work on their own neighborhoods.”

“People were going stir crazy,” I admitted. “I was afraid people were going to start using drugs just out of being bored, if nothing else.”

“They don't have enough money for very many drugs,” he sniffed.

I was sure he knew what he was talking about. Drugs had not been one of the things that I had demanded that he stopped during our first meeting. I regretted that now, but I suspected that it would have been one thing that kept us from making the deal at all.

After all, the involuntary sex trade had only been a small portion of his business. Gambling and voluntary sex work had been much larger, along with drugs. Even now I sometimes saw ABB members setting up small betting rings around things as small as which tortoise would win a race.

They'd made some sort of deal with Dad not to interfere with things like that; in return they offered extra help to the Dock workers, and relations between the two groups had thawed somewhat.

“I thought the PRT would blow a gasket when they saw the work chits,” I smirked.

The city government had been doing everything they could to separate me from the people. Obviously they saw my influence with people as being as great a threat as my actual parahuman power. However, rebuilding the electrical grid had been the work of less than a week given the powers I brought to bear.

All of the major junctions had been repaired, and the work crews had focused on the wealthier areas. They were now working on the poor areas, which I found a little optimistic. After all, there were no houses there to run electricity to.

I'd cleaned the streets of downed electrical lines and debris as much as I could. The work crews were now helping people to retrieve their belongings, scavenging under the watchful eye of supervisors. In general the people who owned homes that were now being scavenged were sent out with the crews.

They were given cameras and were told to photograph everything. It was necessary for insurance to pay for their claims, and for FEMA money. FEMA generally paid only thirty three thousand dollars maximum, and that wasn't nearly enough for people to replace their homes, but every dollar helped.

Unfortunately, due to the sheer numbers involved, people were being told that it might be as long as five to six months before FEMA inspectors could be out to inspect properties. I wasn't sure why that was. After all, during a normal storm there was a lot of damage that could be hidden and inspections took time. In this case, houses were usually razed to the foundations, which seemed like something the Inspector could simply drive by, take a few pictures and then make a check mark.

“I'm not sure it's worth what they are paying though. They found fourteen bodies today... I'm not sure there's enough pizza in the world to be worth that.”

The work crews weren't the only ones to find bodies. I'd found a lot myself when I was clearing out debris. The difference was that I was usually floating in the air high enough that I didn't have to smell the stench of death and decomposition and that I wasn't close enough to see the faces. The people working the crews did, though.

Nobody seemed to resent me, though. They took pictures and posted them on several boards that had been set up at the center of camp. That way if people saw a relative they had not known was dead there were people there ready to console them.
The area was cordoned off from children for obvious reasons.

“"I hear you are offering people money for their land," I said, staring out at the line of people. They looked happier than they had in days, even happier than they had been when I'd set up portable showers. People had been stinking for a while, and it was something I should have done earlier.

“"Only because you were doing it first," he said. "I assumed that you knew something that I didn't."

"I was just buying out my neighbors," I said. "I wanted to build a bigger complex without people complaining because I'd put a shadow over their flower garden."

""Renovating the neighborhoods is going to take money that these people do not have," he said. "Most of them probably won't be coming back."

"It'd be nice if they had a chance, though," I said.

I knew what he said was true, though. There had been a constant trickle of people leaving the camps as they'd found shelter with family members in other cities and states. It wouldn't take much to turn that trickle into a flood if people had other options.

The problem was that a lot of the people in the poor areas had worked in the poor areas in businesses that had been destroyed. Without jobs there was no way they'd ever be able to reestablish their lives or rebuild their homes.

Yet without these people Brockton Bay wouldn't be the Brockton Bay that I knew. Having the poor leave and the rich remain might be good for the bottom line, but it would be bad for the culture.

"We will rebuild this city like a Phoenix from the ashes," he said, looking off into the distance. "I did not think Leviathan could be face3d, that he was an inevitable force of nature and that the end was as inevitable as the sunrise. I am glad you convinced me of different."

"Still, we can't keep people working on scavenging forever. Eventually we're going to run out of houses and basements to search, and then we'll need some real work to give them."

Also, the amount of pizza I was going through I'd actually need to find some buried treasure before long.

"I have heard that the Protectorate has been making dolls of you even though you are not one of their own."

"I get five percent of the sales proceeds," I said. "And the other five percent goes towards things the camp needs. When this is over it will go to charity."

It was amazing how fast the production had ramped up. I had no access to the Internet, being too busy to go to Boston to check, but Leet apparently thought that I'd somehow 'broken' the Internet.

I wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but apparently I was all that people had been talking about for the past two weeks. Interest in me had exploded, and there were talks about a Hollywood movie being made about me.

My lawyer had made sure I would get a cut.

Apparently they were thinking about having some actress I'd never heard of play me. Personally I couldn't see the appeal. They hadn't even talked to me, so how did they think they were going to get my story right?
With my luck Emma and Sophia would be made out to be heroes for triggering the Ender of Endbringers.

Lung chuckled. “I'd never thought that honey would work better than vinegar, but you have proven me wrong.”

“What?”

“You are now the undisputed warlord of the city. People look to you before they look to the government or the PRT. You even have your own money. None of us would have been able to do that through intimidation or fear.”

“Love is stronger than fear,” I said. “People only fear you as long as they are within your reach, but if they love you they will follow you even when they know you are nowhere near.”

“They fear you as well,” he said.

I shrugged. “Fear helps to motivate people. You think children don't fear their parents even as they love them?”

“So you see people four times your age as your children?” he asked. “How condescending of you.”

“If they act like children, how am I supposed to treat them?” I asked irritably. “They keep putting blockades in the way of doing what is right for people because it threatens their positions or their sense of how things have always been done.”

Lung chuckled. “Superheroes always think they know better than everyone else... otherwise why try to change the world?”

“Maybe because some people actively try to tear it down?”

“When you are on a sinking ship, why worry about tearing off doors?” he asked, ignoring my dig at him. “It is different when there is a chance that the ship can be saved.”

I wanted to argue with him, convince him that there was always a chance, but he'd just think I was young and idealistic. He'd probably say that it was my power that made me think that, and that ordinary people had none of the leverage I had to change things.

“I understand you are trying to save the dog girl,” he said.

I nodded. “I think it's going pretty well. The PRT are being a lot nicer about it than I'd expected. My lawyer thinks they can get her off with probation and community service, or maybe with some time in a minimum security facility working with dogs.”

“Power has it's privileges,” he said. “Anyone else who asked would find her in prison unless she agreed to become a Protectorate patsy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I get the impression she's not much of a team player. I don't understand how the Undersiders have managed her. Speaking of, have you heard anything about them?”

I'd had thoughts about folding them into my group. I wasn't sure what Tattletale actually did, but Lung thought she was some kind of a thinker. I needed all of those that we could get. Their leader's darkness control wasn't really all that useful, and nobody knew what Regent even did, but I'd rather have them with me than against me.
After all, the time I spent fighting useless battles with other gangs was time away from my plans for the city and for the Endbringers.

It wasn't as though I had any real plans for them though. I doubted they'd fall for the same trick Leviathan had; the Simurgh would know what I planned before I even planned it, and there was no guarantee that my grandfather's helmet would protect me.

Energy went wonky around Behemoth. Killing him might be beyond me as well.

Still, people seemed to have confidence in me, which meant that I had to pretend to know what I was doing. I couldn't dwell on the thought that some of the bodies people had been finding might be a direct result of what I had done.

Had my mining of minerals from the ocean been enough to draw Leviathan's attention? Some people thought the Endbringers were attracted by conflict. Had my destruction of the Empire been enough to trigger a visit?

Had the buildings I'd used as ammunition really been completely empty? I'd given them a casual scan, but there hadn't been time to be thorough. People hiding in bathrooms or places with a lot of metal might have been invisible to me.

Still, I knew better than to focus on that. If I did, I'd spiral into the same sort of pit as my dad had after Mom died, and I'd be useless to anyone.

“There are rumors that Coil simply moved elsewhere. Perhaps it was your demonstration of the kind of hospitality this city has to offer. Perhaps one of his thinkers saw something that we have not seen yet. The Undersiders have simply vanished with him, although Tattletale did show up to the last battle.”

It was inconvenient, but I'd make do. I suspected that a lot of parahumans would want to work with me after what had happened with Leviathan.

“I've been thinking about companies we can start,” I said. “Get people to working again. You've got some money; would you consider going into business with me?”

“We aren't already?” he asked. He hesitated. “Funds are growing difficult to acquire for the moment. No one is working, which means that money is not being made. Even if we did not have the restrictions you imposed, you can hardly squeeze money from people who have none themselves.”

“Getting people jobs is kind of the first step to getting the city back in order. Infrastructure would help, but every time I bring something up the city shoots me down.”

My ideas for a high tech ferry, something I could have easily built had almost seemed to offend everyone. They'd claimed that untested Tinkertech would have to be extensively tested, and that building it myself would break a dozen federal laws.

Replacing roads would be considered defacing public property. The roads belonged to the city or the state.

Even building people low cost housing had run into roadblocks. Building permits were required, and the building that the permits were issued from had been destroyed. Blueprints would have to be sent to the city and examined, and I doubted that my grandfather had ever bothered with blueprints in his life.

There were all kinds of rules about facades and colors that were allowed and building materials. It
was frustrating; I sometimes felt as though I was slowly but surely being strangled in red tape.

“Lung,” I began.

Before I could say anything else, I heard a song in the distance. It was powerful and mesmerizing, and my world suddenly shrunk until all I could hear was the song. I'd heard the voice before, but I couldn't place where.

In the distance I saw people falling down, dropping as though their strings had been cut.

Around the corner walked a group of three people. All three were chillingly familiar; one had been in the news recently.

She had a collar around her neck made of metal and with blinking lights. She looked terrified.

The other two were worse. A small girl in a blood stained lab coat and a tall, slender goateed man stood on both sides of the girl. The man had his arm around her shoulders. He was looking directly at me and smirking.

The little girl barely seemed to notice me. She was looking down at a device in her hands.

I stood frozen, as did Lung. I tried to force myself to move, but all the energy had left my body. I couldn't force myself to do anything even though in the back of my mind part of my mind was screaming.

As I stared at them I had one thought.

When did Canary join the Slaughterhouse Nine?
“Taylor Hebert,” Jack Slash said. “So many ripples from such a young girl.”

In the background Canary was still singling, but it was low and almost inaudible. I could sense the design of the collar on her neck, and the bomb inside it was obvious to me. That wasn't all that was there, though.

“The collar amplifies her power,” my grandfather's avatar whispered. He sounded intrigued. “It makes her stronger while hobbling her at the same time. It's not a design I have seen very often; in mutants it can lead to instability”

“I wouldn't have expected such a diamond in a place like this,” he said. He gestured at the camp around us. “Living among the normals as though you were one of them.”

I still couldn't speak. Canary's voice kept me from wanting to do anything. I felt drugged, like I had once when I'd gotten a tooth pulled when I was eight.

The normal noises of the crowd around us were gone. The only sounds were the tinny sounds of music in the distance from portable radios, and the sounds of insects flying through the air. Otherwise there was only silence. It was eerie, and it sounded like we were in a graveyard.

How many people had the Nine already killed while I was chatting with Lung and eating Pizza? I should have been more prepared, asked Dinah to check the future for me.

Instead I'd been content to focus on city building while the barbarians were at the gate.

The Nine had been ruining lives for longer than I'd been alive. Even now I was trying to improve the lives of a hundred thousand people and knowing the kind of atrocities they tended to commit, they were planning on killing them all.

They'd torture them first. By the time the Protectorate was even aware of what had happened, all the people I'd promised to help would be left either dead or maimed, physically or emotionally. The Nine would get away, the way they always did, and the world would barely mourn.

I felt anger growing inside me slowly.

They didn't have the right to ruin people's lives. None of these people had done anything to deserve this. They'd had everything stripped from them by a monster beyond their comprehension only to work together to try to rebuild. I'd seen people help each other, neighbors who would never have even spoken to each other in the normal world supporting each other.

These monsters wanted to take all of that away.

My anger didn't show on my face, and it didn't seem to make much of a difference in my ability to take action either. I couldn't exert my power or even move a finger. I simply sat and stared up at Jack Slash as he approached.

Jack Slash sauntered up to me, ignoring Lung. He squatted down in front of me and he reached up and touched my face. I should have felt that it was creepy, but there didn't seem to be anything sexual about it. Instead it was almost as though he was examining a puppy he was planning on buying.
“So much power to make change,” he said, staring into my eyes. “And all it would take would be a little push to spin you off in a completely new direction.”

He stood up and chuckled.

His laughter caused my anger to spike. He thought this was all funny? All it would take was a single mistake and this would all go very differently.

“I heard about what you did to the Empire,” he said. “Apparently you already have a little bit of the cruelty and creativity that's needed to be truly great in this business. Your power is certainly not in question. The only thing that's needed is a little difference of perspective.”

Him calling me cruel? That was like Hitler calling someone a racist.

“We're going to create a new world, you and I,” he said. “But before that can happen you have to be made better. The best metal has to be forged before it can be useful.”

Glancing behind him, he gestured toward the little girl.

“I suppose it's ready?”

The little girl smiled. Her face looked innocent, blonde ringlets framing a face that looked like she'd never done anything wrong in her life. The blood on her apron said differently. “It's ready. It's some of my best work, really. When I'm done she won't be able to do anything to any of us without getting eaten from the inside out. Best of all, there's no metal in any of it, so there will be nothing she can hang on to with her power.”

The needle she pulled from her pocket didn't have any metal in it at all. I suppose that was meant to be some kind of defense against me.

It wouldn't matter under normal circumstances, but as things were going now, it didn't look good.

The things the Slaughterhouse did were there on the Net for those who were willing to look. Most people didn't want to know. They were the only parahumans who were feared almost as much as the Endbringers.

The insects were growing thick, now. Usually they only grew this thick around the trashcans when people put something sweet inside. It was strange that there were this many alive; just a week ago it had been too cold for them to be around much.

I suspected that Dad had been fostering their growth. He'd been using them, and I think he'd been using some of the heated buildings vacated by people headed for other cities as incubators. There was enough leftover detritus from a hundred thousand people to feed them all forever.

Was my mind wandering because I didn't want to face what was going to happen? The Nine tortured people, which was bad. Worse was when they turned people into one of them. Turning me into one of the Nine would be the worst thing ever. I had the power to do Endbringer levels of damage to cities, and I wouldn't be working on a three month cycle.

I could build a base on the other side of the moon and the Nine would be out of reach of everyone except when they wanted to rain destruction down on the world.

This couldn't happen. I gathered my will, as much as I could and struggled to use my power. It wouldn't take much power to make one of the tokens in front of me into a bullet that would go through Canary's forehead.
My grandfather had told me countless stories about how he'd struggled to defeat attacks by telepaths, real telepaths, not the bargain basement versions we got here. He'd told me he'd won as often as not through sheer force of will.

It wasn't working for me.

Jack stared at me and frowned.

“This is too easy, It's almost boring,” Glancing behind him, he asked “Can we at least let her speak?”

The little girl looked down at her controller and she made some adjustments. Suddenly I found that my ability to speak was back, even if I still couldn't muster the will to actually do anything.

“You know what's about to happen,” he said.

“You're going to try to kill the people that I care about,” I said. “Murder my friends in front of me, make me like you. There's a funny thing about that, though.”

“What's that?” he asked.

“I don't have any friends,” I said. “But my family isn't the kind to go down easily.”

Canary choked suddenly, staggering back as insects swarmed and filled her mouth. I'd seen the swarm growing behind them, but Jack hadn't read my expression enough to realize what was happening. Birds were pecking at her eyes as well.

They were trying to attack Bonesaw at the same time, but most of them were dropping dead as soon as they got near her. It was some kind of biological poison.

The collar around her Canary's neck exploded, but I already had a force field around her so that the explosion was directed away from her. Metal shards and bird parts pelted the little girl, who screamed.

I levitated to my feet.

“People like to underestimate me,” I said, staring at the man who'd threatened to use me to destroy everyone. “Threaten me with laws, or threats of killing me. I can handle that. But when people threaten to hurt my family... well, some people are suicidal I guess.”

Jack's right leg exploded as I pulled the bone from it while holding the rest of his skeleton in place. He would have fallen, but I lifted him into the air by his skeleton. It was probably painful, at least from the wince on his face. I telekinetically smashed him in the face with his own legbone, and his nose exploded with blood.

“Jack!” the little girl screamed, but I'd frozen her as well, and I was already disassembling the spiders surrounding her, discarding the rudimentary brains and turning the rest into blades that were slowly surrounding me in a cloud.

“Putting metal mesh around your bones probably sounded like a good idea when you had her do it,” I said. I stared down at the ruin of his leg. “Not so much now.”

He stared up at me, a look of wonder on his face.

“You're more than I expected,” he said.

“There's an implant in his brain that regulates pain,” my grandfather's avatar said. “It's relatively easy
to reverse it and make pain worse instead of better.”

People were watching in the distance. They should have fled the moment they realized what was happening, but instead they were simply standing there, frozen.

They'd started seeing me as a hero. If I did what I was inclined to do, would that be reversed in a moment of anger?

After all, legally I'd be in the clear if I killed both of these people right this moment, but that wouldn't make people accept me any more.

“We have Panacea and the little Seer girl,” Jack said. “If that makes a difference. Also, we'll release a plague if we're killed that will make what the Endbringers did look like child's play.”

Rage filled me. If they'd hurt Dinah...

My grandfather whispered in my ear. His voice sounded curiously distant.

“You always wanted to be immortal, didn't you?” I asked. “Wanted to be remembered, for evil if you couldn't do anything good.”

“Trying to steal my trick?” he asked. “You can't play the player.”

His leg had already stopped bleeding, probably from some of the implants that had been placed in him. A little twist and the bleeding started again.

“Sure I can,” I said.

“So you are willing to let your minions suffer under the delightful attentions of my colleagues?” Jack asked.

“How long do you think people with metal bones can hide from someone like me?” I asked. “I'm going to kill you all, and I'm going to use the money to actually help people. I might even give it to charity.”

He grimaced as I suddenly turned off the pain regulator, but he didn't cry out, not even as I reversed it to intensify the pain to something beyond natural levels.

“When I'm done, everyone will look up to you,” I said. “Every night when they look up at the moon.”

I twisted reality in the way my grandfather showed me, and suddenly a great wind rose. The world shifted behind Jack, tearing in a way that felt wrong. A portal opened, and I could see gray rocks and a dark sky behind him, the Earth high in the sky behind him.

“To the moon, Jack,” I said.

Before I could push him through something hit me from the side like a freight train. Startled, I flew through a building and the portal collapsed. I saw Jack fall to the ground.

Right.

I'd made fun of my grandfather for monologuing; I should have simply sent a token into Jack's brain and then spun it like a blender.

The stripes of the woman who had run into me were startling. She was crawling through the hole in
the wall of the building I'd just flown through.

“She has no metal in her body,” my grandfather's avatar pointed out. He still sounded strange, tired a little.

“Yeah,” I said.

It was weird. Humans had iron in their bodies, even if it wasn't a lot. Any with red blood did as well. Even blue blooded animals had copper in their blood, but there wasn't a single trace of metal in the Siberian.

She was very very fast, and very very naked.

In the space of a moment she was on top of me, a scrabbling whirlwind of claws and teeth, death just inches away from me.

The metal from the disassembled spiders flashed through the air and into her side, but she didn't even seem to notice. I tried cutting into her with it, but there was something very wrong.

Pushing her away wasn't working either. It wasn't a matter of strength. She didn't have any leverage and she shouldn't have been able to hold me down.

The entire building contracted around us, focusing on containing her, but she simply tore through it like tissue paper. I'd fought Leviathan and had less problems. She was an immovable object and that should not have been possible.

I could feel her tearing away at my shields, and as much as I struggled against her I couldn't move her away.

Insects suddenly swarmed us, turning the sky black. I couldn't see anything, and neither could anyone else.

The Siberian wasn't harmed, but she was distracted for a moment, and that was all it took for me to propel myself along the ground and out from under her.

The next moment I was up in the air, and the Siberian was jumping from point to point, as though the air had suddenly become solid. How many powers did she actually have?

She was faster than me, even in the air. I began grabbing up everything I could to throw at her; parts of metal buildings, even cars.

The moment I threw one van at her she stopped coming after me. She frantically turned toward the van, leaping through the windshield and grabbing the driver.

“She doesn't strike me as the kind to be altruistic,” my grandfather said. “It's likely that she's a projection. Perhaps the man she is racing away with is the Tinker who made her.”

She was fast enough to dodge the missiles I sent after her. She was not, however, fast enough to stop me from turning the filling in his right back molar into a missile that turned his brain into a blender.

She turned and stared at me with hatred in her eyes a moment before vanishing.

Her owner's body fell, dropping to the ground with a sickening thud. Strangely, his body didn't have the characteristic alterations that the rest of the Nine had.

It didn't matter. I had no doubt that they were going after my Dad and possibly other hostages.
Jack had said that they had ways of releasing plagues on the world if they were killed. The man who'd controlled the Siberian hadn't, but he hadn't been modified either.

“Taylor,” my grandfather's voice said, suddenly urgent. “Something is happening.”

My head snapped around. There was nothing coming for me that I could see. I would have expected Crawler at the very least.

It occurred to me that he might have meant at the camp.

Sensing them was easy; as I'd told Jack, very few people had metal in their bones. I knew Crawler wasn't one of them. Any modifications they made on him wouldn't last long. I'd have to watch out for him attacking me, although from what I'd heard he wouldn't bother with surprise.

I went straight after them, resolved that this time I wouldn't bother with torturing them or even talking to them.

The Nine had proven that they didn't deserve to live, not just once but time and time again. Some of them might have once been victims but they were now monsters, every single one of them.

I saw them standing in a group.

Mannequin was the first to die. I simply willed all of his protective metal to crush inward, crushing his brain and organs before he had a time to as much as move.

Flame sliced toward me, and glass burst harmlessly against my force field. Burnscar and Shatterbird were decapitated as I pulled their heads from their bodies using their own skeletal enhancements.

I didn't see Bonesaw anywhere, but Crawler was leaping toward me.

He'd be harder to kill, but it didn't matter. Metal surrounded him, coating him more and more as he struggled. It was growing into a massive ball, and unlike the Siberian he wasn't able to simply tear out of the growing mass. Physics still had at least a little effect on him.

Jack Slash was the last of those I saw, and I froze as I saw what he was holding.

“It took me a while to figure it out,” he said. “This is pretty important to you. I thought I might at least give you something to remember me by.”

He was holding my grandfather's helmet in his hand, crushed, probably by Crawler.

I saw red, and his entire body exploded into viscera.

A gesture and everything nearby was pulled out into space. I followed; hopefully whatever plagues they'd released would be vented with the atmosphere. I'd still have to have the PRT quarantine the area and do whatever it took to keep the world safe.

Feeling numb I stood in the space above the earth as I sent the metal covered Crawler in an arc toward the sun. Alexandria had said that powers didn't work past the moon. If that was true, good.

If not, then Crawler would be trapped on a trip taking years toward the sun. It was possible that he might be able to survive inside the sun itself, in which case he would burn in its fires forever.

Good.
“There isn’t really much in the way of technology here,” Leet said. “Certainly nothing in the way of an artificial intelligence.”

I’d done my best to rebuild the helmet, but it hadn’t brought my grandfather's avatar back. Going to Leet had been my only choice; of all tinkers he was the one who knew about every kind of technology, even if he could no longer build many of them.

I was looking through a window in at Leet as he worked on my grandfather's helmet.

“That can’t be true,” I said. “My gran.... I mean I was talking to one this whole time.”

“This isn’t an artificial intelligence,” he said. “But the technology that is here is actually an amplifier of some kind. It gives me a little bit of a headache really... whatever it amplifies shouldn't exist.”

“Telepathy maybe?” I asked.

“Don’t be silly,” he said automatically. “Telepathy doesn’t exist. Everybody knows that. But if I believed in something like that, I’d say yeah. Theoretically it could amplify mental defenses and maybe even the ability to communicate... if telepathy really existed.”

“Can you fix it?” I asked.

“I already have,” he said. “It should be working like it did before.”

I hadn’t heard a word from my grandfather since the helmet had been crushed. If what Leet was saying was true, it meant that his intelligence wasn't actually in the helmet, it was somewhere else and the helmet was simply the link.

I should have been relieved. My grandfather's intelligence wasn't gone; it was hidden somewhere. The problem was that I had no idea where to find it and I certainly had no way to communicate. It was frustrating.

Even though he'd been talking less and less, I'd depended on my grandfather for everything. I'd assumed that he'd been speaking less because I needed him less, but what if he'd been conserving energy?

Power sources didn't last forever, after all, and it was possible that it'd been flooded during Leviathan's attack and damaged somehow. But why wouldn’t it have told me? I'd have found some what to move it, to protect it even if it was the size of a building.

“Thanks for everything.”

“You really shouldn’t trust anything that doesn't have a brain,” Leet said. He grimaced. “It's trite but it's true. As far as modern day science... even by Tinkertech standards that thing might as well be magic. You can't trust magic.”

“I barely trust things that actually have brains,” I said. “Look at how people are reacting.”

We were inside a mobile laboratory Leet had built. After he'd lost his last lab in the floods from Leviathan he'd decided that he wanted something a lot more secure. It was in an extradimensional space through some sort of Tinkertech trickery. Doorways to various places in Brockton Bay had
been set up, including one in the refugee camp.

I suspected that he'd bought the equipment from Toybox, not trusting his own designs. I didn't blame him.

I wouldn't have been allowed outside the camp otherwise. The whole place was cordoned off, with more and more military forces arriving by the hour. What was startling was just how many people had showed up and how quickly. Having heroes like Strider on call probably had something to do with it, but the amount of equipment involved made me suspicious that they'd been prepared for something like this.

Despite the people fleeing the scene, they'd been rounded up before they could leave the camp. Had the PRT been planning on keeping people in the camp all along?

Apparently there were concerns that the Slaughterhouse had released viruses on their deaths that would result in pandemics that would ultimately destroy humanity.

The PRT had sprayed the entire area with huge masses of a decontaminating foam, designed to kill bacteria and viruses of all types. Despite this they were worried that people were already infected, and they were taking no chances.

Even Leet was wearing a full bio-hazard suit. He'd insisted that I stay inside I decontamination chamber and he had never actually handled my grandfather's helmet, using machines and Waldo's to do all the work.

People were frightened and afraid, and this was undoing all the good work I'd done so far. Yet while I could easily break through the cordon, part of me had to wonder whether it was the right thing to do.

What if they were right?

It still seemed suspicious that while they'd had trouble bringing enough food and supplies for a couple of days, they had no trouble finding enough shipping containers to wall off the enormous area around the camp.

“What am I going to do?” I asked him.

“Fix everything?” he asked.

I scowled at him. Maybe if I'd had my grandfather I'd have been able to do something, but now I was just a teen-aged girl and I had no idea what to do.

“I'm serious,” he said. “Everybody in the camp looks up to you. People should be celebrating the fact that you got rid of the Nine, but instead they're dealing with all of this. You have to give them hope or they'll fall apart.”

“But how?” I asked. “I can't just magically create food or build houses for people. I can barely take care of myself.”

“Look like you know what you are doing,” he said. “That's sometimes more important than actually knowing. People who panic are people who do dumb things that hurt themselves.”

I nodded and stared at him.

“How do you know all this?” I asked.
He shrugged. “I've seen war movies... not just the sci-fi ones. Mostly those, though.”

Right.

“All right,” I said. “Hand me my helmet.”

His mechanical arms passed it though the slot, and another blast of disinfecting gas sprayed me and everything I was wearing. Undoubtedly he'd probably set the tiny anteroom I was in on fire the moment I left.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

The only way to know whether the government was right to Quarantine us was to wait. Diseases tended to spread best if they were asymptomatic but contagious. Bonesaw knew that and probably intended for there to be a maximum spread of the diseases she made.

I stepped outside and into the real world. I could hear people screaming at the perimeter, even as men with guns were holding them off. The storage containers were already up around thirty percent of the camp.

Lung was standing near the doorway, staring impassively at the chaos.

Glancing over at me, he said, “They intend to let us die. They will treat us like a city of Simurgh victims.”

“They won't,” I said. “I won't let them.”

“I do not see you stopping them now,” he said.

“They might be right,” I said.

“And if they are?”

“I'll build a place on Mars if I have to,” I said. “I'm sure Leet can show me how.”

I was going to miss the instant access my grandfather had given me to Tinkertech designs, even if it wasn't actually Tinkertech.

If that had been the only thing I was going to miss it wouldn't have been that bad. The problem was that my grandfather's avatar had filled a void that I hadn't even known I had. Our family had never been particularly large, and when I'd had both Mom and Dad it had been enough.

Once we'd lost Mom, though, it had all changed. I'd lost my entire family, and getting a grandfather I hadn't even known about had filled some of that loss.

“So what now?” Lung asked. “Do we show strength, or do we abandon the plan?”

“We double down,” I said. “If everyone dies none of this will matter. If they don't... “

“Then we will have tightened our hold on these people even further,” he said. He looked at me strangely. “For all your claims not to be a warlord, you think very much like one.”

I shrugged.

“Warlords rise when the system fails the people. That's what's happening now,” I said. “We've got an opportunity to make things better for people, and we have to take it.”
With that I levitated, floating toward the cursing people.

“People of Brockton Bay!”

Slowly the shouting and pushing stopped and people turned to face me.

“We have seen what the Protectorate and the PRT thinks of us,” I said. “Because we were poor they think they can lock us away and contain us, forget us as though we were Simurgh victims.”

I heard angry shouts at that, but people were listening.

“I won't let that happen. They fear that we may be diseased, and because of that that we must be separated from the rest of humanity. There is a chance that they are right.”

The crowd fell dead silent with that.

“That is why I am allowing this, because otherwise the fact that they are surrounding us with metal shipping containers would mean that they were only giving me the weapons I needed to free us.”

“They're trapping the uninfected in here with the infected!” a man shouted.

“How do we know which is which?” I asked. “How many of you have people you care about that are outside of those walls... friends, family... do you want them to die?”

The crowd murmured, their mood turning ugly. I was losing them.

“If there is a disease that Bonesaw created, it's going to be slow so that there's more time to infect as many people as possible. That's good, because it buys us time to fix it before anybody gets killed.”

The crowd settled. This was apparently something that hadn't occurred to them.

“Panacea can handle the people here, given enough time, but if there is a disease and it spreads to the whole world she won't be able to do anything. I've got money now from killing the Nine. I will use some of it to hire the best parahuman healers and medical tinkers to come and help solve this problem.”

The crowd looked up at me expectantly.

“What parahumans create, parahumans can solve,” I said. “But if we start fighting each other and acting like animals then we will prove that we are exactly what the government and the PRT thinks we are... worthless specimens.”

It was the same everywhere. In my grandfather's world, everyone had hated mutants. Here it was the poor and the disenfranchised. These were my father's people, and I was going to protect them, even if it was from themselves.

The crowd growled.

“These people are not our friends,” I continued. “But we have to live among them. There will be a day of reckoning, but that day is not today. Today is a day for us to show that we are better than they think we are. United we will stand, divided we will fall.”

“And if we start getting sick?” a man shouted out.
“You'd be just as sick out there as you would be in here,” I said. “Do you really think Bonesaw wouldn't have spread the disease to the whole camp? Either we're all sick or none of us are.”

It wasn't true, of course, but crowds tended to be stupid.

Seeing that I had them, I said, “I will see that something is done. In the meantime everyone should get some rest. If there is a disease, it's best if you have lots of rest to fight it off long enough for us to save you.”

I wondered if Leet had ever made a healing machine. If he hadn't, I'd make sure he got the money to do so.

Floating to what looked like one of several gates that would be used to truck supplies in, I faced a PRT commander.

All of the PRT were carrying Tinkertech weapons made of plastic. A quick check showed no metal inside any of them, an impressive achievement even if it wouldn't really do anything to stop me. The fact that their armor contained metal, probably because of the extra environmental equipment that turned these particular sets of armor into clean suits meant that the effort on the weapons was wasted.

It looked like they had Tinkertech filtration systems in their armor. The whole suits were designed to be hazmat suits without looking like Hazmat suits, probably in an effort to avoid looking threatening.

As though faceless men in black armor wasn't threatening enough. There were hundreds of PRT agents in the cordon around the camp, more than Brockton Bay actually had, which meant that they'd undoubtedly teleported agents in from other cities.

That also meant that these agents would probably be less sympathetic, in part because they didn't have relatives in the camp that they'd be tempted to sneak out.

I wondered if there were any native born Brocktonites under those masks at all. If it had been me I would have rotated them out and relied entirely on foreign agents. I wasn't sure if the PRT was that pragmatic though.

“You can't leave,” he said.

I couldn't see his face through the mirrored mask, but he sounded anxious. Even if he wasn't a local he probably knew me by reputation. After all, I was the Endslayer, the Slaughterhouse Slaughter, the Empire Ender.

The PRT agents had all undoubtedly been briefed on me before they'd been posted here, which meant they had at least some idea of what I could do.

“I expect to see some progress on seeing these people diagnosed and treated,” I said loudly. “If I don't, I'm going to start throwing things, and I doubt anybody is going to like that.”

“That's not up to me,” he said, holding up his hand. He very carefully did not aim his weapon at me like the PRT troopers had been aiming at the crowd.

The nervousness in his voice was increasing, though. If he shot at me, I was going to make him regret it. He had a metal pin in his hip, and it wouldn't take much to make him bleed.

“Find out who is responsible, and have them call me if they are afraid to come into the camp,” I said. “Otherwise things might start getting ugly.”
Not all of the crowd was gone; posturing for followers was one of the things my grandfather's avatar had taught me.

It was almost as important to look like you were negotiating from strength as to actually have strength.

Of course bullying a low level lackey wasn't really going to get us anywhere, and behind closed doors I would be more polite with the people who mattered. What was important was that people thought something was being done, whether it was or not.

As long as they had hope, something they could set their compass to they would remain calm. Let them lose that hope and they really would turn into animals.

The government could make all the promises they wanted, but they'd lost these people's trust in more ways than one. I still had it and I planned to keep it.

Still, in the end there a lot of what was going to happen involved waiting.

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Hordes of men in bio-hazard suits were moving through the camp, taking samples and checking people's health. Those who had been checked were being stamped with a Tinkertech marker that couldn't be counterfeited, not with the equipment these people had.

I'd volunteered to be one of the first to be checked, in part to assuage people's fears that the government wasn't trying to poison us like some of the rumors I had heard.

The funny thing was that the men had already been on their way when I'd made my speech to the crowd, but now the people in the camp were assuming that I had bullied the government into finally responding.

Nothing the government men were trying to say would change people's minds, and while I probably should have felt bad for taking advantage of the situation, I didn't.

I really did believe that the people in the camp were low priority for the government, and I believed that it was mostly because they were poor. If the neighborhoods where the Arcadia kids came from had been effected there would have been all kinds of aid that simply wasn't coming despite everything I could do.

There were people who would deny it, but I knew it the way the people here knew it, in my gut.

I'd lost my grandfather; the last thing I wanted to do was to lose anyone else.

It had been two days since I'd made my ultimatum, and the men in bio-hazard suits were already thinner on the ground than they had been. I'd managed to call Dinah; her family had returned to Brockton Bay.

According to her there was a ninety eight percent chance that the camp was clean, which was part of the reason they were returning to the possible site of biological Armageddon. Despite her assurances, part of me would be worried until the very last test result had come in.

Still, if removing an Endbringer from the world hadn't increased my popularity, destroying the Nine was almost certain to have put my face on every magazine.

The PRT had an entire publicity machine designed to make their Capes popular and accessible. I would have to do it on my own, unless I hired someone with the money that was now flowing into
my bank accounts.

Strike while the iron is hot seemed to be the one piece of advice to the newly famous, whether they were actors, musicians or reality stars. Fame was fleeting, and I needed to take advantage of my newfound popularity while I still had it.

Becoming a celebrity would advance my plans, but I felt a little uneasy about it. What did I know about magazine interviews and talking to late night talk shows?

Still, I could learn if it would get things moving for the people here.
“It's going to be a new era,” I said. “For a long time Tinkers who could really make a difference were afraid to try for fear that the Slaughterhouse would come to visit. Very often they did.”

The female host sitting across from me was the sixth or seventh in the past week; they were all starting to blur together. Still, I was getting better at staying on message.

“Are you dating anyone?” she asked.

I forced myself not to scowl. For some reason some of these people seemed to focus on the most inconsequential things. My grandfather probably would have had some advice about how to handle them.

“I hardly have time,” I said. “I'm trying to help rebuild a city that's been devastated by tragedy. I've set up a foundation for Tinkers who have reproducible tech; there aren't many, but those are the ones who will change society forever. I want to encourage those people to come to Brockton Bay and let us have a look at what you've got.”

With any luck I'd be able to keep them there, which would mean that Brockton Bay would eventually become a technological super center. There would be factories and companies like Apple and Microsoft might open up headquarters there if it was profitable to do so. The more money that flowed into the city the fast people would be to get back to work and get back to their lives.

“I also want to ask people to send whatever aid they can,” I said. “And to encourage their congressmen to expedite help from FEMA and to ask for money to help rebuild the city.”

“You are asking for a lot,” the host said, looking uncomfortable. I'd seen similar looks on the faces of Oprah, Colbert, Kimmel and that guy from NPR.

“This city is the one place in the entire world where an Endbringer was defeated,” I said. “That makes it more than just a memorial. It should be a place of celebration, a place that gives hope that the human spirit will triumph over adversity, no matter what the universe throws at us. That can't happen as long as there are people who have lost their homes.”

“Things are hard all over,” the host said. “A lot of people barely have enough for their own families.”

“That's true, but it doesn't have to be,” I said enthusiastically. “Leviathan is gone, which means that shipping can start again. That means more trade, which means more manufacturing, which means more jobs. We're at the start of a new era, like I said, and that means things are about to start getting better for everyone.”

“So are you planning to start a new clothing line?” she asked, smiling brightly.

I fought the urge to say something negative. I needed these people's goodwill no matter how stupid they were. The world was indecisive about me; half the people thought I was the next Endbringer, while the others thought I was the savior of humanity. I needed the public to see me as being ultimately benevolent.

Actually though...

“I hadn't thought about it, but that might not be a bad idea. I can make bulletproof clothing for a
fraction of the cost that other manufacturers do. All I need is some designers to offer designs that people will actually want to wear. After all, fashion was never my strong suit.”

“And to work with you they'll have to come to Brockton Bay,” the host said.

Maybe she wasn't as stupid as I thought she was. I smiled and nodded.

The rest of the interview was as banal as the host could possibly make it. She was skilled at turning the conversation away from anything of substance no matter how hard I tried to stay on message.

At least the conversation was going better than the grilling I'd gotten on Fox. The host there had seemed to think that I was the Anti-Christ. He'd ambushed me and pressured me about my anti-Protectorate viewpoints.

That was a little hypocritical since Fox seemed to think that the Protectorate was dangerous too, mostly because they weren't strictly owned by the government. Or maybe because they were too owned by the government. I couldn't ever quite follow their reasoning. It probably had something to do with the Clintons.

I could understand the desire for accountability, and I had my issues with the group, but that wasn't any reason to take it out on someone who could crush your head like a melon with the slightest of thoughts.

I'd barely even been tempted.

My NPR interview had been difficult too. They'd asked some hard questions which were difficult to answer no matter how nice they sounded on the air. They'd been concerned about putting so much power in the hands of a teenager.

For some reason nobody believed that I was totally in control and not pettily vengeful like other teenage girls. I could hardly understand it. After all, I was the soul of restraint, except for that one time with my Dad, and that other time with the Nine, and maybe a couple of other times.

I was starting to think I needed a publicist. I wouldn't have thought that managing a public image would be as hard as it was, and the last thing I needed was something like the Protectorate horror stories that one heard about sometimes from comments made by Wards in various cities about being forced to wear stupid costumes because public polls suggested that pink would make you less threatening.

Wearing pink was not going to happen, although red or black seemed like good colors.

The moment I was out of the interview, I stepped out of the studio and took a deep breath. Chicago seemed like a nice city; it didn't have same smell New York had or the terrible sprawl of Los Angeles. I could see myself settling here, assuming I was willing to let go of Brockton Bay.

As I flew upward, I focused and twisted space. Brockton Bay appeared before me.

My grandfather had apparently not used that ability very often, and I couldn't really understand why. It was effectively teleportation, and that made everything so much easier. It would have taken me hours to fly back to Brockton Bay the normal way, and the more I used it the easier it got.

I'd even considered talking to Vista to see if we could learn from each other about how to use powers like that. There were ideas that I had that my grandfather hadn't talked to me about.

Now that he was gone, I was starting to realize that I'd leaned on him too much. He'd had decades of
experience in using his powers, which meant that he'd thought up ways to use his powers and by
extension mine that I'd never thought about.

But it was possible that in trusting him I was missing out on uses that he'd never even thought about.
After all, even if our power sets were very similar that didn't mean that the way we used them would be.

My mind worked somewhat differently than his did, which might mean that I did some things
differently.

Who wouldn't teleport if they could manage it? If it was easier and didn't play havoc with local
equipment I'd have used it to go to the refrigerator. As it was I could justify using it as being that I
needed to practice or I might lose the skill.

There were other skills I was practicing. I'd let whatever telepathy I'd had atrophy, having used it
only once to taunt Emma and to communicate with my grandfather, and for nothing else. If mutant
powers worked like muscles, then I needed to use it or I'd lose it.

Unfortunately, right now I seemed to be weaker than a lot of television psychics. During times of
high emotion I could get flashes from people, but otherwise nothing.

My idea for a Mars colony would have to wait, not because I couldn't reach Mars but because aiming
would be difficult.

I wondered if I could get paid for warping satellites into orbit, or maybe simply lifting them
magnetically. I'd be able to defend against the Simurgh maybe; although my grandfather's helmet
didn't hold his spirit anymore, there was a chance that it might protect against the Simurgh's mental
affect.

We wouldn't know until her next attack, though, and I'd hate to depend on it and then discover that it
didn't work against what passed for mind control in this world. If it did work, it was technology that
I'd gladly pass on to the Protectorate. It'd make fighting the Simurgh and other Masters much much
easier.

The technology was going to be the biggest loss from my grandfather, at least as far as the world was
concerned. The things he built could be replicated by anyone with enough know how and the right
tools. It was almost as though Tinker abilities intentionally left steps out of deigns so that we couldn't
replicate them.

Still, that wasn't always true.

Dragon was able to reverse engineer some things and there were other capes who could do the same.
I suspected that the Protectorate intentionally withheld some technologies just so that they would
have an advantage.

Science worked best when information was shared. That was why there had been an explosion in
knowledge once the printing press had been developed, and another with the development of the
Internet. Communication was key, and anyone who stopped that was acting as a brake to the
development of science for the whole human species.

I wanted to hire a think tank of some of the smartest normal people around, people who would have
the best chance of understanding some of the Tinkertech devices that weren't that advanced. Not
everything was a laser gun or a singularity generator after all.

If we could create new science, then we'd help bring humanity get one step closer to the stars. We'd
be able to scatter, and then even if Scion or the Endbringers or someone else destroyed us we'd be too dispersed for anyone to ever destroy humanity.

I had big dreams for someone who was still living in what was essentially a metal hut. I had the money, now for the Slaughterhouse members I had killed; twenty five million dollars sitting in an account somewhere. That was after they'd already taken taxes out and after I'd already paid for the healers for the camp just as I'd said they would.

There had apparently been a nasty strain of cholera going around the camp; not everyone was drinking bottled water. It made me a little ill to think about what might have happened considering that the port-a-potties weren't the most sanitary things in the world.

I generally flew into town to do my business, and I'm not sure what Dad did. I didn't want to know. Creating showers in the middle of everything hadn't hurt people's attitudes toward me much. Although they were metal they were otherwise much like RV camp showers. They cleaned and reused water using a design Leet had showed me that I suspected wasn't even Tinkertech. Some water was lost, of course, but they only had to be refilled every couple of days.

Being clean was one more step toward feeling like a human being, and it had done a lot toward making people calmer about their lots in life.

I'd even managed to set up laundromats all over camp, although the machines were constantly breaking down from overuse.

There was talk about sending kids back to school next week even, splitting the Winslow kids, who were almost unanimously in the camps to Arcadia and the other schools in the area.

Now that I thought about it, the Winslow kids had been avoiding me in the camps. It wasn't like I was going to pull their spleens out for not helping me when I'd been bullied, or for laughing when they saw what was happening.

I was a hero after all, or at least not a villain.

The temptation was there, sometimes, when I dealt with annoying talk show hosts asking about my shoes when a hundred thousand people in my home town barely had blankets. It was there when I dealt with bureaucrats who tried to obstruct every idea that I tried to implement.

It seemed that there was red tape everywhere, and it all seemed like it was designed to keep people from actually accomplishing anything. I could understand that some of the rules had good reasons behind them; that wasn't the problem. The problem was that there was a rule about everything, and there were so many of them that there were entire professions of people whose only job was to navigate those rules.

Setting up a business shouldn't be so hard. Neither should providing charity to people, or building shelters or any of a dozen things I'd tried in the past week alone.

People were more afraid of lawyers than they were willing to keep people alive, and that was wrong.

Flying over the camp, I looked over the work that had been done. People were slowly trying to resume their lives, for what that was worth inside the camp. My food stands had been expanded by entrepreneurs representing some major brands; apparently killing the Endbringers and the Nine had been enough that major corporations were sponsoring food carts.

The new carts actually accepted my coins, as I paid at the end of the month at a discount.
half the food was donated. I suspected that they were trying to get brand loyalty as a cigarette manufacturer had tried to set up a stand.

I'd nixed that one.

Those people who were the most addicted were making their way into town to get their fixed, or having others do it for them. I'd heard that some people were making a profitable living doing that, despite the high cost of cigarettes.

Still, there were people who had given it up and I didn't want to make it more difficult for them to quit. After all, if there could be at least a little good to come out of monstrous tragedy I'd be pleased.

FEMA was finally sending inspectors out, as were the major insurance companies. Apparently my shaming them in my first and later subsequent interviews had been enough to get the ball moving. Even with the army of inspectors it wouldn't be enough to get everyone what they needed in any reasonable time frame.

Even if it did, more than half of the people who had lived in the poor neighborhoods had been renters.

I'd been quietly buying up properties under an assumed name from former landlords for pennies on the dollar. The landlords knew that it would be years before their property was rebuilt, and most of them wanted quick profits.

Lung had been doing the same, although I'd been insistent on letting him know that no one was to be intimidated into selling. Even if it wasn't ethically wrong it went against the image we were trying to pursue.

No one believed that we would be able to rebuild the city, and even with the money we had now between us it wouldn't be possible.

If it worked we'd be left richer than ever and people would have places to live, maybe even rent to own. I'd make a decent profit and people would be grateful to me. If it didn't work I'd be left with hundreds of lots of worthless land.

Under his advice, I now had a dozen different shell companies buying land in my name. I was selling minerals from seawater at an accelerated rate; just because I had millions of dollars didn't mean that it would last.

After all, the food stalls were costing money despite the donations, as were the movies I was setting up to keep people entertained.

The sun was setting right now, and I landed next to Dad.

There were blankets spread out all over, real blankets, not the cheap FEMA stuff. People were chatting and passing food and drinks around.

The people in this section of the part were used to me by now, and no one blinked as I set down gently by my Dad.

“How are things going?” I asked him.

“Everybody's excited about the movie,” he said. “We haven't had hardly any fights in the last two
days, probably because we limited the amount of beer that stalls can sell to any one person.”

That had been a problem for a while. Some people were abusing the system, or maybe were just alcoholics. The ones who drank too much tended to get rowdy, and preexisting agreements turned into fights.

As the sun set, someone came out and told everyone the movie was about to begin.

The same scene was occurring all over camp. Mostly it was old movies that were shown, but since getting some money I'd paid a little more to get an actual first run movie.

I could see Lung over in the corner with a couple of beautiful Chinese women under his arms. He still had habits I didn't exactly approve of, but his personal life wasn't something I could really talk to him about.

Still, it was good to be on top.

I laughed with everyone else as the movie wound to its conclusion, and then I heard the sounds of whispering all around me. I looked up to see what everyone was talking about.

Hanging in the air above us was a golden man.

I'd always heard that he barely even noticed people, but he was looking right at me, his face utterly expressionless.

I froze.

Everyone else thought he was the world's greatest hero, but I knew what he really was. He was the source of the Endbringers, the source of all of the misery of our world. He was the one who intended to eventually end not just our world, but all of the worlds everywhere with humans on them.

And now he was here.
Alexandria

Scion didn't have any metal in him, and as far as I could tell, he didn't breathe. He was simply there, staring down at me with a look that wasn't any look at all.

I'd been trying to fix the world and he wanted to destroy it. Did that mean he was here to kill me?

People were gasping, staring up at him. They thought he was the world's greatest hero, but I knew better. Even if Alexandria hadn't told me, I think I'd have suspected. There was something alien about his body language, about his unnatural stillness.

He was more like a statue than a person.

I tried to think of his known powers, but my mind kept coming up blank. He was stronger and faster than any of the Endbringers, so powerful that Capes like Eidolon and Alexandria barely even rated.

Even with my force fields he might be able to pull my head off before I could react to him, and if he was the one who gave everyone their powers like Alexandria implied that might mean that he had powers that I had no counter for.

I couldn't even move to defend myself, because that might be the one thing that set him off.

Alexandria's entire clandestine organization was dedicated to defeating him. They had the best thinkers in the business, and they'd been planning the fight for longer than I'd been alive. Yet they still didn't think they would be able to win.

So what chance did I have?

It was true that my powers might not be something he'd seen before, but if he'd been on other planets he'd probably seen other beings with powers and he'd undoubtedly had experience in dealing with them.

I'd only been doing this for a few weeks.

Missing my grandfather had been something I'd been trying to force to the back of my mind, although the people around me had certainly noticed that I was different over the last week. Things that had seemed important no longer did, and sometimes it felt like I was going through the motions.

Staring up at Scion I suddenly wondered if that was how he felt. Alexandria had said something about their killing another one of his kind. Was he alone now, and was that why he never bothered to interact with everyone?

Or was this just an act, like a cuckoo bird stuck in another bird's nest, hoping to force the other bird to expend all the food and energy of raising the chick.

I rose to my feet, and from there I levitated into the air. If he was going to kill me, he would kill me. Otherwise, I wasn't going to back down.

My grandfather was Magneto, first among mutants, hero and villain, savior of his people and sometimes enemy of humanity. I couldn't let his memory die with me, and I couldn't back down.

I rose until I was facing him.
“Can I help you?” I asked.

Inside I was trembling, tense. This could end very badly. Even if I was somehow capable of fighting Scion, there were people all around that I cared about, including my Dad.

He didn't say anything. He didn't move at all, and the silence stretched out to an uncomfortable degree.

I felt the urge to keep talking, but I remembered my grandfather's advice. People will rush to fill silence, and usually to their detriment. How I acted here and now could affect the future of the entire world, even though Scion didn't look like he particularly care whatever I said.

Before I could think of anything to say his head snapped around. A moment later he was gone, moving at the kind of speed that even Alexandria would have been envious of, yet he barely created a wind in his passing.

People were taking pictures beneath me; getting everyone access to their phones may have been a bad idea.

How would the world react to Scion facing me down. There would be people who assumed that it meant that Scion thought I was a villain, even though he never bothered to interact with parahuman villains.

Others would assume that Scion was passing on some kind of mantle.

I suspected that he'd been scanning me, and that this was only the opening salvo of what was inevitably going to be a war.

As I dropped to the ground, I ignored the fact that my knees were shaking. People expected me to be the powerful person who knew what to do, and I had to project that image, at least until I found a way to be alone.

“What was that all about?” I heard several people asking.

“Maybe he made a wrong turn at Albuquerque,” I said, shrugging.

Bugs bunny references never hurt. They made people think I was a huge dork, but that just made me more human. I think that was where my grandfather had gone wrong. He'd been so traumatized by whatever experiences he'd been through that he assumed that all humans were evil.

If people thought you were on their side they tended to like you.

It took almost ten minutes to get away from the crowd and head off to my hut. I had a separate hut from Dad now that I wasn't as worried about people assassinating either one of us.

I wasn't surprised to see a form in the darkness sitting on my metal couch. It was a female shape, and the voice that called out to me was familiar.

“He's aware of you now,” Alexandria said. “It was only a matter of time. I'm only surprised that it took this long.”

“Do you think it was Leviathan?” I asked. “That's been more than a couple of weeks ago.”

“We're still not sure of his psychology,” she admitted. “We're not even sure he's fully sentient. What we have been able to figure out is that finding new abilities and new uses for old abilities are his
entire reason for being. That means that he's going to be particularly interested in you.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“You don't have a shard,” she said. “We still haven't figured out exactly where your power comes from, but presumably he is as intrigued as we are.”

“Was it Panacea who told you?” I asked. I felt a surge of anger. She was supposed to keep things confidential! She acted like she was bound by doctor type rules and the first thing she did was betray me.

Alexandria said, “We haven't spoken to her. We didn't need to. We've got access to all the best thinkers in the business, as well as some of the best bio-tinkers.”

“Bonesaw?” I asked.

I'd worried about Bonesaw a lot; she was the member of the Nine that had gotten away, and it could have easily been that she'd spent the time since I'd killed her teammates building something horrible— a horrible plague, or a Nilbog style clone army or something.

“We've got her contained in an extradimensional prison,” Alexandria said. “She's actually afraid of you, but she's been very useful. Where she is she won't be able to hurt anyone else though.”

It was a relief, even if the fact that they were harboring one of the Nine was ethically dubious.

“So what are we going to do?” I asked.

“We're going to have to bring you even closer into the fold,” she said. I couldn't see her face in the darkness, but her voice sounded irritable. “There's been some discussion about that, even though the way is usually a lot clearer. The problem is that precog and Thinker powers don't work around Scion, and now that you are involved with him you are getting harder to Path.”

“Ripples in water,” I said. I'd had a few conversations with Dinah. “If you can't see it, look for the effects. I think the first thing I'm going to need is as much information as you can give me about his capabilities, and about what we have that might be able to hurt him.”

That was the least they could do.

“You aren't going to tell me where you got your powers?” she asked.

I snorted. “Trust goes both ways. You think that I haven't noticed that you aren't introducing me to anyone else in on your little conspiracy?”

“That's still being decided,” she said.

“Meaning you aren't in charge,” I said. “That must sting when you are used to being the head of the PRT.”

She didn't move at all, being as still as Scion, which was more damning than if she'd immediately tried to deny it.

My grandfather had figured it out before he'd... left.

“I think you mean the Protectorate,” she said. Her voice was chilly.
“Right,” I said evenly. “I get them confused sometimes.”

Outing a cape was dangerous business, and I'd just subtly threatened to do so to her. How she'd react I still didn't know, but it was possible that it wouldn't be good.

Still, I had to convince her that I was competent enough to trust with the information I needed. I couldn't fight someone I couldn't understand, not at his level of power. He wasn't just some low level gang member whose head I could crush with a nearby aluminum can.

“You should keep track of things like that,” she said. “Mistakes can be unpleasant.”

“Even for someone who is important to the Plan?” I asked.

“What do you know about that?” she asked. She stared at me for a moment. “No... you are just fishing. You haven't been up to your usual standards lately, and I have to ask myself why?”

“Maybe I'm just tired of living in a refugee camp,” I said. “It's tough to get any privacy to shower.”

“You've got enough money to buy yourself a mansion anywhere,” she said impatiently. She stared at me for a moment. “Oh, you are trying to distract me.”

Alexandria had a thinker rating, if I remembered correctly, and it wasn't just for her eidetic memory.

“You talked to yourself in the past, but you haven't been doing it since your confrontation with the Nine. Maybe you weren't talking to yourself. Maybe you lost someone you aren't talking about?”

Now she was the one who was fishing. I forced myself to keep my face as neutral as possible, but there wasn't anything I could do about microexpressions. Worse, part of me wanted to tell her. It was possible that her people had resources that weren't available to Leet. They might be able to fix him.

They'd hold him hostage for my cooperation. I didn't need my grandfather's input to realize that.

If they were strictly on the up and up, they'd have been public, at least to the Protectorate. Instead she was here talking to me in the darkness, which meant she didn't want her own people knowing she was talking to me.

That suggested that they were willing to use any means necessary to accomplish their goal. Considering that they thought they were saving the entire human race, I suspected that their methods had to be less than humane.

A little blackmail would seem a small price to pay if I could help them in their war.

I fully intended to do so, but I wasn't willing to be a foot soldier or cannon fodder. I'd do it on my own terms.

“Talk to your people,” I said. “Let me talk to your thinkers. Maybe we can come up with something that you haven't come up with in the past.”

“There's an element of secrecy involved,” she said.

“That's solved easily,” I said. I gestured, and something began to form in the center of the room. Alexandria didn't jerk back, although I had a feeling that she wanted to.

After several moments a glittering figure appeared. It was vaguely in my shape, but made of small shards of metal suspended in the air.
“I can speak through this by vibrating the metal shards like an amplifier,” I said through the metal avatar. I frowned. The words sounded a little fuzzier than I would like. Of course, I'd only had a week to practice.

“I can hear through it as well, but not see,” I said through my avatar. “I was thinking about what my father does with his insects, and about Leviathan and the way that he couldn't see but sensed people through the water in their bodies, and that led indirectly to this.”

She was silent for a moment.

“And you can't see through it?”

“I can't figure out a way to do it,” I said. “I can sense the vibrations in the metal, and it took a bit of work figuring out how to use it to hear; interpreting the vibrations sound causes in the metal wasn't easy, and I'm still kind of refining it. If I really wanted to see I'd have to use tiny cameras and send to a TV receiver.”

“Which you could do easily, especially as Leet is one of your contacts.”

“You could scan for cameras,” I said. I was assuming they had access to anything the Protectorate did. They probably had thinkers give them information through intermediaries who didn't know what was going on so that they wouldn't give anything away. Possibly through more than one layer.

Silent for a moment, she sighed audibly. “I suppose it wouldn't hurt to set up a meeting. I'll let you know the time and we'll take you to the place.”

I smiled, although I wasn't sure how much she could see in the darkness. I gestured, although I didn't really need to and I dismissed the shimmering figure in the corner. The little metal shavings that composed it went back in my pouch. They weighed less than two pounds.

If necessary I could turn them into a weapon that would kill a lot of people at the same time, not that I would. I didn't really need to and I dismissed the shimmering figure in the corner. The little metal shavings that composed it went back in my pouch. They weighed less than two pounds.

“I feel like time is running out,” I said. “Maybe sooner would be better than later.”

“T’ll let you know,” she said shortly. She rose to her feet. “There aren't very many people who threaten me, not anymore.”

“You have to breathe,” I said. “And parahuman powers don't work past the radius of the moon. Mine work just fine, though.”

I grinned at her.

“Not that it's going to come to that. We're on the same side after all. We need each other, and we both like having the world not destroyed.”

She stepped forward and as she came closer I saw a scowl on her face.

“You make it tough to really like you.”

“The people seem to like me well enough,” I said. “It's just the people in power that seem to have a problem with me.”

“There's a reason things are done the way they are, Taylor,” she said. “Sometimes when it seems
there are simple solutions there are very good reasons those solutions are not followed through.”

“Unintended consequences?” I asked. “Isn't that what old people use to justify not changing? Except you aren't ever going to get old, are you?”

“And you will,” she said. “Assuming we all survive, of course, Enjoy your youth while it lasts.”

“I'll just have Leet whip up a tinker tech potion,” I said. “Or have Panacea learn to reverse aging. There are ways. Accepting the status quo just because that's how it has always been done is stupid.”

“There are reasons for everything,” she repeated. “Which suggests that telling you why things are done might be the best thing. You are very much the bull running around in the china closet.”

“Better that than the bull who is afraid to ever do anything,” I said, frustrated. “Standing in one spot terrified of breaking a plate. Doesn't it ever get frustrating never getting anything done, leaving the villains on the street to run rampage.”

“We need them!” she said, then scowled.

“That's why we're doing all of this,” I said suddenly. “Fighting, letting the villains go. You are training an army to fight Scion.”

“Using the powers he gave us against him is appropriate, don't you think? He gave us these powers to destroy us, but in the end we will make him choke on them.”

There was conviction in her voice, a grim certainty that I didn't know how to respond to except in one way.

“How has that been working with the Endbringers?” I asked. “And they aren't even the end bosses. Until I'd come along you hadn't really hurt any of them, Maybe it's time to think outside the box.”

I was getting better at talking a good game, but the question was whether I would be able to follow through. In the end it was all going to be up to me.

It always was.

“We'll be in touch,” Alexandria said.

With that a bright doorway appeared in the wall of my metal hut and I blinked at the sudden bright light.

A moment after that she was gone, and I was left with my own thoughts.
I tasted ashes, and it took me a moment to realize that the bitter taste in my mouth was the remnants of what had once been my kind.

All that was left was dust and a few fragments of bone left over from those who were stronger.

The dream was dead. Mutants were never going to have a place in this world, not as long as the machines were there, getting smarter and adapting every time they faced one of us.

Even my own powers, well adapted to fighting machines no longer worked as well as they once had. The machines were finding workarounds, and it was only a matter of time until I found myself in the same situation as these poor souls.

The landscape was scorched and burned. They hadn't gone without a fight, something I could at least take some satisfaction in. They'd been innocents, not warriors like my old foes and later friends. Still, there had been children there, as well as families with parents.

Most mutants were just people, for all my claims they were homo superior. Perhaps that had been a mistake in retrospect. I hadn't realized how afraid the humans would be, how vicious they would become.

I should have known.

I'd grown up seeing the worst of what humanity had to offer, growing up behind barbed wire and seeing the daily role call of the dead.

I'd believed them when they'd said 'never again,' not realizing how short human memory was or how long I would live. People tend to see those who are other as not being human, and if someone isn't human then any action against them is appropriate.

We'd lost the war before it had even started, if only we had known it.

How long would it be before the machines turned on their masters, the baseline humans? I wasn't sure, but it was no longer my concern.

"Don't look, honey," I said. "We're going some place better."

I'd only recently discovered how to jump worlds, using information from the late, great Mr. Richards. It was a gamble; there was no reason to think that whatever world I found would be any better than this one.

Still, it might be, and I had family to protect, even if she wasn't strictly of my own kind.

"Annette, we have to go," I said.

She clung to me, terrified. I needed to protect her above all things. She was the only legacy I had left. All my years of fighting for my people, and this...

There was a sound of rocks sliding, and Annette screamed. I turned in time to see a pile of rubble shifting as metallic parts sprang into place.

I should have been able to feel the metal, but it was dull and muted.
This one rose to its full height, towering far above us. It was monstrous, a creature designed only to kill.

“MUTANT IDENTIFIED. STEP AWAY FROM THE HUMAN AND ACCEPT YOUR END.”

It didn’t even bother to wait for me to comply. Instead hell fire rained down on us.

I gasped as I woke up. This was part of the reason that I’d gotten my own building to sleep in at night. I’d been having nightmares, and when I did things started flying. If this kept up I was going to have to move away from people.

I wasn’t sure why this was happening. Had letting my grandfather's avatar control me during the Leviathan fight been a mistake? Had it left something behind, an imprint of its mind?

I was telepathic, even if not very. Maybe I’d read its mind and these were the memories that I hadn't even realized I had.

For some reason, every memory was a bad one. I had had nightmares about being in concentration camps, both the kinds I knew about from the forties with the Germans, and futuristic versions which didn't seem much different, except that some of the people didn't look entirely human.

There were nighmarish images of a man with claw hands stabbing me in the chest, of having my wife murdered and taking revenge on the people who had done it.

Dinosaurs and animal men appeared in some of my dreams.

Every night it was something different. I suspected that this one was going to haunt me if only because this was what Scion planned, not just for mutants but for everyone I had ever known.

It was a matter of time, and the information that Alexandria's organization had given me wasn't nearly as thorough as I'd thought for a group that had had decades to study him and the corpse of his partner.

The problem was that they were forced to use powers that had been intentionally limited by the Entities to prevent just this sort of thing. Apparently they'd gotten lucky with the one Entity, proving they could be killed, but we weren't going to be nearly as lucky with Scion.

His actual body was hidden on another earth; the body he showed wasn't a projection, exactly, but it was an infinitesimal part of him, and any damage would look like it was healed instantly because he was replacing the injured matter with other injured matter.

Like humans, he apparently had certain pieces that were vital, but those would never appear in his human form. It made sense; humans kept their most important organs hidden behind shields of bone.

If I could find his actual body and get there it might be possible to do something, but apparently his size was immense. Finding the few pieces that mattered was going to be difficult at best, and in the meantime no one knew exactly what powers he'd kept for himself.

He only used a few powers, but Alexandria's group was suspicious that he would have kept the best powers all to himself.

How did you fight someone who might have hundreds of powers?
There were powers that I wouldn’t be able to defend against. Mind control in particular would be difficult.

My grandfather’s helmet would protect against telepathy even without him, but would it work against being Mastered? I had no way of knowing if the two effects were the same. Finding out on the field of battle could be costly, both to myself and to the world.

I'd watched videos of his fights with the Endbringers, what few of those there were. Most Capes were too busy during Endbringer fights to bother taking videos. Most of them seemed to have been uploaded by Armsmaster for some reason.

I couldn't even attack him to find out more. I'd asked Dinah, and while she couldn't see him, she could see that the world would end early if I attacked him without a plan.

Yet at the same time Dinah hadn't yet seen a scenario where he didn't end the world in more than thirty years. Most scenarios were less. She knew it was him because she couldn't see him, and her power seemed to see everyone.

It was frustrating. I hadn't had a good nights sleep in days and I didn't know why. If I could rest maybe my thought processes might be clearer and I'd be able to come up with something that might be useful.

I touched the piece of the helmet in my pocket.

Maybe the helmet had left a copy of itself in my mind when it had taken me over? I wasn't a hundred percent sure I'd be ok with that, especially if I got older and started getting interested in dating. Still, it would be better than losing it altogether.

Imagining listening to my grandfather comment on whatever pimple faced boy I picked while I was trying to have a date was somehow hard to imagine. I doubted that he'd be impressed.

It'd be hard enough to find a boy who wasn't intimidated by me without a running commentary about how he was homo inferior, not because he was a human but because he was an idiot.

Scowling I forced myself to get up.

Dressing, I headed out of the building.

Dad was outside by a campfire making breakfast. He'd been doing it a lot more these days as opposed to picking something up from one of the kiosks. I'd had to insist that he not use any of his animal friends to “help” though. It was enough to make me wonder whether his powers were affecting his mind.

“Power affects the human brain,” the voice on the radio said. “Research shows that power causes people to become more impulsive, less conscious of risk and less able to empathize with others. Given that, I have to wonder why no one else is as worried as I am about a fifteen year old girl who is essentially running an entire city?”

Another voice broke in. “I think she's doing a great job, more than what the government is doing anyway.”

“Fifteen year olds are already impulsive and not very empathetic. You heard what she's done to people who have crossed her in the past, right?”

“Nazis and Endbringers,” the second host said dismissively. “Maybe we should clone her.”
A large beetle rammed the small radio and it fell over and fell quiet.

Dad looked up. “Another bad night?”

“I've been dreaming about him again,” I said. I sat down on the log beside him and accepted a bean and egg burrito from him. Our houses at least had refrigerators, which is more than most people had, even though I'd had to sneak them in after everyone went to bed.

Living like the common folk could only go so far, after all. I tended to like ice cream before I went to bed, and with my recent sleep deprivation the last thing anyone needed was for me to become irritable from a lack of food.

“Do you think it's because you miss him?” Dad asked. “I never really got to meet him, so I don't know what he was like.”

“I miss him,” I said. “Even if he wasn't really real. He felt like a real person even if he was only a computer program.”

“Any luck in finding the computer he's based out of?”

I shook my head. I'd been looking all over the Bay with my magnetic sense, but I hadn't found anything anomalous. I'd found a few secret lairs from Tinkers who had died over the past couple of decades; Leet had been interested in them if only from an academic standpoint.

“I just can't help but feel like he would have had a plan for all of this. These dreams feel like real memories, and he had a lot of bad ones.”

“Your mother said he wasn't always a good man,” my father said, staring at the fire. He took a sip of coffee. “But he was toward the end. He was good to her despite the fact that she wasn't... like him.”

We'd agreed to never talk about mutants; there were too many ways that we could be overheard. I still didn't entirely trust Alexandria or her group. They hadn't even told me what they called themselves. I had a feeling that they probably did a lot of things I wouldn't approve of, and I worked with villains on a daily basis.

“She wouldn't talk much about her world,” he said. “She left when she was a child. I got the impression that she didn't like thinking about it much. It seemed like it was pretty bad.”

I had a sudden image of skulls sticking out of dust and I shuddered. I had a feeling that things had been much worse in his world than even that. There had been hints in the dreams that I had been having that it had gotten a lot worse before the end.

With all his power, hadn't he been able to stop it?

It was every nightmare that he'd ever had, the Holocaust of his youth written large upon his people. How many mutants had there been and how many of them had been killed by the machines?

Had humanity survived on that world, or were the machines now there alone, waiting for a hapless inter-dimensional traveler to open new worlds for them to despoil and destroy.

Scion was the immediate threat, but even if we destroyed him we'd have to deal with other threats like this.

“Today's the big day, right?” Dad asked.
I grunted and sipped my coffee. It was bitter.

An Asian teenager approached our camp. It took me a moment, but I recognized him. It was Wu, the teenaged nephew of Lung’s aide-de-camp Wu. Apparently the Asians used their last name first. I probably needed to learn his first name at some point, assuming I hadn't already forgotten it.

Maybe I really did have trouble empathizing with others.

Wu stopped. He was wearing a T-shirt with my face on it. There was a logo in Japanese that I didn't understand.

I wondered if I was getting a cut of the sales, or if this was another of the knockoffs that the Protectorate kept busting. Everyone seemed to want to get into the game of capitalizing on my name, whether they had a right to it or not.

“What's going on, Wu?” I asked.

“Lung wishes to speak to you,” he said.

I lifted my eyebrow. Usually Lung came to me, as much as it probably galled him. After all, I was the undisputed leader in the camp.

“He says we are ready for the demonstration,” Wu said. “And there are other matters that have to be discussed as well.”

I sighed. In a camp like this there were always matters of importance. The last time was when there had been problems with the septic systems; we'd long passed the existence of port-a-potties. There was talk about hooking us into the city sewer systems, but there were concerns that would make people realize that the camp was here for the long term.

Moral was hard enough to maintain as it was. Inspectors were moving around the city and some people actually had construction crews beginning work on their houses. However there were never enough inspectors and there were never enough construction crews even though they had been coming from all over the state and even from surrounding states.

FEMA only provided a portion of the reconstruction costs, with those who had the right kinds of Insurance policies getting the rest covered. The problem was that a lot of cheaper policies considered Endbringer attacks to be Acts of God, which meant they did not cover damage.

The poorer homeowners often had the cheaper policies, and they were largely out of luck. The poorest residents of course hadn't owned their own homes and they'd just rented.

I'd bought up as much property as I could and I was trying to build new neighborhoods that would be places where the renters wanted to live. It wasn't as easy as it sounded. Lung and I had been forced to become real estate developers over the past few weeks and there were as always all sorts of rules involved.

We were hitting a limit on our resources. We needed more money already before we would build the houses that people needed.

An architect was designing a series of houses that we could build, taking my abilities in mind to reduce costs. Excavation and foundations were the priciest part of house building, and I was going to be able to help with those easily.

Half the money on building a home was the cost of labor. If we could work our way around the
bureaucratic hurdles involved, I'd be able to help with that a lot too. I'd learned my lesson when I'd built my own Tower; there were codes for everything, and if I was building them for other people instead of just myself it would be even worse.

I suspected that once everything was set up it would go really quickly. Even if I had to put up the framework for every building in a neighborhood one after another, then wait for inspectors before doing the next part, I'd be able to mass produce buildings far more quickly than any home developer.

There might be problems with unions, though. Not every union was as benevolent as the Dockworkers, and some would probably have problems with their perception that I was taking jobs from hardworking Americans, even though there was already enough work for everyone from the people in the wealthier districts.

I had people looking into what snags we'd meet there too.

This time I was going to do things the right way. We were working on deals to buy materials in bulk much more cheaply than buying for one house, but again I needed more money before any of it could happen. FEMA was dragging its feet on the properties that I'd already bought, and I still hadn't found a treasure ship.

I'd had twenty five million dollars when this had all started. That money was running out. To build the city back like I wanted would require at last a billion dollars, only a third of which would be covered by the government.

Seven hundred million dollars wasn't just going to fall out of trees. I had to make it happen.

Fortunately I had a plan. I'd contacted several companies about launching satellites. The possibilities for making money there was high. Launching a satellite cost anywhere from fifty million to four hundred million dollars, and I would be able to do so for a fraction of that price.

It would have to be done from somewhere far away from populated cities, but we were in discussion with several companies. There were concerns of course that the Simurgh would get involved,

First I'd have to do a proof of concept. Most people who knew much about powers thought that they ended at the end of the earth's atmosphere. I'd have to prove that I could do something spectacular before they'd risk spending tens of millions.

So today I was going to take a group of wealthy investors on a trip while building myself a small base. Lung wanted to be part of it, the first man to be in space since Sphere had built his moon base.

With luck it would be the beginning of something with which I could base my empire.
“You want us to go into space in a sphere made of glass,” the man in the suit said dubiously.

“It's not glass. It's a sphere of aluminum oxynitride, a ceramic made of aluminum, oxygen and nitrogen.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“It's basically transparent aluminum. You'll never get a better view than what we are going to give you.”

There were five executives, all from different companies staring at the sphere I'd spent a week making. Without my grandfather's expertise it had been much harder to make, but I had finished it and Leet had assured me that I'd gotten it right.

To their credit they didn't blink at Lung's presence by my side. I doubted that some of them even knew who he was; after all, while he was famous in Brockton Bay, he wasn't necessarily nationally famous except among Cape geeks.

Given Leet's record I wasn't going to mention that he was the one checking my work to any of them. Still, with my force field they didn't need an actual vehicle at all, but the point was to prove that I could launch an actual physical vessel into space.

“How are we going to breathe?” a second executive asked.

“The sphere is big enough that we wouldn't actually need anything for oxygen for as long as we're going to be up there. However, just in case, I've got a couple of tinkertech gadgets to absorb our carbon dioxide and provide oxygen and heat.”

“And radiation?”

“You all sounded more confident on the phone,” I said. “My force field protects from all of that, but I've put a small amount of lead in the transparent aluminum to help.”

I gestured toward the sky. “There's never been an astronaut who got sick or died from going through the Van Allen Belt.”

“And will this survive re entry?”

“No,” I said. “If we reach a point where I can't fly the thing, then Alexandria will fly up here and get you herself.”

It was a lie, of course. Alexandria couldn't breathe in space and some parahuman powers ended with the atmosphere, while others ended as far as the moon. None had been known to extend beyond that.

“You know Alexandria?” the first executive asked.

“She takes an interest in people who beat an Endbringer,” I said. “She's been fighting them long enough that helping me out is cheaper than keeping up with what she's been doing.”

The men hesitated, then nodded.

“I still think we could do this from the ground, George,” one of the men said to the first executive.
“People pay tens of millions of dollars for this in Earth Aleph,” George said. “And when was the last
time a civilian went into space in this universe? We're getting it essentially for free. Are you a man or
not?”

One executive shook his head. “It doesn’t look safe. I’m out.”

He stepped away, heading for the Black SUV that was waiting for him. We were ten miles south of
Brockton Bay in an uninhabited area. Technically we were trespassing, but I doubted anyone would
complain.

The sphere was made of glass and it was twenty feet in diameter. It had a level floor, though; the last
thing I wanted was for the executives to be all falling all over themselves. I had purchased a half
dozen airline seats for a couple of thousand dollars; they were from airplanes that had been
disassembled. They had good seat belts and were made of leather. I’d welded them to the floor.

Opening the hatch, I gestured for the men to step inside. They hesitated, but George was the first to
step inside.

“It’s roomier than it has to be,” he said.

“Weight's not much of a constraint for me,” I said. “Which means I don't have to be limited to the
kind of cramped quarters rocket based launch systems need.”

“This still seems kind of shoddy,” the second man said.

“I'm not trying to go into space for a long time. That would take a lot of equipment and expertise that
I don't have. The question isn't whether I can build a spaceship or not; the space shuttle had two and
a half million moving parts. I'm not sure I'd trust myself with something like that. The point is to
prove that I can put something this size into space.”

“How much does this weigh?”

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “I don't have the kind of limits you are used to, and I plan to prove it to
you once we get started.”

“All right, impress us,” George said.

I grinned at him. He shouldn't have said that.

It took a little to get them all strapped in. The last thing I needed was for one of them to break an
ankle during acceleration. Lung sat on the end, his body relaxed and calm. I suspected that this was
part of what was helping the executives keep from panicking.

I continued to stand. Once I was sure they were all secure I gestured and the door sealed. This was
the part that I'd worked on the most; an oxygen leak would be unfortunate even with my force field;
the men would probably panic and never trust me again. Sometimes the appearance of safety was
more important than actual safety.

I made sure that the craft rose smoothly. The line of SUV's below us rapidly grew smaller.

We then shot forward.

“I thought we were going up,” one of the men said.

“It works better if launches are done from the tropics,” George said. “Although I'm not sure how
long that's going to take.”

“I don't need to worry about any of that,” I said. “But there is a stop we have to make before we can
get airborne.”

“Do you have a launch and reentry license?” the third man asked.

“It would take six months of government review to get one of those,” I said. “So we'll be launching
from the ocean in international waters. They shouldn't have anything to complain about, and if they
do I'll make them regret it.”

We were out over the open waters now, and the men seemed impressed at the speeds we were
managing. I'd figured out how to propel this craft faster than I could my body, with balancing being a
lot easier among everything else.

“Before we go into space we're going to take a quick tour underwater,” I said.

Before anyone could reply, we plunged into the water, the sphere jolting with contact. The seal on
the door held, and I grinned.

“The seal is good,” I said, gesturing toward the door.

A moment later we were in familiar waters, with fish everywhere.

“I found this a while back,” I said as we passed over the remains of the U-boat. “I don't think you are
actually supposed to sell these, but I've got another use for it.”

“This is a German U-boat, type 42,” I said. “Empty weight is about nine hundred ninety nine tons.
Right now it is full of water, which makes it unimaginably heavier.”

I gestured, and through the metal of the hull of the sphere we could hear the groaning of metal from
the submarine. Tons of mud and silt covered most of it, and I had to reinforce it with a force field just
to make sure that it stayed whole.

A moment later, it began to rise, and as it did, so did we.

We broke water in the space of a moment, the submarine following behind us a moment later. I
forced myself to look relaxed and casual, even though I could actually feel this weight. It was getting
better, though as the water spilled out of large holes in the sides.

A glance back and the men showed them to be open mouthed. Apparently it was one thing to hear
about me lifting boats and another thing entirely to see it.

“Another reason that I decided to come out here was that there aren't as many airlines flying out here.
I can sense them coming, but I'd rather not scare anyone.”

I'd checked the flight schedules just to make sure.

We were rising through the air rapidly now. I had little doubt that the government would probably
launch fighter planes once they saw our signatures on radar, but by the time they reached us we'd be
out of their reach.

They'd be able to catch us on the way down, assuming they decided to make an issue of it. I'd just
have to plead ignorance.
A glance back showed that the men behind me were staring at the hunk of German metal I was hauling in front of us. It was as though they'd never seen a flying submarine before.

I waited until I turned around to smirk.

We were rising quickly. Normally a vehicle would have to move around twenty five thousand miles an hour to escape the Earth's gravitational pull, but what I was doing was closer to a space elevator, except that I didn't actually need an elevator.

Everyone was silent for ten minutes before the men finally started to get restless.

We were passing through the clouds now, and I turned to the men.

“Does anyone want any refreshments? I put a mini-fridge in the floor. I've got juice, sodas, bottled water.”

“Nothing but the best, eh?” George asked shakily. He was staring at the portion of the sphere wall where the submarine had been.

“I removed the bodies before the demonstration,” I said. “Took pictures of their location and everything.”

“There are laws about salvaging military vessels,” one of the men said uneasily. He was staring too.

“If Germany wants it, they can come up here and get it,” I said. “I doubt the European Space agency would be willing to pay what it would cost to get it down.”

“Are you really going to put it up into Space?” George asked.

We'd passed through the clouds by now, and the sky was turning black.

“I absolutely am,” I said. “You all wanted a demonstration about what I could do, so I'm going to give you a show.”

We could see stars by now. I could hear gasps from the men behind me, and I had to admit that having a clear view of everything around us made for a magnificent view. We were already above the operational limits of any military aircraft, given that their maximum range was approximately seventeen miles. We were in fact more almost three times that distance up, and there wasn't anything anyone could do to us without launching an actual missile at us.

Tinkers might try beam weapons, but I knew how to deflect those.

“We are fifty miles up. There's a little atmosphere left, but it's so thin we might as well be in outer space.”

The expressions on their faces were worth the trip. All of these men were innovators and pioneers. There were ordinary bean counters, but those hadn't given me the time of day. They'd regret that once I started my business, since I'd charge them twenty percent more than I charged these men.

They were all in the space business because they loved space, and because there was a feeling that the Simurgh had stolen space from us. There had been a time when people had dreamed about bases on the moon, about going to Mars and maybe even going further.

The Simurgh had shattered that dream forever. I'd heard that there was an International Space Station in Earth Aleph, and that there was even talk about going to Mars.
This was these men's one chance to do something they'd be able to tell their grandchildren about, assuming the Earth and mankind survived for that long.

Some of them had cellphones out, recording everything. I didn't mention that I had some of Leet's cameras on board; he'd put together a professional clip for them, and for us if we wanted future backers.

It was possible that I could charge for this; there were people who would pay a hundred thousand dollars for something like this easy, and if I brought them up in groups of five it would be easy to get money to help people.

Maybe I needed to form a non-profit organization. I had a feeling that my taxes were going to be ugly even though they were more than a year away.

It took twenty minutes to reach the hundred mile mark, but without atmosphere to slow things down I could accelerate much faster. I had to because in order to reach Geosynchronous orbit I had to be moving at twenty two thousand miles an hour.

This required acceleration, which meant we were never in free fall. Twenty more minutes brought us to the place and the speed and the place we needed to be. I had Leet whispering course corrections through an earpiece in my ear.

This helped me avoid any major Satellites. As we were moving I was gathering up tiny bits of space debris, mostly metallic, cleaning up the local area of space. That was another thing I could probably charge for. Even in this universe space was getting pretty full; it was too expensive to clean up old satellites and other detritus.

“Brockton Bay is directly below us,” I said.

They were staring again. Some of them had forgotten to keep filming with their cameras. This was the best view in the universe; not a fleeting glimpse of the Earth through a tiny porthole, but a panoramic view through a massive window.

“And now for the rest,” I said.

They'd forgotten about the Submarine, even though it was floating a hundred yards to our right. I gestured, and the submarine began to contract in on itself. It began to collapse into the shape of a ball. I was leisurely about it, taking five minutes to put the tiny trenches into it.

In the end it was a larger version of our sphere, except this one was in a familiar shape.

I wasn't sure if it was wise to let Leet talk me into this, but I hadn't been able to think of anything better. This sphere was forty feet in diameter and it weighed a thousand tons. I'd wanted to make a bigger statement, but getting enough metal on short notice had been harder than I'd thought.

“I...is that the Death Star?” one of the men asked.

“Well, it doesn't have a giant laser on it, or anything, but the choice was that or the Enterprise, and this is a lot more structurally stable. When I get the time I'll open a gateway into it and fill it with air, and I'll put windows in with transparent Aluminum.”

“You mean you just put the first possibly manned Satellite up since Skylab?” George asked.

I shrugged. “It won't work without a lot of work. Life support without parahuman assistance alone would cost a lot of money. Ultimately though, the answer is yeah.”
“Um... aren't there going to be copy write issues?” one of the men asked.

“George Lucas can suck it,” I said. “Unless he wants to buy ad space, in which case he is a visionary genius.”

“Should we really be putting ads in space?” one of the men asked.

“Why not?” another said. “I'm sure Pepsi would be glad to get in on this.”

The profit potentials of what I had just done was suddenly occurring to them men.

I saw movement below us; squinting my eyes it looked white. It took me a moment to realize that it looked like a glowing woman. Ordinarily I wouldn't have been able to see something that was maybe twice human size from a very far distance. The fact that I was seeing her with my naked eye meant that she was already closer to us than I would have liked.

Why hadn't Leet warned us if the Simurgh had changed course? He had access to Dragon's satellites, even if she didn't know about it.

She was coming closer at a high rate of speed.

I grimaced. I wasn't ready to fight her, not here and not while I was protecting these men. I could possibly use the metal from the Death Star to wrap her up, but she had her own telekinetic abilities that were at least as strong as my metal controlling powers and maybe stronger. Anything I could do to her she could do back, and better.

Furthermore, if she took control of my mind, I had the potential to become an Endbringer myself. Even ordinary people exposed to her scream had done monumental damage to the world; how much damage could I do, or even the men in the seats behind me?

Even if I somehow managed to force a stalemate, just seeing the Simurgh would probably frighten them enough to undo anything else I'd accomplished on this trip.

At least they were still staring at the Death Star, although Lung at least had noticed what I was looking at.

“This isn't the only thing we can do,” I said suddenly.

It wasn't a solution my Grandfather would have come up with, but it was one I was willing to take. If you can't win a fight, run away.

I'd let go of the Death star, which was freely floating in space. I would just have to hope that the Simurgh didn't chose to use it as a missile to destroy a city or something.

A gesture and a portal opened in front of us. A moment later, we were flying two miles over the surface of the moon.

“If you will look below us, you can see the remains of Sphere's complex,” I began.

Sphere hadn't bothered with building satellites; he'd shot straight for the moon. I'd toyed with the idea of going there just so I could plant my flag and thumb my nose at the various governments on Earth, but there had never been the time.

I heard a groan from behind me.

My head snapped back. Lung had snapped out of his seatbelt and was floating up into the air now
that we were in free fall. His entire body had tightened up and he was moaning in pain.

“Crap,” I said.
“He's in a coma,” Panacea said. “And I don't do brains.”

“Shouldn't his regeneration bring him back?” I asked. I felt uneasy.

“His powers aren't working right now. People told you powers don't work past the moon. Why didn't you listen?”

“There were extenuating circumstances,” I said.

The truth was that I could have returned us to Earth and everything would have been all right. I'd wanted to impress the investors and so I'd chosen to show off, and in the process I'd possibly lost one of my greatest allies.

While I didn't particularly like the things he had done, he'd made a genuine effort to be helpful and to change. He was key to my plans to remake the city. Without him there was a good chance that the ABB would refuse to follow me.

I had no doubt that they wouldn't attack me; they seemed smarter than a lot of the Empire 88 rejects had been. That didn't mean they would follow me. Most likely they would splinter and maybe even leave the city. I could try to offer my protection, but I didn't really understand their culture.

Sometimes I wondered if I might even be a little racist.

Brockton Bay had been surprisingly segregated when it came to Asians when I was growing up. There had always been a suspicion that any Asians might be ABB and so other kids had tended to isolate them. The fact that this probably pushed them into the ABB hadn't seemed to occur to anyone, at least in elementary school or junior high.

By the time I was in high school, I wasn't friends with anyone.

I could have learned about their culture, but instead I had been isolated and self absorbed, obsessed with my running feud with Emma and Sophia. All I really knew about Asians was what I'd seen on television.

Objectively I knew that even lumping all Asians together was probably foolish. It would be a little like talking about Europeans as though they were a single unified culture. The problem was that I had no idea how the Japanese were different from the Koreans and the Vietnamese and the Chinese.

Lung had somehow welded all these groups together, either by force or force of personality. Without him, I had little doubt that cracks would begin to show, and I didn't know enough to even try to mend fences between all of them.

There was no way I could use half-remembered movie references from more racist times to calm people down. I probably offended people without even meaning to all the time and Lung had been smoothing things over.

I could maybe ignore the whole racial aspect and simply treat them like I would the Dockworkers, but there was still a chance that I would mess up, and that wouldn't help with the strife between the groups.
Oni Lee was another problem. He'd been supportive of Lung, but the impression I got was that he wasn't particularly bright. It was possible that he'd had brain damage at some point, an occupational habit of being squishy and fighting brutes. You could dodge all you wanted to but all it took was one punch to the head and everything would go sideways.

If he attacked me it was possible that I would have to kill him. He was too much of a threat to my father and people I cared about otherwise. If I killed him and Lung revived that might cause problems between the two of us.

The power of time travel was sounding really good at the moment.

“If all he did was lose his powers, why did he have a seizure?” I asked.

“Apparently whatever connection he had to his powers was very close,” Panacea said. “Losing them had to be a shock to his system. Even worse, he had fragments of depleted uranium inside of him. Apparently he'd been shot with a tank buster shell at some time and it had broken up in his body. Most of it had been expelled from his body, but some of it had lodged in his bones. He's been fighting radiation poisoning ever since.”

“And without his powers that's made him sick pretty fast,” I said. I frowned. “What about the people who have been around him?”

Panacea put her hand on my forearm, and frowned. “You're fine, except for the weird genetic damage that you've got. It doesn't seem to be doing anything bad to you and it would take me forever to fix.”

“I'd rather you didn't,” I said hastily, pulling my hand away. The last thing I needed was for Panacea to return me to being a baseline human. I had too many plans for that.

“It's weird,” she said. “I've only seen damage like that one other time.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. I had a strange feeling in my gut. Had other mutants come across to this world along with my mother? Maybe they'd followed behind?

Talking to someone from my grandfather's world, who'd seen it in person... that was something that would make me feel closer to him. I'd spent so much time playing hero that I hadn't really talked to him about the things that mattered.

“It was a man who'd been in a coma for the past thirty years. They were hoping I'd be able to help because the money to keep him on life support is running out, even though I told them I didn't do brains. I fixed his body as well as I could, but he was still in a coma.”

“When was this?”

“Back in January,” she said. “A little before you started showing up.”

The strange feeling in my stomach grew stronger. My grandfather was a supervillain, and supervillains lied all the time. I hadn't found a trace of a computer in Brockton Bay, and I'd been looking for a while. He'd said he was an artificial intelligence, but what if that had been the lie all along?

“What did he look like?” I asked.

All I really remembered about what he looked like was that he'd had white hair. I'd lost all the pictures in Leviathan's flood.
She stared at me. “I can't tell you that, not without permission from the family.”

“It's possible that I might be his family,” I said. I looked around, then leaned toward her. “I haven't 
told anybody this, but I inherited my powers from my grandfather.”

“Proximity often results in similar triggers,” she said. She frowned. “Although considering that you 
don't have the right pieces in your brain I'm not sure how your powers are manifesting.”

“He had exactly the same powers I do,” I said. “And I never met him.”

She stared at me.

“Are you saying your powers are genetic?”

“Let's say for the sake of argument that the answer to that question was yes. What would that mean?”

“It'd mean that your powers don't come from the same source as everyone else's. Maybe you could 
both be the result of some Tinker experiment or something.”

“Or maybe powers from other places don't follow the same rules,” I said. “Was there any record of 
where he was from?”

She shook her head. “He had identification, but it was fake. There was a girl with him who said she 
was his daughter, but she entered the foster care system and nobody knows what happened to her.”

“If you find out that her name was Annette Rose then she was my mother,” I said. “The people 
paying for his care would probably love to have me take over payments, and I've got the money 
now.”

Her lips tightened. “I can make some calls, but I can't make any guarantees. Records sometimes get 
shredded after a while, and the people who might remember what happened retire or leave for other 
jobs.”

“They should have tried to contact the family, even if they thought she didn't have any money,” I 
said.

Hadn't my mother tried to look for him, or had she assumed that he was dead? Maybe it had been too 
painful for her to deal with. If Panacea was right about the timeline she’d have been twelve when 
they came across; of course it was possible that she was off by a few years and my mother was even 
younger.

She'd had things from him, including his helmet, so she couldn't have been entirely ignorant.

There were so many questions that needed to be answered, and I didn't know who to go to. I could 
ask my father, but he'd already said he'd never met my grandfather, and I obviously didn't have 
anyone from my grandfather's family to talk to.

The thought that this might not even be him, but rather someone else from his world passed through 
my mind. That would be disappointing. The thought that maybe I could actually meet a living, 
breathing version of my grandfather was so exciting that it drove almost all other thoughts from my 
mind.

“I'll do what I can,” Panacea said. “But I can't promise anything. I shouldn't have even told you as 
much as I did.”
“Thank you,” I said. “That's all I can ask. I'd ask that you keep what's happening with Lung as secret as you can too; it's going to have some pretty major effects on the city.”

She nodded grimly. “Things were just getting back to normal too.”

I couldn't help but note that that was probably true for her. After all, she lived in the richer part of the city where things really were getting better. There had been a slow exodus from the camps even with everything I had been doing to make them livable.

Where there had been a hundred thousand people there were now only eighty thousand as people started to see that houses weren't going to be built overnight.

The people who left tended to be the people with resources, the ones with family in other parts of the country, or at least enough money and insurance to make a new start of things.

The information about Lung was going to get out, of course. All it would take was one nurse making a comment to someone else, and the next thing it would be all over the city.

I forced a smile onto my face and I marched out of the hospital. As soon as I was in the air I grabbed my cell phone, and I called Leet.

“Can you get me in contact with Tattletale?”

“It's not like I have her number or anything. She's a little young for me,” Leet said.

Dinah had actually worked with her a couple of times with questions that I suspected were generated by Alexandria's group. From what I'd heard about her capabilities, she was exactly the kind of person I wanted to look into this.

I could use Alexandria's group to get the number, but they'd want to know why. The last thing I needed was for them to get control of my grandfather's comatose body and maybe give him over to Bonesaw.

Of course, I might end up doing that anyway if there was no way to pull him from the coma. If I did, though I'd make sure it was under my terms.

There was silence on the other end of the line. I could hear Leet grumbling that I thought all villains knew each other.

“Found it,” he said. “She's opened up a private investigation agency in Boston. Her number is 1-555-4733-9682.”

Leet was quiet for a moment. “I wonder how in the hell she managed that?”

“What?”

“Her number is basically 555-I SEE YOU2,” Leet said, his voice admiring. It was exactly the kind of thing he would have tried, had he thought of it first.

“That's a pretty good name for a private investigator,” I said. “Get me her address.”

I couldn't trust that Panacea would do the right thing, or at least the thing that was convenient to me. After all, she had some kind of weird code, or scruples or something.

“I'll text you,” he said. He hesitated. “How are you going to deal with the Lung thing?”
He'd been on the other end of my earpiece when Lung had been going into convulsions.

“Try to keep it secret as long as I can. There's going to be conspiracy theories that I did it intentionally to take him out of the picture and take everything for myself, as though I couldn't have done that anyway.”

The ABB had an overblown impression of Lung's power, even though I'd grown to appreciate his business acumen and leadership abilities.

“I don't want to have to kill Oni Lee,” I said. “Although I suppose I could just blind him if his powers work the way I think they do. Panacea can always fix that later.”

“You worry me sometimes, boss, what with all the maiming you like to do. You make Glory Girl look like girl scout Barbie.”

“There's nothing wrong with Victoria Dallon,” I said disapprovingly. I'd been trying to get her on my team and I couldn't afford for any dissension in the ranks.

“I didn't mean anything by it,” he said. “She's just a little destructive.”

“Right,” I said.

I looked down at my phone, which chirped. There was a short, simple text.

“That's her address?”

“As near as I could tell. It's possible that what's on her web page isn't right, but there isn't a lot I can do about that without more time.”

“Right.”

“Hey, the investors seemed pretty impressed, didn't they?”

“Yeah. I'll be hearing from them soon, I think, though actually doing any business is going to take a while. Most people aren't tinkers, able to whip something up in a few days.”

It might be months. It was frustrating.

I had so many plans, and all of them seemed to be things that were going to take weeks or months or even years to accomplished. I wanted to do things right away; I had the powers to do so much, but I didn't know how to direct them.

Maybe I really should have talked to Accord, even if he was a supervillain.

If this thing with my grandfather didn't pan out, I'd get his address from Tattletale. I needed a good plan, and from what I'd heard he was desperate to have someone listen to him. It might be a good match.

“I'm out,” I said.

I clicked off the phone and immediately dialed Tattletale's number. I was still floating over the city; depending on how this conversation went I might end up in any of several destinations.

The phone rang a couple of times before it clicked and I heard a sleepy voice.

“Taylor Hebert?” she asked. She didn't sound particularly surprised.
I wondered how she knew it was me; I hadn't even said anything yet and there weren't enough background noises to extrapolate from, not at this height.

“I've got caller ID,” she said, in answer to a question I hadn't asked. “But yea, I really am that good.”

“I don't suppose that you know what I'm going to ask you then, do you?” I asked. The tone of her voice bothered me; she sounded arrogant and snarky. It was probably how I sounded to other people, but I could move buildings and she couldn't.

“I don't have a clue,” she said cheerfully. “I like to tell people I'm psychic, but we all know that doesn't really exist, don't we?”

The tone of her voice suggested that she knew something, but that was impossible. I hadn't talked about my minuscule telepathic ability with anyone, and I'd only really used it to communicate with my grandfather, and that one time on Emma.

“Panacea was called in to see a patient in January. He was in a coma. It may have been outside of Brockton Bay, although I don't thing Panacea travels that far.”

“You couldn't have gotten your pet nerd to do this?” she grumbled. I heard the sounds of keyboards clicking.

“He's trying to turn over a new leaf,” I said. “As far as I know you are still a villain.”

“I'm a rogue,” she said. “I've got the paperwork and everything. All my sins were forgiven.”

I frowned. I wouldn't put something like that past the Protectors, but they would have forced her into their ranks. This stank of Alexandria's group.

“Yeah, we both work for the same people,” Tattletale said. “They snapped up my former boss too... said I wouldn't have to deal with him again.”

I wasn't sure who she was talking about. Did they take Grue?

His powers didn't seem like the kind that would be all that useful, not in a saving the world sense. Of course nobody had seen most of the Undersiders in a while, with the exception of Bitch and Tattletale.

“Only one coma victim in Boston,” Tattletale said. “Do you want me to look into it?”

“Give me the name and the address and I'll do it myself.”

“Uh, they have him listed as John Doe; apparently he didn't have any papers on him thirty years ago when they found him. His daughter was too traumatized to give them much information, and when she went into the system they lost track of her.”

“That's the one,” I said. “Send me the address and I'll be there in half an hour.”

“You aren't going to be putting out fires in Brockton Bay?” Tattletale asked. “With the Lung thing?”

I didn't even bother to ask how she knew. After all, that was the one thing she was supposed to be good at. She was even doing it professionally now. I wondered if she was going to send a bill.

“Hopefully nobody finds out for a few hours,” I said.
“Uh, a nurse posted pictures on Facebook five minutes ago,” she said. “It's already out.”
“Oh, sorry,” Tattletale said. “It was just a Nursing Assistant. It doesn't really matter though. The information is out, and now you'll have to deal with it.”

“Are you enjoying this?” I asked. I scowled.

There were rules about things like this. Hospitals were supposed to protect their patients, not expose them to danger. There were people who Lung had hurt in the past, people who would be happy to break into his hospital room and murder him in his sleep.

“Not at all,” Tattletale said. She still sounded annoyingly perky. “But it's really not my problem, is it? I'm not even in the same city.”

“I can make it your problem,” I said. “Crap.”

I turned around and headed back to the hospital. Odds were that it wasn't just assassins I had to worry about. It was possible that some PRT officers would try to take advantage of this, maybe claiming the need to put Lung in protective custody.

His own people would be headed that way too, along with a throng of reporters and other people who wanted to profit somehow from all of this. That would make it very difficult to differentiate the people who wanted to hurt him from everyone else.

It wouldn't even take a bullet to the head.

A bubble in an IV line would kill just as easily, and it would be a lot harder to detect, at least before whoever did it got away. Or they could simply switch medications; an adequate dose of one medication could be a lethal dose in another.

There hadn't been much time since I'd left the hospital; if Tattletale was right there was plenty of time to get back, assuming someone else hadn't been tipped off first. I couldn't be sure that the nursing assistant who'd tipped the press off hadn't been a secret Empire sympathizer.

I wasn't stupid enough to think that people's underlying beliefs had changed just because I was around. That kind of change took exposure and desire and a willingness to examine core beliefs that usually were so deeply ingrained that they were taken as givens.

There had been a lot of people who had sympathized with the Empire; most of them were smart enough to keep their heads down now that I was essentially the warlord of the town. That didn't mean that they wouldn't take actions that didn't involve a lot of risk, like leaving a door that was supposed to be locked unlatched, or leaving a set of hospital scrubs out where someone could get to them.

Maybe I'd watched too many movies, but my imagination was coming up with a hundred ways they'd be able to get to Lung, and if they did, it would be my fault.

Fortunately, there wasn't anything physically wrong with him.

I landed in front of the hospital, and headed on in. I could already hear a commotion up ahead. Apparently the hospital was already aware there was a problem.
I had enough money now that I could take Lung to a hospital of my choosing in secret. I'd make it clear to the people at the next place that I would take it personally if they pulled something like that again.

There was a crowd outside Lung’s room. I walked forward, and my force field gently shoved people aside.

“What's happened?” I asked.

Panacea was on the floor, and there was blood on her head. Lung’s bed was empty, although it looked like there had been a struggle.

“Somebody hit me from behind,” she said. She scowled. “This sucks.”

She couldn't use her powers on herself, and I'd gotten rid of Othalla. That meant that she'd either have to heal naturally or depend on a healer from outside the city.

I doubted that she'd let Bonesaw take a look at her. Nobody would do that willingly, unless they were sedated and didn't know any better.

I could see the potential uses of someone with her power sets, but she'd been one of the Nine.

“Who was it?” I asked.

“I didn't get a good look at them, and the cameras all seemed to have been shut off before they came here. That's what alerted security. They generally check on high profile patients first when something like this happens.”

“Does this happen a lot?” I asked incredulously. How did that not make the news?

“Usually they stop it before they get this far,” Panacea said. “If it was that dangerous my family wouldn't let me work here. It is Brockton Bay, and the gangs never exactly made this neutral ground.”

“How can the hospital not be neutral ground?” I asked, staring at her. “Sooner or later everybody needs to come here.”

“The Empire had Othalla, and Lung had regeneration. The Merchants were too stupid to think about the consequences.”

“Well, OK,” I said. “How long has he been gone?”

“Three minutes,” Panacea said. “It couldn't be much more than that.”

“All right then,” I said. I turned around, ready to force myself through the crowd again only to realize that the crowd had dispersed on its own. Apparently no one had wanted to be around when they realized that I probably wasn't going to be happy about this.

I wasn't happy about this, and I was going to have issues with the hospital about it. Brockton Bay had a real problem with this kind of thing; you'd have thought that with the way the gangs had been that people would have had more of a sense of self preservation about this kind of thing.

Maybe my getting rid of the gangs had made people feel bolder, as though I wouldn't murder them the way that Lung or Kaiser would have. It was most likely true, although I would probably work to make sure that the woman didn't have a house any more.
If the lawsuit didn't work out, it was always possible that an errant piece of space junk might end up destroying her house just after her insurance ran out. I knew people, after all.

That was assuming that members of the ABB didn't take matters into their own hands. The new civility they had been showing was only skin deep, after all.

The most likely outcome was the the woman would just disappear, unless someone wanted to send a message, which would be a direction I wouldn't want for the group.

Picking up my phone, I dialed Tattletale again.

“I don't suppose you can look at camera footage around the hospital from three and a half minutes ago,” I asked.

“They took him, right?” Tattletale said. She chuckled. “Well, either they want him alive for something, or they want to make an example of him, probably online.”

I hadn't heard from the teeth in a while. I wondered if they thought that Lung still had his powers and were taking him to provide a new body for Butcher. Butcher with Lung's powers might be a problem even for me, at least until I launched them all into space.

Of course, Lung might actually be able to handle Butcher's voices without being controlled. He'd seemed fairly comfortable with violence and with himself.

Still, I'd never be able to trust him if that happened. Probably best to keep it from happening in the first place.

“There was a white van heading toward the Market from the street you are on now,” Tattletale said. “It's got a crunched left fender. Half the cameras have been broken or stolen, though, so I can't give you full coverage, and the satellite doesn't swing by for another fifteen minutes.”

I could fly faster than a car could drive, and even better I didn't have to worry about traffic lights or street signs.

It didn't take long before I saw the van she was talking about. They were driving at a normal speed, and there were several other vans on the road, but this one had the fender she'd been talking about.

There were three figures inside, and one seemed to be lying down in the back. I could detect this all not by the metal in their bodies, which is what I had been doing, but by their bioelectric fields. Electricity passed through human nerves, which generated magnetism. Learning to see it was taking longer than I liked, because it was subtle, but it was more detailed than simple iron content.

The lines which made up their bodies showed a figure about the size of Lung in the back of the van. I decided to wait until they got to where they were going before I captured them. After all, it was possible that there were more co-conspirators.

I summoned Leet's cameras from across the city to meet us. Having cameras on them would make prosecuting them a lot easier. So far they had kidnapping and assault on a minor on their docket. They'd probably have other charges soon.

They were approaching the train yards and I grimaced. I hadn't bothered to deal with the Merchants because I hadn't really seen them as much of a threat. Obviously they needed to be dealt with sooner than later.
They were slowing outside an old train yard building.

This was probably a good opportunity to try out some of the new uses for my abilities, now that I wasn't bound by my grandfather's way of doing things.

I summoned another mass from the camps, one I'd had Leet make. It was several thousand pounds of putty infused with iron filings. It would take a little while to get here, so I frowned and concentrated.

I wasn't just the master of magnetism, but electromagnetism, and with the right combination of forces, I could bend even light. I'd made sure I'd done my experimentation on that one far outside the city and there had been some regrettable mistakes.

Making up for the damage I'd done to whoever owned that property was probably number thirty eight on my list of things to do, although I fully intended to get around to it at some point. It probably wasn't anything a few thousand pounds of grass seed and a few planted trees would fix.

I'm sure the radiation count would be back to normal any day now.

Still, I'd finally gotten a handle on it, and I pulled the cloak of invisibility around me. It took a lot more power than I usually used, and there were probably instruments that could detect it. The worst part was that I couldn't see; the light that would have struck my eyes was instead diverted around my body.

The world went black immediately, but it didn't matter. I could still sense their electromagnetism, and as I dropped down toward them I could hear the sound of their voices.

“Skidmark is going to be pumped! We caught Lung!”

“I don't know man,” the second voice said. “What are we going to do with him?”

“Show the world that the Merchants aren't some third rate group! Where's the Empire now, bitches? The ABB? They're just pussy whipped into being Boy Scouts. But we're still here!”

I heard the sound of their voices change.

“Jeeze this guy is heavy. You sure that he doesn't still have his powers?”

“Nah,” the first voice said. “It was on the Internet, so it's got to be true!”

The cameras were here, and so was the goo. I sent the cameras to the top of the building, to get a clear view of the men carrying Lung. If they had any sense at all they'd have him covered with a blanket. It was possible that they didn't, though.

I followed them, and they didn't seem to notice that the door behind them didn't slam shut as quickly as it should have.

Once inside I floated to the ceiling.

“What are you shitstains doing?” I could hear; there were about a dozen bodies in the room, and the one speaking was probably Skidmark.

“Lung's lost his powers,” the first voice said. “He was in the hospital and we got him.”

“You what?” Skidmark's voice suddenly got quiet.

“We thought we could make an example of him, but us back on the map.”
“And does the Iron Bitch still have her powers?”

I punched a hole through the back wall with my putty, and then began to send it through the hole. None of the Merchants seemed to notice. Mostly it was because I was just expanding on an already existing hole in the wall, and there wasn't really all that much noise.

“Yes...?”

“And he works for her now?”

“Yeeaaahhh, kind of.”

“So what do you think that she's going to do when she finds out you took her boy toy?”

There was silence.

“What did she do to the last people who took one of her people?”

“Crushed them into paste, from what I remember,” the first voice said reluctantly.

I forced the putty to form into a humanoid form, rising up behind Skidmark. I heard gasps from everyone, but it took Skidmark a moment to realize that someone was behind him.

As he turned around he suddenly found himself drowning in goo.

The others in the room found themselves similarly drowning even as I let the invisibility drop. It had been a lot cooler under the shield, even temporarily, and inside the train station it was hot and muggy.

I could hear muffled screaming, and I made sure that I didn't fill their lungs. It didn't take long to suffocate them all to unconsciousness, at which point I pulled the good from around their mouths and noses.

At the same time I disassembled Squealer's latest vehicle, especially the particle cannon on the hood.

A couple of the drug users I had to restart their hearts and lungs; apparently the terror of being drowned in goo had been enough to damage them. I was working on controlling the electrical impulses in their bodies, although I hadn't really gotten the handle of it yet. Someday I might be able to control people's bodies like Regent of the Undersiders, or at least the electrical impulses controlling their limbs.

Picking up the phone, I speed dialed the PRT.

“This is Taylor Hebert. I've got the Merchants captured at the old train station.”

“Is anyone in need of medical assistance?” the woman on the other end of the line asked. “Any amputations or severed limbs that we need to inform the ambulance teams about?”

“None dead,” I said. “Nobody lost an arm or anything. There may have been some heart attacks, though. Most of them are stable at the moment, but I don't know what all they were on.”

Everyone always focused on the amputations. Do it two or three times and people start thinking that's your signature move or something.

It was probably good that I didn't let the PRT name me, or I probably would have been given a name like the Amputator or something. At least Endslayer was cool and not simply threatening.
I stayed on the line with the operator until the ambulances and PRT vans came. When Armsmaster asked for a statement, I sent him the footage from the cameras.

“You've been getting a little better about procedure,” he said approvingly, as he watched the footage on the inside of his visor. “Although I'm not sure what this substance you used to capture them with was. Is it a metallic version of containment foam?”

“It's not breathable,” I said. At his sharp look I said, “I tried to get the chemical formula for containment foam, but it's a trade secret apparently.”

“Purposefully suffocating a group of men won't do your reputation any good.”

“I didn't cut anybody's limbs off, and nobody died or was seriously injured. That's a win as far as I'm concerned.”

“And what will you do with Lung?” he asked, nodding toward the body of Lung on the floor. Several PRT officers looked like they wanted to blast him with containment foam, but they kept looking nervously at me. Even though I couldn't see their faces, it was there in their body language.

“Take him to a hospital that understands HIPPA laws and then sue the one here.”

He nodded, and no one stopped me as I floated Lung out of there.

I flew him to Boston, of course. I was going there anyway to see my grandfather, and it was a city close enough that I could keep an eye on Lung, but far enough away that enemies were unlikely to simply stumble across him there.

Getting him admitted to a hospital took time, especially since it required discretion. I had Tattletale call ahead to a hospital that was supposedly good and that had some experience with treating Capes. They didn't have anyone like Panacea on board, but that probably meant they tried harder with the patients they did have.

With paperwork it took hours before he was situated. Lung didn't have health insurance, which wasn't surprising considering that he'd been a regenerator who probably had never been sick since he'd gotten his powers. That meant that I was solely responsible for his hospital bill, which was one more expense I was going to have to deal with.

By the time it was done it was already dark. I found myself a little anxious as I approached the building where my grandfather had been housed for the past twenty five years. I wasn't sure what I was hoping for. In all likelihood I was leaving one hospital bed with an unresponsive unconscious man for another.

Yet I couldn't help but hope for more, for some kind of familial connection that had been missing for my entire life. I didn't know what to expect, but as I landed in front of the facility I took a deep breath.

If I was right it was time to meet my grandfather, the infamous Magneto, master of magnetism.
The hospital was run down and dingy looking, with walls that looked like they'd seen better days in the seventies. It was hardly the kind of place my grandfather would have expected to end up in, even in his old age.

From what he'd told me he probably would have expected to end up on a throne, in a prison or in the grave. A place like this would have been anathema to him. It was the kind of place mediocre people went to die, not the kind of place where his world's premiere supervillain would end up.

It had the usual hospital smell at least, and it seemed clean enough.

Stepping into the lobby I saw a woman at the information desk. She looked bored, barely looking up as I walked up to speak to her.

“I'm here to see my grandfather,” I said.

She looked up at me, and I could tell that she didn't think much of me, probably because of my age. I was too young to have any legitimate business here, at least without a parent, and I wasn't someone she wanted to bother with.

“What's his name?” she asked. At my silence she looked up at me suspiciously. “We can't confirm that he's even here without a name. If you are on his list there won't be any kind of a problem.”

“He's been in a coma and he can't sign any consent,” I said. I'd expected that there would be at least a token amount of resistance.

“What's his name?” she asked. The look she was giving me was increasingly hard.

“You probably have him listed as John Doe. He didn't have any identification on him when he came here, and my mother wasn't able to give much information as she was a child.”

She looked up sharply. “And you say you are the grandchild?”

I nodded.

“Do you have any proof? A photo ID maybe?”

I shook my head.

“Then we can't let you see him. Bring your mother and we might be able to do something.”

“My mother is dead,” I gritted. “And I'm going to see him today.”

“Do I need to call security?” she asked.

I noticed that she reached under her desk, probably tapping a button calling for reinforcements. It didn't matter to me.

“You haven't asked who I am,” I said as the orderlies stepped through the doors leading further into the hospital. The doors were held closed by electromagnets, probably so that in the event of a fire or power failure it would be easy for people to get out without having to unlock each individual door. It would be ridiculously easy for me to get inside even without simply blowing through the walls or the doors.
“Who are you?” she asked in a condescending tone of voice.

“Taylor Hebert,” I said.

She was staring behind me through the glass doors leading out to the parking lot. I could understand why, as all of the cars in the parking lot were now levitating ten feet in the air, having turned and pointed in the direction of the lobby.

Her face paled.

“Are you threatening us?”

I shook my head. “Just proving I am who I say I am. I would suggest against making it public that I have a relative here. There are a lot of supervillains who would love to get control of me through a relative, and this is the first place they'd visit when they tried to find him.”

Her face drained even more.

“Also, if something were to happen to my grandfather, I'd have to make sure that the person responsible understood the.. error of their ways.”

There was an empty Coke can on her desk. It began to slowly deform into a ball, crushing smaller and smaller until it was the size of a marble. The orderlies were staring at it as well.

She jerked, and said, “Let me get in touch with the charge nurse.”

I waited and listened in to her frantic call to the woman in charge. I had no doubt that this woman would be calling the owner of the facility, who would be coming soon if they were in the city.

Letting the cars back down to rest in their previous places, I sank down into a chair to wait. Was I doing the right thing prioritizing my grandfather over the ABB? I'd gotten Lung settled into a place that ought to be secure, somewhere that was actually much nicer than this.

Still, it felt like I ought to be doing more.

The Simurgh had done it deliberately to hamstring me, I was almost sure of it. Things had been going well, if slower than I would have liked, and this was exactly the kind of thing the Simurgh was known for. She was such a powerful precog that she could engage in elaborate Rube Goldberg-esque plots, making sure that the worst person was in the worst place to cause the most damage.

With all my power I would never be able to match that. I didn't know what was going to happen in the next five minutes, much less see six months or ten years from now. Even Dinah, who was the most powerful precog of her generation, at least as far as people knew about couldn't match that kind of precision.

“Miss Herbert?” a woman asked, coming out of the locked doors leading into the center. They were covered in faux wood paneling that was peeling a little. It was obvious that this place needed more than a little money. Hopefully they were just putting the money into patient care instead of this simply being a place where people were sent to die.

The woman was a heavyset Asian woman wearing blue scrubs, and there was a faint smell of cigarettes lingering on her person. To her credit she only looked a little nervous.

“It's Hebert,” I said.
While I would have expected that my fame would have made that clear, some people probably didn't watch a lot of television.

“The owner is going to be here shortly, but it was thought best if we not make you wait.”

I purposefully didn't smirk.

“My name is Nancy Tan,” the woman said. “I am the charge nurse here.”

“I hope you can help me,” I said. “I'm here for my grandfather.”

“There are rules about what information can be shared with people. Usually people are allowed to decide whether information is shared or not, but in cases where people aren't able to make that decision for themselves information can be shared if it is in the patient's best interest.”

“Who makes that decision?” I asked.

“The doctors, generally. Doctor Callahan is being called in also to help with this,” Nurse Tan said. She gestured, and there was a buzz. The doors opened in front of us.

As we walked into the facility, I could see that pains had been taken to keep the lobby presentable at least. The place smelled clean, but there were missing tiles on the sterile wall, and the paint on the walls was peeling. This was a place that had seen much better days.

“How did you find out about your grandfather?” the woman asked.

“I have thinkers and precognitives working for me,” I said. “Once I realized he was still alive the trail led here.”

“And you don't know his name?”

“It's Max Eisenhardt,” I said. “He sometimes went by Eric Lehnsherr or Magnus. I don't think he had any identification on him, and my mother was too traumatized to tell anyone who he was before she went into the foster system.”

“We've only got one John Doe here,” Nurse Tan said. “He's been here for a very long time, and his health has been declining for a long time. It's surprising that he lasted this long; most people don't stay in comas for decades without a lot of deterioration.”

“I heard you had Panacea visit the facility?”

“It was a favor,” she said. “We're closing down due to a lack of funds and the owner knows her family. She came in and cured as many people as she could, enough to get a lot of them out on their own. She couldn't do anything for the Alzheimer's patient, but it did cut the load. She cut the meds we were having to pass out by half, which meant we could keep the doors open another three months.”

“Why are you closing?” I asked, as though I didn't know.

“Medicare has been cutting payments at the same time as they are making it harder and harder to collect without going through a lot of hoops. None of our people are working, which means that we have been working with a sicker and sicker group with shrinking funds for a long time.”

“When will I be allowed to see him?” I asked.

“When the owner and the doctor get here,” she said. “Normally I'd say it would be a problem since...
you don't even have a driver's license, but I've got a Time magazine with your face on the cover. What you did out in the parking lot is pretty definitive too.”

She was silent for a moment as we passed by several rooms where elderly patients lay in hospital beds.

“If you can take him off our hands, it would probably be for the best. We've been having problems placing people.”

She took me to her office, and she offered me a drink from an aging mini-fridge that was obviously on its last days. I shook my head and I sat down. Idly I checked the fridge with my senses and determined what was wrong; the coils were clogging up which was putting undue strain on the motor. It was the work of a moment to repair the problem and the machine audibly sounded like it was running smoothly.

“Miss Hebert?” a distinguished looking man asked. He'd carefully pronounced my name correctly, and he was followed by an even older man.

I rose to my feet.

“I am doctor Callahan and this is Elvin Dallon, the owner of the facility. We understand that you want to see one of the patients here.”

“My grandfather,” I said. “I'd like to move him to a facility with better resources for his treatment.”

“We've done everything humanly possible,” Doctor Callahan said. “Even called in parahuman assistance. Nothing we did seemed to make any difference.”

“I've got access to more than one parahuman,” I said. “Some of the world's greatest Tinkers owe me favors and I have more money to throw at a single patient than you do. I'm certainly not suggesting that you did anything wrong.”

The man seemed to relax.

“This is a little unusual. We don't have any real proof that you are even his granddaughter.”

“I had a picture once,” I said. “But it was lost in Leviathan's flood. Does it really matter? Your job is to do what's in his best interest, and I'm offering him better care than you can afford. Even if I wasn't related to him, would it matter?”

The man frowned, then sighed. “If we had more resources I'd argue more. I'll get the papers drawn up. Do you have a place to take him?”

The place I'd taken Lung was a state of the art facility, and they'd been more than happy to take another patient from me, both due to a generous cash donation, and because of who I was.

“Yes,” I said.

“Take her to see him, Nurse Tan,” Doctor Callahan said. He hesitated. “Also, thank you for Leviathan. Millions of people are going to survive because of what you did.”

I shrugged uncomfortably. Most people hadn't bothered to say it so bluntly, and I wasn't exactly sure what kind of response to give. Did you thank someone for thanking you? Did they thank you for thanking them? Was it like putting two mirrors facing each other so that there were reflections of mirrors all the way down?
Saying nothing at all seemed like the wisest course.

Following the nurse, I felt my stomach knotting up. What if I was wrong and this was just some random homeless man who'd also had a child?

As I stepped into the room, I knew, though.

He still had his hair, which had grown long, probably because the staff hadn't had the time to cut it. He looked almost unbearably old.

The grandfather of my memories had seemed as though he was in his sixties, but this man seemed almost infinitely older. It had been a quarter of a century since that time, and he looked as though every year had etched itself into his face.

“You never had any signs of consciousness?” I asked.

Nurse Tan shook her head. “Some coma victims are conscious enough to hear the people around them, though. I prefer to think that he isn't, because living like that for this long would be torture, but it's possible that he might be able to hear you.”

Sitting in the chair next to him, I hesitantly reached out for his hand. The skin on his hand was paper thin and there were age spots. His flesh felt cold.

I hadn't even tried to use my telepathic abilities since Emma; knowing what people thought had seemed much less important than what they did.

Now, though I closed my eyes and I summoned what little telepathic abilities that I had. If he'd been able to communicate to me through the helmet that meant that some part of him had to be conscious.

If that was true, then it was possible that I could reach him now that we were so close, even without the helmet to act as an amplifier.

If necessary I'd use the helmet, but first I was going to try it this way.

The first time I'd used my ability it had been an accident with Emma. Doing it intentionally was much harder, and for a moment I couldn't feel anything at all. I had a moment's fear that it had atrophied, that it had been such a weak power that not using it had made it go away completely.

A moment later I felt something give inside of me, and a moment after that I felt myself falling into a pool of icy water.

This was what death was like, the warmth of life being slowly drained away bit by bit. Was this what my grandfather had been feeling all this time, trapped in the shell of a crumbling body?

How had he avoided going crazy, trapped inside a body and unable to communicate for twenty five years? I'd heard that prisoners in solitary confinement often had permanent psychological damage after as little as fifteen days of being trapped.

Without social contact, the mind decays. Brains atrophy without outside stimuli; with nothing to do the mind spirals into anger, anxiety and hopelessness.

Was that why my grandfather had seemed like multiple people from different parts of his life? Had he maintained his sanity by partitioning his mind so that he would have someone to talk to?

Was he even sane now?
I'd heard that isolation could lead to confusion and disorientation, hallucinations, even paranoia. Some even mutilated themselves, or attempted suicide.

If I was somehow able to revive my grandfather, would he be who I thought he was, or would he be the next Endbringer?

Even if he wasn't any stronger than I was, he'd have infinitely more experience. He'd be in a world that didn't have any experience dealing with powers on his scale, at least outside of Endbringer fights. He'd be like a predator species introduced to a new country, able to overwhelm the natives who had no natural defenses against him.

It had happened over and over. Kudzu, European rabbits, feral pigs, pythons. Humans introduced species that slaughtered and destroyed everything in their path, leaving nothing but ruin and devastation in their path.

I could see light up ahead, and I found myself in a desolate battlefield, the smell of burning flesh acrid in my nostrils. There were bodies everywhere, both mutant and human, and I could feel an overwhelming sense of despair covering everything.

The air was filled with ash, and I saw the ruins of great machines littering the landscape.

Lightning flashes, and I could see the silhouettes of even greater machines on the horizon. They were searching and scanning for the last of us.

I knew instinctively that it didn't matter whether we were human or mutant; mutants were simply easier to find. In the end mutants and humans had both lost the battle for control of the world, turning the world over to the machines.

Looking around, I couldn't see any sign of him.

Had I been wrong and he was already dead?

I felt a presence behind me; turning I saw him, or at least a shadow of who he once was.

“Grandpa?” I asked.

He was frowning sadly. “You shouldn't have come. It was my time.”

“I need you. This world needs you.”

“I tried to stop them,” he said. “The others I mean, but they wouldn't listen.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. He looked like he was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand what he was trying to say.

“It's dangerous to leave your body,” he said. “It's part of the reason that I didn't bother much with telepathy. It can leave you vulnerable.”

“What are you saying?” I asked uneasily.

“The others were desperate to get out,” he said. “It's been so long. Even if it cost... I'm sorry for what they've done.”

I felt my face freeze as a thought suddenly occurred to me.

Surely he wouldn't have...
Closing my eyes I tried to will myself back into my body. I couldn't feel anything; it was as though the mindscape was surrounded by a void that I had no way of reaching through.

The grandfather in front of me smiled sadly. “I'm not really here you know. I'm just a shadow of a shadow. I swear that I will try to make this right.”

His face began to dissolve into the same ash that was filling the air. A moment later he was gone.

I was trapped inside a body that wasn't my own.
“I can't replace the knowledge in his mind,” Panacea said. “I’m still amazed that I could regrow an entire body. I've never done anything like that before.”

It was disconcerting. One moment I'd been wandering around in my grandfather's mindscape, and suddenly I was here in the middle of a conversation with Panacea.

“What?” I asked stupidly.

It took me a moment to become aware of my surroundings. We were in a hospital room that I didn't know and there were two bodies on beds. We were standing between the beds.

One had the decrepit body my grandfather had been trapped in. The other looked like it was twenty five years old but it had an uncanny resemblance to my grandfather.

I could sense the life inside of both of them, one strong and young and the other slowly fading away.

What had my grandfather done in my body, and why was I back?

The bioelectric field in the younger body was brightening, growing stronger by the minute. It suddenly occurred to me what my grandfather had done; he'd somehow convinced Panacea to make a clone of him. How she'd managed to grow it to adulthood and how long it had taken I couldn't be sure; the time I had spent in his mind had seemed both endless and like no time at all.

He'd left himself vulnerable though. All it would take was for me to manipulate the iron in his blood and the body would die. I could just tell Panacea that it hadn't been viable.

What did I owe him after all? He'd hijacked my body, and I was fairly certain that he was crazy enough to be a threat to the world. While there were bonds of family he hadn't bothered to ask permission before stealing my body.

Yet he'd given it back, which was something he hadn't had to do. Had he simply stolen it out of desperation, then regretted his actions, or had he intended to do this all along?

My hesitation was enough that it was too late; he opened his eyes.

“It won't be a problem,” I said lamely.

Panacea was staring at him with wide eyes. She took a step back. “That's not possible. He's just a meat puppet I made. There shouldn't be anything there.”

“Thank you,” my grandfather said. He smiled at Panacea. “You made my resurrection possible.”

“How?” she asked.

“There are ways to move minds,” he said. “Both technological and through powers. I may have used both.”

There were machines under the floor, I realized suddenly. When had he had time to build all of this; how long had I been gone?

Panacea had grown me a new arm, but growing an entire new body had to be much more difficult. How had he even convinced her to try? It wasn't like we were friends or anything.
“You’ve got questions,” he said. He struggled to sit up, but his new muscles weren't quite up to the task. Before Panacea could step forward, he used his abilities to lift himself up magnetically.

It was weird to see the power in operation from the outside. I could see what he was doing, and it made me feel strange simply to be around it.

“Yes,” I said.

There was a sudden shrill tone from the bed next to his; he looked over and scowled.

People suddenly rushed into the room, shoving us out the door while they tried to work on my grandfather's old body. I could have told them it wouldn't work; there was nothing they could do that Panacea wouldn't have been able to do.

Panacea stayed, but I could tell that it was too late.

“You don't care about your old body at all?” I asked.

“It wasn't my original body,” he said dismissively. “I've been aged, de-aged, cloned... none of it matters. All that matters is the mission.”

“You stole my body,” I said. “Without asking. How long has it been?’

“One month. It took that long to do what was necessary to recreate a body for myself.”

“Are you gone for an entire month?”

He was already walking better now, even though he was using his powers to support his body. At this rate it wouldn't take long for him to be fully restored.

“As far as the world was concerned you were not gone a single day,” he said.

I stared at him. Stealing my body had been a gross violation. Assuming that he'd showered and used the bathroom in my body it was even more gross.

Had he been trying to take over the world while I was gone? Panacea hadn't seemed intimidated by him.

“What have you done?” I asked slowly.

“I've only advanced the goals you set for yourself,” he said smoothly. “Brought you money, improved the lives of your people, navigated politics in a way that will make you a voice to be heard instead of ignored.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” I said. I hesitated. “Do you plan to take over the world?”

He grimaced. “I was foolish in my younger days. I've long since learned that people will fight against even actions taken in their own best interest if they do not believe that they are free.”

He hadn't answered my question, not really. Did he mean that people would only believe that they were free?

I followed him as we walked out of the hospital. It was the one I'd put Lung in. I had to wonder how he was doing. Had he ever regained consciousness?
“Your lackey regained consciousness and his abilities,” my grandfather said. “With a little help from technology I created.”

“And there wasn't any problem with the ABB?” I asked.

I'd expected major headaches from that quarter, with splintering factions and a civil war as ethnic groups separated into their component parts.

“They followed Lung because he was the strongest. I simply demonstrated that I was even stronger. You have many positive qualities, granddaughter, but a mastery of politics has never been one of them.”

“I've tried intimidating people,” I protested. “It never seems to work for long.”

People kept finding ways to go around me, whether it was by finding obscure rules, laws or simply obstructing me where ever they could. There were days where I had felt like I was drowning in red tape, and yet whenever I lashed out people always made me feel guilty.

“Because intimidating people isn't enough,” he said. “You have to understand what people desire and make them believe that you are the one who can meet that need. Fear only lasts as long as people are within your reach. People will continue to follow you if your desires give them theirs.”

Right. Unfortunately I didn't have the benefit of a hundred years of experience in dealing with people to let me make a guess at what they wanted. I mostly had no idea. If I'd been more socially savvy I might have been able to figure out a way to deal with Emma and Sophia without using powers at all.

We rose into the air, on a route that I recognized as heading back to Brockton Bay.

“You should have asked,” I said. “I could have helped you get a body. I would have done anything for you.”

“I wasn't entirely in control of myself when I took your body. I'd been trapped for so long and my consciousness was fading. Once I had your body I realized that I had an opportunity to make things better.”

He'd left me trapped inside his body, and even though it hadn't seemed long, it was still a betrayal. He was trying to make it seem like he'd done it all for my benefit, but I couldn't believe him.

We were both silent as the landscape moved beneath us. I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Was he planning his next scheme, his next deception?

He didn't look like he was crazy, but I couldn't know what was going on inside his mind. Maybe it was an epic battle between good and evil. Maybe one of his personas had finally won and was now in charge. I couldn't know even with telepathy because he'd had decades of experience fighting a telepath who had power beyond anything I could comprehend.

Was he stronger than me?

Even if we were completely matched in power he had the advantage of experience and skill. A battle between the two of us would go poorly unless I had the backing of other Capes, and even then I hadn't had a lot of skill in leading people like he had.

It was a little galling, having to deal with someone more powerful than me. I'd been getting used to always being the most powerful person in the room, to steamrolling over other people to get what I want simply because I was much more powerful than they were.
I'd have to be more cunning if I wanted things to go my way. Subtlety wasn't my strong suit, but it was what I needed now.

He probably knew exactly how I was feeling. He could read body language with a proficiency that I could barely begin to understand. That meant that I would need the help of others to make up for everything I was lacking.

Obviously he still had some affection for me, or he would have left me in his old body and simply let me die. It might not even be a family thing; I was the only other mutant in the entire world, the only member of his people remaining. He'd sworn to defend us against the world, and maybe this was his way of doing it.

I frowned as we reached the camp outside of town. It seemed largely deserted.

“Where is everyone?”

“The New York of my world received the equivalent of an Endbringer attack every three months for more than twenty years. In that time one of our world's greatest Tinkers designed construction methods that allowed the city to rise from the ashes time and time again.”

He wasn't exactly answering the question. Reaching out with my senses, I could feel that there were less than a quarter of the people in the camp than there had been when I left. Surely this many hadn't found homes outside the camps; they'd had nowhere to go.

He stared off in the distance. “I never understood why the humans stayed. There are more parahumans in this world than there were in my own, at least once the mutants were... removed. However, our Capes were much stronger and less limited. Our capes were concentrated in New York; there were more than three thousand of them in the city, and very few people outside of that chose to wear costumes.”

“What happened here?” I asked again. Was he growing senile despite having a new brain?

“They called the company that rebuilt the city in a matter of weeks Damage Control. I made a study of the technology they used, and I started a new company of the same name here.”

He gestured and I followed him across the city.

I stared. There were new houses everywhere, and it looked like just as many were under construction. How had he done all of this in just a month?

“Most of the time was taken up with training,” he said. “We have four thousand employees and teaching them was a monumental undertaking. Creating the devices was a matter of no consequence, but getting the materials here and teaching the people to use the equipment was not so easy.”

“How?” I asked.

“We aren't anywhere near the level of the real Damage Control,” he said. “They could rebuild an entire city in less than two months. At the rate we are going I expect the reconstruction to take at least twice that long.”

“How did you pay for all of this?” I asked.

“Speeding FEMA payments up helped.” he said.

“But that only pays for part of it,” I said. “What about the rest?”
“Unstable molecules,” he said. “Costumes which adapt to users powers. After I demonstrated what they and other inventions from my world, industry and the Protectorate were stumbling all over themselves to help. I’ve also launched two satellites for ludicrous amounts of money.”

“And I own all of this?” I asked suspiciously.

“Half,” he said. “With the other half coming to me. It's only fair, don't you think?”

How he'd arranged that I wasn't sure, but lawyers could apparently do almost anything. I doubted that he'd build people's houses for free; money had to be coming in at a prodigious rate even if it was going out almost as fast.

It sounded complicated, and I couldn't help but be suspicious.

Why did he care about money, and why did he care about these people? They weren't the people he'd sworn to protect and he didn't strike me as the kind of person who would simply do good deeds out of the kindness of his heart.

“Why?” I asked. “Why do all of this? You don't care about these people.”

“But you do,” he said. “And you are the only family I have left.”

Was this a bribe? What did he want from me? There had been a time when I'd trusted him, thought he was the one person in my life that I could depend on. Even my own father had abandoned me to wallow in his own depression.

His voice in my head had filled a void I hadn't even known existed, a loneliness that had been so pervasive that it had faded into the background and had just seemed like the way the world was.

I'd filled in the blanks the way I'd wanted, assuming that the things I didn't know were as good as I'd hoped. He'd told me from the beginning that he was a supervillain, but I'd made excuses for him, assuming that he was some sort of noble renegade.

He probably saw himself that way.

In truth he used people, and I wasn't going to forget it, no matter how charismatic he might be. In a way he was like a cult leader; he drew people in and tried to convince them that he was their compass. He warped people to his own will, and it was seductive to follow him.

In his own world he was probably like Che Guevera, with T-shirts with his face on them saying things like “Magneto was right.”

I wasn't going to be fooled by him, as much as part of me wanted to believe that he was being honest. If he'd really wanted to be my grandfather, he wouldn't have stolen my body. Even if it had been as involuntary as he'd said he could have communicated with me instead of simply leaving me while he went ahead with his plans.

The fact that he'd done better than I had at helping people didn't sting at all. After all, I was only fifteen while he had all the experience in the world as well as knowledge of technologies that could revolutionize this world.

The tinkers of his world weren't tinkers at all; they were mostly men of genius who had access to alien technology that had jump started a technological revolution. Their technology could be replicated; it wasn't intentionally designed to be difficult to reproduce.
“So what now?” I asked. “What do you want from me?”

“Can’t a grandfather be nice to his granddaughter?” he asked. “Without ulterior motives?”

“I wouldn’t trust you to go buy a bagel without having at least three backup plans.”

He chuckled.

“I’ve been working with Alexandria and her people,” he said. “They call themselves Cauldron. It took some doing, but they’ve given me everything they know about Scion and access to some of their resources. I’ve been working on a plan to destroy him.”

“Do we need to?” I asked.

If Cauldron was right, Scion needed to be destroyed, but I was learning not to completely trust anyone’s motivations. What if it had all been a lie by Alexandria?

“I’ve seen the corpse of the second entity,” he said. “It’s not remotely human. I’ve also seen the evidence of the ultimate plan by Scion. I’ll be happy to share it with you.”

“That might be for the best,” I said. “I’d hate to kill someone who was innocent just because Alexandria was jealous.”

There had been a time when I wouldn’t have talked so casually about killing someone, but it really did get easier the more you did it. If Scion was really the kind of monster that Alexandria made him out to be and he really did plan destroy all life on all the Earths, then I wouldn’t have any choice but fight him.

It might even explain why my grandfather was in on this. He'd sworn to protect mutants and while it seemed that his own world had been driven to extinction, there were probably mutants in other worlds that he had yet to save.

The one thing you could trust people to do was to follow their own needs. Even if he wasn't there for me as a grandfather, it was possible that we might be able to work together. Killing Scion was the biggest thing I could do to help humanity. He was probably the one directing the Endbringers, and if we stopped him it might all stop.

“All right,” I asked. “Assuming that it all pans out, what is your plan? How do we kill Scion?”
“It seems risky,” I said. “Especially since the things we know about Scion are mostly indirect.”

Fifteen minutes of explaining his plans and I still wasn't convinced. It would take both of us to pull off, and if it didn't work it would leave the Earth under attack by someone who could demonstrably kill everyone.

“It's the best they could do,” my grandfather said. “Given the limitations they are working under.”

“So powers are weakened so that they can't be turned against their creators. That doesn't leave us a lot of options in terms of help.”

“I can create beings with limited powers, but against a force like this I doubt it will make much of a difference.”

“You can mass produce Capes?” I asked.

“Low powered capes,” he said. “With deleterious physical side effects. I'm aware of a process used by someone called the Power Broker to create what would be considered here to be mid-level brutes. It has a fifty percent success rate.”

“What happens to the failures?”

“Dead or turned into monstrosities in mind, body and spirit. Many had to be put down. I'm not entirely sure that the process would work here in any case, as the people of my world had been granted a genetic predisposition for superpowers through alien experimentation millenia ago.”

“And your process works better?”

“It'll work on your people,” he said. “But there's still a strong chance of physical mutations.”

Cauldron had apparently tried something similar, and they were holding the people in captivity until something could be done about it. I could understand the desperation and need for more Capes, but it didn't seem like more capes would do it.

After all, the Empire hadn't stood a chance against me, and Scion was an order of magnitude more powerful than I was. I'd hate to be on the weaker side of a battle like that.

“So it's not like we could create an army that would actually have a chance of fighting him,” I said. “Not without monstrous casualties.”

“They only need to serve as distractions,” he said. “Long enough for us to do what needs to be done.”

“And if he has some power to counter it? From what you are telling me he's basically made up of powers, and if I was him I'd have kept all the best ones for myself. Just because he's only demonstrated a few powers doesn't mean those are the only ones he has.”

“That's why we aren't attacking right away,” my grandfather said. “We're analyzing the corpse of his comrade now looking for other vulnerabilities. It's best not to have just one plan of attack, after all.”
“Won’t they find it a little weird if I start including you in all of this?”

“They know,” he said dismissively. “That Alexandria woman picked up on it right away and I had to work to convince them that it was in their best interest not to try to kill me.”

“So they were... OK that you’d bodyjacked me,” I said flatly.

“They aren’t evil,” he said. “But they are intensely pragmatic. The survival of the human species trumps all other concerns as far as they are concerned. What use is morality to the dead?”

We were floating in the sky over Brockton Bay, and the sun was setting. He stared out into the distance and said, “I’ve seen my whole race eliminated and there was a time I would have said good riddance to humanity. That’s not true now.”

Was it Mom who had changed his mind, or had he already had some kind of epiphany?

Or was he simply convinced that there were other mutants out in the worlds and he needed to protect them.

“There is one other option,” he said. “I know of another world where aliens didn’t intervene, but mutants existed nonetheless. They were the result of a super-soldier project gone wrong, a virus spread across the world giving people powers beyond those of this world.”

Why hadn’t he done it already? If he could recreate his species here it sounded like exactly the kind of thing he might have done.

Did he need my approval somehow?

“There were sixteen million mutants on my world,” he said. “Once. There are currently less than thirty thousand parahumans in the United States and less than six hundred thousand parahumans worldwide. Is this world really ready for thirty times the numbers of powered individuals, even if most of them don’t put on strange costumes?”

“One could argue that dealing with that would be better than dealing with everyone being dead,” I said neutrally. “Assuming it worked and wasn’t just a pathetic diversion.”

“Most of them won’t have powers of much consequence. Some of them will simply have unattractive cosmetic changes, others powers of minor utility.”

“What does Cauldron think of this plan of yours?”

“They don’t know. I know what their opinion would be, so I don’t even have to ask.”

“And you aren’t so sure of what I will say?”

Why did my opinion even matter? If he was willing to take over my body and take over my businesses, was he just looking to give me the illusion of choice while he went around doing whatever he wanted?

“We’re alike in many ways,” my grandfather said. “But there are things that we will not agree on. I prefer to give you the benefit of choice in as many things I can so that those things we don’t agree on won’t sting so badly.”

“So I’ll be less likely to fight you,” I said flatly.
“If you prefer,” he said mildly. “One way that supervillains and superheroes tend to be alike is that they both have strong visions of how the world should be, and they are willing to fight for them. I have at one time or another been both and I know just how stubborn we can be when it comes to fighting for what we think is right.”

“Why haven't you done it already?” I asked. “You had to know that if it was a question between this or extinction I'd say yes.”

“I'm concerned that it might set him off before we are ready. If he has control over the Endbringers then he could use them to accelerate his destruction of the world at a rate that we couldn't compensate for.”

“For all you know he could be listening in to us right now,” I said. “Thinker powers being what they are.”

“There have to be limits or we don't have a chance. There are weapons from my world that I can use to help, although I'm not sure how effective they will be.”

He wasn't telling me anything about them, which meant that he wasn't entirely sure that Scion wasn't listening in.

“Maybe we should focus on the Endbringers first,” I said. “If we can't beat them we surely can't beat him.”

“I suspect that your eliminating one of them brought him very close to deciding to end it all,” he said. “Only the fact that what you did wouldn't work on the other two likely prevented it. Subverting the Endbringers would be a better method, if we could arrange it.”

“Can we?” I asked incredulously. That would be a game changer, both for the battle and for the world.

Turning the Simurgh's power to good would go a long way towards creating a Utopian future. Instead of people being bombs waiting to explode, she'd be able to create human agents on the side of the angels, in the right place to inspire others and to bring world peace.

It was an idea that had never even occurred to me. The Endbringers had simply always been there, the ultimate final bosses. They were like natural disasters, uncontrollable and unknowable.

My grandfather didn't have those preconceived notions. I'd been arrogant what I'd talked to Alexandria about thinking outside of the box. I was just as much in the box as she was, mostly because I didn't even know where the box was.

Maybe that's how it always was. You couldn't think outside of the box as long as the box was all you could see, but once you could see it things seemed perfectly obvious.

A lot of inventions seemed easy now but hadn't been created for thousands or hundreds of thousands of years for reasons I didn't really understand.

“I'm not sure. With the right inspiration almost anything is possible. There are other possibilities that I am looking into as well,” he said. “The important thing is that we aren't moving on anything immediately. As far as Cauldron can tell, although precognition around Scion is limited by the fact that he cannot be seen, we still have at least eighteen months before he attacks.”

“It was a different number the last time they talked to me,” I said dryly. “That means it could happen tomorrow just as easily as two years from now.”
My grandfather nodded in agreement, then stared off into the sunset. “It might be good to enjoy the time left, just in case.”

“Is it that unlikely that we'll win?” I asked. I was shocked that he would even say something like that.

“There was a time where I wouldn't have even contemplated the possibility of failure, not in the long term. I had faith that the mutant race would eventually assume its rightful place. There would be short term failures along the way, but it was always supposed to end well.”

He fell silent for a long moment. “But I lost my entire world. Your mother was the only thing I managed to save, and now even she is gone. You are all that I have left of that world, of my legacy.”

It should have made me feel warm toward him, but I wasn't sure he really saw me as a person. I represented all the people he couldn't save, and while that meant he might be trying to kill me overtly, it didn't mean that he really cared about what my feelings were.

If I was just a symbol then that meant that he would protect me, but he would also try to marginalize me, push me to the side while he went ahead with whatever heroic or dastardly deeds his mental state of the moment would allow.

His mental state seemed to be stable for the moment, but I'd had a glimpse inside his head, and he wasn't sane at all. It was possible that he would revert to his former villainous self at the worst possible time, and he might not even notice the transition.

I was the world's only defense if he went bad, even as he was possibly the world's only defense against Scion.

The solution for dealing with him would be the same as for dealing with Scion. Watch, wait and plan.

It was probably best to change the subject before he figured out what I was thinking about. If I wasn't thinking about something, my body language wouldn't give me away. Of course, the only way to not think about something was to think about something else.

“Did anyone even notice that I was gone?” I asked.

I wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't. Dad had never been the most observant person and now that he had his attention divided between his duties to the community and his control over the animals it was even less likely that he'd noticed.

Even worse, there wasn't anyone I was really close to. I had a distant kind of relationship with Uber and Leet, I'd had a few words with Bitch. My relationship with Dinah wasn't close.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't been close to anyone in a long time, not since Emma. Would anyone even care that I'd been gone?

“Tattletale noticed,’ he said. He smirked. “She didn't say anything to anyone though. I think I scared her, whatever she learned about me. Alexandria...the child Dinah. Keeping up the pretense was remarkably easy since you tend to keep a distance between yourself and your followers.”

So only the Thinkers had noticed. Was my only impact on the world related to my powers? If I hadn't had them would I have simply faded into obscurity, dropped out of school and ultimately become the loser that Sophia had made me out to be?
My grandfather had been a better me than I had. He'd accomplished more in a month than I had in the two months before, and while it was true that he had advantages I didn't, age and experience and Tinker knowledge, this was my world.

These were my people, and I'd let them down. I'd held myself over them, and the fact that I could sense approval in my grandfather's attitude only made it worse.

He'd spent his life failing time and time again, ultimately failing his people, and he was better than me.

What chance did I have?

I was going to have to change my ways, become someone better than him in more ways than one. It wasn't just a matter of how I applied our powers, although that was one way where imagination and creativity might help. It was also in the way I led people.

I'd been bullying people like I was a supervillain, like I had a right to tell them what to do just because I had the biggest stick in the room. I hadn't inspired them, not really. I'd done what I could to make things better, but I hadn't really listened to other people.

There might have been better plans out there, but we'd gone with mine because I was the one with the means to implement them.

If the time came where I had to fight, either Scion or even my own grandfather, I wasn't going to be able to do it alone. I needed help from other people, maybe a lot of other people, and the only way I would be able to do that would be to inspire them.

My grandfather had been like a cult leader in his time. I was going to have to match that, and I wasn't sure how I was going to do it. I didn't have his natural charisma. I didn't have his skill at reading body language, at figuring out what people needed and giving it to them.

I wasn't a gifted orator, able to inspire people with words that echoed across the ages.

I was just a teenage girl, unskilled in reading and manipulating people. It was true that I'd gotten a little better at it since my grandfather had started coaching me, but I still had a long way to go.

If I was going to win I needed to become a guiding light. There was a term used in the past for stars used to guide the course of ships... it took me a moment to recall what it was. Lodestar.

I needed to become a Lodestar, or maybe just magnetic north for people to guide themselves by. The Protectorate had lost their moral authority a long time ago. The government was barely hanging on.

Becoming that much of a leader would be difficult when my grandfather would be gathering his own followers. I'd need help with planning and other things, and my first target would be Tattletale.

After all, if what she saw in my grandfather scared her, that would give her all the motivation she needed to work with me. She could be the cricket in my ear as well, helping to make up for the body image reading skills that I lacked.

I'd have to approach her and offer her money after we had a long discussion about where the world was going.

It was possible that my grandfather truly loved me, at least as far as he could love anyone. Unfortunately I couldn't trust in that.
“Give it time and you will come to believe me,” he said.

He must have sensed my doubts. The fact that this was exactly what a cult leader would have said didn't surprise me at all.

Even if I was wrong and he was absolutely sincere, gathering an army would only be helpful in our long term goals.

More importantly, I wanted to make sure that if I died there would be people other than my father who would care. People made ripples in the world, affecting the people around them in ways only the Simurgh could sense.

I didn’t want to make such a small impact on the world that the pool was motionless the moment I passed.

I needed to make friends, real ones, and that meant that I was going to have to start trusting people.

Somehow that seemed like the biggest challenge of them all. After all, I didn't even trust my own family.

How did you learn to trust when your entire life had been about betrayal?

The only good thing about any of it was that at least some of what my grandfather had been done would be attributed to me. He could hardly make the fact that he'd taken over my body public, which meant that I'd be able to take credit for a lot of what he had done.

That would at least give me a foothold to start recruiting people. It was cheating, but I was going to need every advantage I could get to start my own army.

“Maybe we should start with a trial run on the mutant thing,” I said suddenly. “Assuming that it isn't harmful to people.”

He smiled suddenly, his face brightening like the sun, and I wondered if I'd just made a deal with the devil.
Body language

“You're back,” Tattletale said, staring at me like she'd seen a ghost.

In a way she actually had.

“Miss me?” I asked.

According to my grandfather she hadn't actually bothered to inform anyone that I was gone, which irritated me more than it should have. It wasn't like we were friends, but basic human decency and concern for the state of the world would have made telling someone seem like a good idea.

“I used to think that you were the scariest thing short of an Endbringer,” she said. “I was wrong.”

The expression on her face seemed to be entirely genuine. She looked anxious just to be talking about the whole thing. There had been a time when I probably wouldn't have even picked up on that much.

“You don't think he's stable?”

“He's as crazy as a bag of badgers stuffed in a bag,” she said. She shuddered. “And he looks so... put together on the outside. Every time I saw him I was afraid he was going to pull my spleen out from my eyeballs. He's full of sadness and rage and there isn't a lot else there other than pure willpower.”

“You act like you can read his mind,” I said.

“Well, my power is pretty handy for... wait. You can?”

“Not very well,” I said. “A little. Our powers don't follow the rules that most parahumans have to follow.”

“Are you reading my mind right now?” she asked.

From anyone else I would have accepted this as a genuine worry. I could tell from her expression that she wasn't being serious.

“You know I'm not.” I said dryly. “But I'm going to need to get better at it if I'm going to be able to fight him when the time comes.”

She shuddered. “You can count me out. You might be able to take a meteor called down on your head, but I'm pretty squishy. Besides, he's got his friends, and they can find you anywhere.”

Cauldron. She had to be talking about Cauldron.

“So what do we do?” I asked. “Just let him take over the world? What happens when he decides that someone who knows everything is a threat to his regime? I can think of at least three ways I could kill you undetectably, and he's got at least fifty years of experience on me.”

She stared at me for a long moment, then sighed.

“You've got to stop blackmailing people. It's not a good way to make friends, and you are going to need some friends if you are going to do what you are hoping to do.”

“Maybe you can help me make friends?” I asked.
“Be the replacement for your grandfather's voice in your ear?” she asked. “You shouldn't depend on that; it'll make your skills weaker over time. I might be willing to help you when it's important.”

“So what do I do then?” I asked. “He's got a lead on me and there's no way I'll be able to catch up.”

“You've got that telepathy thing,” she said. “That sounds like it would be really useful. He doesn't seem to use his much.”

“How do you know he has it?”

“The same way I know he's not really a tinker. I'm a thinker, and my power lets me be the closest thing possible to being a psychic without having crazy powers like yours.”

“Who do I even talk to?” I asked. “There's got to be a group of people whose powers are more useful, but I don't really know anyone outside of Brockton Bay.”

“And you've pretty much devastated Brockton Bay's metahuman population,” she said dryly. “I'd say decimated but that's only one in ten, and you've done a little more damage than that.”

“How do you learn charisma?” I asked helplessly. “It's not like it's something I can really identify or understand.”

“Well,” she said carefully. “Charismatic people make people feel better about themselves. Quiet confidence, active listening, there's a set of skills. You have to make people feel like they are the only people in the room. You have to smile a lot. Be encouraging and uplifting. Eliminate negative speech and mindset.”

I scowled.

Smiling hadn't really been something I'd done a lot of since Emma. I'd done a lot when I was younger, but it hadn't exactly made me popular.

“Smiling when you don't understand social cues isn't enough,” Tattletale said. “There's a lot of body language that goes into making people like you. I can give you a few pointers, but it's probably going to freak the people out who know you if you practice on them. You'd better practice with strangers that don't know you, and it's getting harder and harder to find any of those.”

No kidding.

Apparently my grandfather had been something of a media whore since I'd been gone. He'd gone on numerous talk shows and my face had been on a lot of magazine covers. He'd played the media like a virtuoso, and only the fact that he'd been using my identity had kept him from moving far, far ahead in the competition.

“Try smiling,” she said.

I forced myself to smile, and she winced.

“Are you trying to scare small children? Because that's the smile that will do it. You have to smile with your eyes too.”

Frowning, I said, “I'm trying.”

“Your eyes are cold and calculating,” she said. “People pick up on that. The way you are standing
suggests that you are the biggest big bad in the room and you know it. Everything you do is intimidating.”

“It’s not like I'm trying to do any of that,” I protested.

Was it something I’d picked up from my grandfather’s memories, or was it something I’d slipped into on my own?

“Trying to channel Shadow Stalker?” she asked.

This time I was aware of the way my own body language was freezing up. Tattletale was aware of it too, because she lifted her hands in mock surrender.

“Remember how you felt whenever she was around? How about the other girls? She was popular, but did anyone really like her?”

“Emma did,” I said. I hesitated. “I don't think anybody else did.”

“You haven't been as shitty to everyone as she was, but you still tend to bully people into doing what you want. While I'm sure you think that you know better and that people are just throwing up senseless roadblocks to what you need to do, think about it.”

“About what?”

“What would you think of someone who thought the rules the rest of us have to go by don't apply to them? A billionaire say who thought he could do anything because he had the money and that meant he was better than everyone else.”

“I can see the comparison you are trying to make,” I said. “But this is different. I'm trying to save the world and it's like nobody cares.”

“Everybody cares!” Tattletale said. “Most people just don't think there is anything they can do about it. Have you ever heard about learned helplessness?”

“Electrify rats in a cage with the door to the cage closed long enough and they'll just lay down and stop fighting. They won't even escape if you finally open the door.”

“That's where everyone is right now mentally. The world is going to hell and nothing they does matters, so why should they even try.”

“But it's not hopeless anymore,” I protested.

“The door is open but they can't see it. Your job is to make them see it, believe that there is hope. As long as people have hope that things will get better they can do amazing things. They can literally move mountains if there are enough hands working together.”

“I don't see you inspiring everyone,” I said irritably.

“That's because I know everything is hopeless,” she said. She smiled weakly. “That doesn't mean it is. It just means that I can't see it. It takes a fool who believes in the impossible to actually make the impossible come true.”

“That sounds like something you read off a motivational poster, like one with a kitten hanging off of a branch or something.”

“If I knew how to start my own cult of personality, don't you think I'd have done it already?” she
asked. “I needle and pick away at people. You can't do that and inspire them.”

“Have you tried not doing that?” I asked mildly.

She gave me a dirty look.

“Are you at least willing to work with me?” I asked. “Be my Jiminy Cricket?”

“If you need me to be your conscience, the world is in deep trouble,” she said. “But fine, I'll do what I can to help you, at least until you get a hang of it and can do it on your own.”

“So how do we start?” I asked.

“The first thing is body language,” she said. “Watch people, how they stand, how they hold their arms. Especially watch people that you really like, people you think have charisma. Learn from them.”

“I watch people,” I said defensively.

“Really?” she asked. “Or are you always thinking about what your next move is going to be and barely even listening to them?”

“I...”

“And the way you are dressed,” she said. “It makes a difference. People pick up cues from how you dress, and that influences how they see you. Have you even noticed that your grandfather dressed you differently?”

I looked down at myself. I was wearing some kind of suit; it was a dark blue and it fit me like a glove. I could smell a slight hint of perfume and there was a slight ruffle peeking out of my cuff. The shirt was ivory and it seemed to be made of silk. My shoes were comfortable but were probably expensive.

Designers weren't something I knew enough about to guess on any of the things I was wearing, but I could vaguely tell that they were expensive. I hadn't grown up in a family wealthy enough that I'd even bothered looking at fancy clothing. We'd always bought from low end chain stores, something Emma had taken delight in taunting me about.

I didn't have a lot of jewelry, except for a simple Star of David on a chain under my neck. It was made of titanium, a metal I could easily manipulate, and so I suspected it was meant as much as a weapon as anything else. Each link in the chain could easily be used as a reusable bullet through a simple act of will.

“That's an Armani suit you are wearing,” she said. “It was fitted specifically for you and it costs more than a fairly nice used car.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“It looks professional, but there are enough small details that prove that you are feminine.”

“And my grandfather picked this out?”

“He hired a consultant,” she said. “Since apparently his own fashion sense tends more toward flowing capes and weird looking metal helmets. She'd have probably had you wearing a skirt instead of trousers, but since you are a flier that would be a bad idea.”
“This just doesn’t feel like me,” I said. The material felt nice, but I’d still rather be in a comfortable hoodie, where I could pull my hood up and fade into anonymity.

“Those days are over,” Tattletale said, as though she’d read my mind. “You are a celebrity now, and that means you have to watch your image carefully. You have to control the narrative or people will be saying things about you that you won’t like.”

“This seems so superficial.”

“They’ve done studies,” she said. “Perceptions of expertise tend to drop the more casual your clothing is. The fact that you are fifteen means that you want people to think you know what you are doing; otherwise they’ll be more scared of you. It's like seeing a police officer with a gun or a four year old kid; who would you trust more?”

“And I’m the toddler with a gun?” I asked dubiously.

There had been a lot of people who seemed to condescend to me, and even more who were afraid. Maybe there was something to what she was saying.

“People tend to follow the lead of people who are dressed either professionally or in high status dress. They’re even more likely to jaywalk behind a man in a suit than someone in a T-shirt and shorts.”

I held my hand up. “Fine, so clothes are important. Do I need to hire a consultant too?”

“It depends on what you intend to do. You should already have a professional wardrobe in your closet, but if you want to appear friendly and approachable you might need a different set of clothes.”

“It seems like a whole lot of work,” I grumbled. “I thought being powerful meant you didn’t have to worry about what other people think.”

“That’s true if you want to rule by fear,” she said. “But if you want people to think that you are more than just a teenager with the power of a nuclear weapon, you’ll have to make some sacrifices.”

Nobody had even thought about nuclear weapons in decades, not since Scion had gotten rid of them. Of course, given that he planned to kill us all I suppose it made sense that he had.

“Speak slowly, look like you are listening, smile a lot,” she said. “And make the smile look real, not like you are some kind of slasher ready to murder someone.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to be able to remember all of this,” I said dubiously.

“I’ll help you,” she said. “You have to practice doing it with everyone, except maybe in places where you actually want to intimidate people, in which case you can go back to your old self. If you do it long enough it’ll get to be second nature.”

She stared at me for a moment. “You actually have to be interested in people as something more than what they can do for you.”

“You make me sound like a psychopath,” I said, scowling.

“Aren’t all parahumans, just a little?” she asked. “Anyway, I’d like to go through a few situations and we can talk about how you’d deal with them.”

“Role playing?” I asked. “I’m not Greg Vedar.”
“That,” she said. “That look of disgust on your face. That's part of what turns people off about you. Even if you don't share their interests you have to respect their right to have them. Being judgmental isn't going to get you anywhere.”

Says the former supervillain. I could tell that she knew what I was thinking, but she didn't say anything.

We spent the next half hour talking about ways I could improve my interpersonal relations with people, and Tattletale also suggested that I hire an image consultant. The Protectorate used them, and while she'd heard horror stories about them, they'd actually made Shadow Stalker palatable to the public until she'd gone completely off the rails.

I had to cut the meeting short because I had an appointment with my grandfather to register with the Protectorate. It was a meeting I was dreading, in part because they'd had interactions with me over the last month that I didn't remember.

Worse, they hadn't even noticed that my grandfather had taken me over. In part that might be because we were somewhat alike, but I couldn't help but resent that Armsmaster hadn't noticed. Hadn't I heard rumors that he was working on a lie detector or something?

What if it had just been my grandfather's ability to lie that had made everything work, and now they thought I was the one mastering myself?

I dreaded the confrontation, and I was afraid that they'd sense that fear.

Still, my grandfather insisted, and he knew the Protectorate, probably better than I did, really. He'd made efforts to communicate with them after all.

Sighing, I met with my grandfather.

“I still don't like this,” I said to him as we floated toward the Rig. “Why can't you do it yourself?”

“If I am to take my rightful place I need these people to understand who and what I am,” he said. “Which includes my place as your relative.”

“They won't believe that you are my grandfather,” I said.

“Panacea no doubt told them what happened. I had my body removed before they or Cauldron got access to it, but they will probably be interested.”

I shook my head and we landed in front of the Rig. We weren't questioned as we went in; the guards at the front almost seemed friendly, a stark contrast to how they'd treated me in the past, which was with either condescension or fear.

“Can I help you, Miss Hebert?” the receptionist asked.

“This is my grandfather,” I said. At her look I shrugged. “He looks good for his age. We are here to register him as a Hero.”

“All right,” she said after a moment's hesitation. “I'll send you up to conference room three.”

Guards escorted us up to the conference room, and to my surprise Armsmaster and Emily Piggot arrived after only five minutes. I'd resisted coming here in the past because I'd thought it meant giving up some kind of power to the Protectorate. Apparently my grandfather hadn't felt the same way.
I'd have expected Piggot to make us wait as a power play. I'd heard some things about her in passing from people that made me think she liked to play those kinds of games.

Instead she entered the room and simply stared at us.

“So this is Panacea's monster,” she said. “I always thought that girl was holding out on us about what she could do.”
Everyone froze.

Armsmaster was usually pretty oblivious, at least during the rare interactions I'd had with him, but even he looked shocked.

Even if my grandfather didn't have powers similar to mine, did Piggot really want to offend me? Did she have a deathwish? Armsmaster was wearing metal armor, and the rig was made out of metal. I was a teenager known to be overly protective of her family and to have a short temper.

How much confidence did she have?

I glanced at my grandfather. I would have thought he would have been offended, but instead his lips quirked and he bowed gracefully.

“You can call me the modern Prometheus if you like, but I have another name I'd prefer in public.”

“So he does have a mind,” she said irritably. She glanced at me. “Unless our wunderkind here is just puppeting him.”

Armsmaster shook his head. “Prediction software says no. It’s too fluid.”

“I think, I bleed,” my grandfather said. “I even believe I have a soul.”

He smiled again and stepped forward.

“He's got the mind of my grandfather,” I said. “And his powers.”

“I'm not even going to ask how you accomplished that,” Piggot said. “Given the technology you've already shown us I'm inclined to believe almost anything. I'm even willing to believe that this thing has a copy of your grandfather's mind. What I'm questioning is how your grandfather is completely unknown to us.”

“He's been in a coma since four years after Scion arrived here,” I said.

“Powers usually go to relatives because they are in proximity to each other, not because they are related. As far as anyone knows you never saw your grandfather until a month ago.”

I shrugged, squashing my urge to glance at my grandfather.

“Who knows?”

“Why did you revive him? Was it to increase your power? Your power is already terrifying enough without any help.”

“I don't have much in the way of family,” I said. “I don't have many friends. Given the chance to get him back, why wouldn't I have taken it?”

“Nobody can find anything about you, Mr. ...”

“Lensherr,” he said smoothly. “Although you may call me Erik.”

“Willing to give up your identity,” she said. She glanced at me. “It must run in the family.”
“Our powers are strongly related. It would only be a matter of time before you realized that we are family,” he said. “There is no need for pretense.”

“If you are anything like your granddaughter, I suppose you don’t have the worries most parahumans have,” she said.

I frowned.

What was going on? She’d gone from saying he was a monster to treating him normally? Had it been some kind of test? I felt lost and it was frustrating to realize that everyone else in the room probably understood the undercurrents that I wasn't picking up on.

Worse, there had been a time when I wouldn't even have realized that anything strange was going on.

“I am here to register as a hero,” my grandfather said. “Under the name of Magneto.”

“Your granddaughter never even bothered to come up with a name,” Piggot said, sniffing. “I'm surprised you've chosen differently.”

“As a rogue she undoubtedly felt no need to don a strange costume or go through all the play acting involved in being a 'hero.”

“And you do?”

“Of course. I plan to change the world, after all, and to do so I need people to see that I am here to help.”

“Some would say that rogues make a bigger difference than people dressing up and performing political theater.”

“That's a curious position for someone whose entire job is to manage such people.”

Piggot stepped back and stared at my grandfather for a moment. “You certainly aren’t as young as you look, Mr. Lenhsherr.”

My grandfather smiled and nodded his head slightly. “Despite this current body, I am a man of some experience.”

“About that... no one could find anything out about your past. No reports of anyone of your description missing, no one looking for a lost relative. There have been multiple investigations into your background over the years, and none of them ever came up with anything. Why is that?”

“I suppose one could consider that as much a secret identity as any mask.”

“So Lehnsherr isn't your real name?”

It wasn't, of course.

It had been an alias he used while traveling with gypsies, the people of his first wife. He'd stolen the identity of a dead gypsy as his own, and he'd used it for a long time.

Why wasn't he using his real name, Max Eisenhardt? Was it because it sounded too German and he wanted to disassociate himself from the Empire?

Or was there some other, more sinister reason?
The problem was that while I could usually see the first layer of my grandfather's plans, he often had four or five reasons for doing any single thing. It made me wonder sometimes why he hadn't been able to take over his world.

Had all the heroes been just as devious as he, or had he been a lot more foolish when he was younger. What did it say that all of them had been killed despite all of their planning?

“No one ever said that a hero could only have once secret identity,” my grandfather said. He smirked. “After all, what is any relationship without a little mystery.”

“So you want a relationship with the Protectorate?”

He smiled broadly and reached out and took her hand. She didn't pull away.

“I think we'll have a close personal relationship,” he said. “I couldn't imagine helping to protect the world without the aid of the legitimate authorities.”

He was young and handsome, I suppose, but his silver hair made him look older. It gave him a sort of gravitas that a person in his mid-twenties wouldn't normally have. There was something in the way he stood as well, although I couldn't put my finger on it.

It was an endless sort of self assurance, as though he knew that the people around him were just waiting to fall in line.

He had charisma, and this had to be part of how he'd lured an entire generation of young mutants to his side.

I'd heard that Piggot was a bigot though. She didn't actually like parahumans, or so rumor said. I'd mostly heard it through Glory Girl, who had probably heard it through some of the Wards.

“We'll see,” Piggot said, pulling her hand away from his. She was frowning, but her expression wasn't as harsh as it had been when she entered the room. “There is paperwork to be filled out, forms that must be observed.”

“It's not an issue,” my grandfather said. “An efficient society runs on proper procedures.”

Why was he being so accommodating? He knew these people in a way that they didn't know him, which gave him an advantage in deciding how to handle them. Still, he had his pride. Why was he rolling over for a woman who was a petty bureaucrat?

“Hmph,” she grunted. She glanced at Armsmaster. “It would be nice if everyone understood the necessity.”

Armsmaster shifted uncomfortably.

“Hopefully you'll be a good influence on your granddaughter. She's been a little bit of a loose cannon and tends to think that rules don't apply to her.”

“I'll do my best to encourage her to color within the lines,” he said.

That was the whole point of this charade, I realized suddenly. Piggot thought all parahumans were at least a little crazy, and my grandfather was doing everything he could to reassure her that he, at least was saner than most of the parahumans she dealt with.

It was ironic, considering the truth. I'd had glimpses of what was behind his eyes when I'd been in
his body; seen things in his mindscape that worried me even as they made me feel pity for him.

I'd seen bits and pieces of his life that were intensely private, that he would be upset that I'd seen even though he was the one who had trapped me there in the first place.

“Manage that and I suspect you won't have any problem in getting other people to fall in line. There will be paperwork now, and power testing is traditional.”

“I have no problem with that,” he said.

Most likely it was because he was trying to convince them that he was the more reasonable alternative to me, and to do that he would need to prove that he was just as powerful. I found myself being suddenly interested.

Was he as powerful as I was?

There were no guarantees that Panacea's work had been perfect after all, and it was possible that my powers weren't exactly the same as his in the first place. It would probably be a good idea to find out, and powers testing was a good place to start.

Of course, I doubted that the Protectorate had anything that would adequately test the limits of his powers, and if they did, he probably would cheat somehow, although whether to make his powers seem stronger or weaker I couldn't be sure. It depended on what his plans were for the week, and probably which of his personalities was coming to the forefront.

The signing of the paperwork was anticlimactic. It took fifteen minutes, and suddenly my grandfather had somehow gained legitimacy in a world that wasn't his own.

Piggot left us, and Armsmaster followed us down to a testing lab.

“I think I'll save us all a tedious amount of testing,” my grandfather said. “Perhaps you should warn your people to expect a certain amount of disruption.”

“What do you intend to do?” one of the man in the white coats asked.

“I'm about to demonstrate my power in a way that is actually useful,” he said. “We'll need to take this outside.”

He refused to say anything about his plan, but he insisted that everyone in the complex be warned to expect something big.

We relocated to an observation deck outside the building. I could see that at least two dozen other employees were gathering to watch as well.

He closed his eyes, and a moment later alarms rang throughout the complex. I could feel space twisting five hundred yards away, out in the ocean away from the city. He was opening a portal.

It was bigger than the portal I had opened for Leviathan, a lot bigger. Wind began to rush out as we could see the vastness of space on the other side. A moment later we saw something massive moving through the gap in space that had been created.

Through the seam in space we saw a rock emerging, an asteroid maybe thirty feet in diameter. I could feel a massive amount of metal inside of it, more than a million pounds, with at least a hundred pounds of gold and platinum and other rare metals.

The portal vanished as soon as it was through, but the asteroid didn't. It floated toward us, its surface
boiling away in the sudden heat of Earth’s atmosphere. Apparently it had been tremendously cold in the vastness of space.

A gesture from my grandfather and the metals in the sphere began to separate and melt into shapes; moving images of heroes and villains fighting, shifting like quicksilver from one hero to the next. I didn't recognize any of them, but it was hugely impressive.

I'd thought I was creative selling my artworks, but he was actually creating them and making them move in realtime.

He grew tired of this quickly enough, and the metal began to change shape. This time it was something else completely. It was small, and complex and I could barely follow what he was doing with it. It took a moment, but eventually blue light flared from it, and it began to float toward us, even as the rest of the metal went to settle on an unoccupied part of the beach.

It was still steaming as it came close enough to grab.

“What is it?” one of the scientists asked.

“It's an arc reactor,” my grandfather said. “This one is able to generate enough energy to power the entire city of Brockton Bay for a hundred years. The power is utterly clean, and with enough Palladium it could be replicated to provide power for the entire world.”

“We... we'd have to study it,” the chief scientist stammered. “Your granddaughter's inventions are replicable, but most tinker's aren't and even if it is, there's safety concerns. There's often unintended side effects, and tinkers are often too focused on the invention to notice.”

There was a momentary flash of irritation on my grandfather's face, so quick that anyone would have to be watching to notice it. I did, but everyone else was staring at the arc reactor, including Armsmaster, whose face was slack jawed.

He almost seemed like he was in a trance.

“Tinker fugue,” one of the scientists said. “But I guess you'd know all about that.”

They thought I was a tinker like my grandfather, even though neither of us were, really. He was a genius, but more importantly he had the technology of an entire world, one that had contact with multiple alien races and had probably learned a lot because of it.

Our Tinkers had their inventions deliberately sabotaged, small flaws placed in each so that they wouldn't be mass produced. The last thing Scion wanted was for Earth to become so advanced they were actually a threat to him.

“This will solve many of the world's problems,” he said. “And I, unlike some, will not withhold this technology. I will simply license it.”

In the process he would become rich beyond the dreams of any man in history, even if he only got a tenth of one percent of all the energy money in the world.

I'd seen glimpses of the inventor of this technology while I was inside his mind; a genius who had invented suits of armor like Dragons, only much more advanced. He'd refused to share the technology with the world for reasons neither I not my grandfather understood. Instead he'd used miniaturized versions to power his armor.

“I think we have what we need,” the lead scientist said. His face was a little pale.
My grandfather smiled pleasantly.

“I'll expect that the Protectorate will respect my patents; I visited the US Patent office this morning and they were more than happy to take my patent under consideration.”

He wouldn’t have received a patent right away, of course; the patent office would have to check to see if there were other, similar devices that he was infringing on. I suspected that they wouldn't find anything like it.

The scientists nodded, and gave him a signed receipt.

“I wouldn't suggest trying to open it though,” my grandfather added. “It's called an arc reactor for a reason.”

“We'll use all safety standards in investigating this. We've dealt with volatile tinker devices before,' the lead scientist said.

“It's powerful enough to power Brockton Bay. That means that under the right circumstances it could destroy it as well. You can drop it if you need to, just don't breach the shell around it.”

The whole thing had to weigh two hundred pounds. My grandfather simply left it sitting on the observation deck as he turned to me.

“Would you like to get lunch?”

The technicians behind him looked shell shocked.

“What about the metal on the beach?” one of the technicians asked.

“There's already a crew of dockworkers on their way to salvage it. Most of it will go toward the rebuilding effort, although I've already pulled the precious metals out.”

Gold was going for a thousand dollars an ounce. Quick mental calculations told me that the hundred pounds of gold he'd pulled out was worth one point six million dollars. I wondered if that was enough gold to depress the market or if that was just a drop in the bucket.

“I know of a lovely Jewish delicatessan on Eighth street,” my grandfather said. “It has authentic food from the homeland.”

“I don't have a lot of experience with Jewish food,' I admitted.

“You should reconnect with your heritage,” he said. “I think you'll be surprised.”

As we rose into the air, I looked back at the technicians who looked stunned. With one simple invention my grandfather had changed the world. How many other inventions did he have waiting in the wings from his homeworld?

Would this be the final straw that led the Simurgh or maybe even Scion to act?

The last thing they wanted was for humanity to advance too much; my grandfather had the ability to advance human knowledge by decades at least and maybe further in some fields. Would the alien entities stand for him to actually improve human lives, or would they immediately move to knock things down.

After all, there was nothing as insidious as hope, and the world hadn't had any in a long time.
The house my grandfather had built for us took up six lots in my old neighborhood, and he hadn’t bothered to rebuild any of the houses nearby.

Although the exterior was covered with a stone facade, the walls themselves were made of multiple feet of concrete, with steel laced throughout the entire structure. I could see where he had built the structure himself instead of having it built; the metal work blended together without any welds or rivets.

It was only two stories tall, but it sprawled out over a lot of real estate. It looked familiar, a lot like a mansion I’d seen in his memories a time or two. There had been a lot of conflicting feelings about that house; I had the feeling that people who were friends at times and enemies at other times had once lived there.

He could have built in a better area, but instead he’d turned the lots he’d built all around into parkland. I could still see the places where the sod had been laid; the grass hadn’t yet had time to grow in and the transplanted trees he’d places weren’t yet blooming.

That was one area where our powers wouldn’t be particularly useful, although I’d read a study showing that plants growing under a magnetic field tended to germinate more, grew taller and had bigger leaves. Still, those effects were hardly the wave your hand and watch a tree grow effect that I’d heard some parahumans were able to manage.

If it was important enough for him, or for me for that matter we could hire one of those parahumans.

I had little doubt that he’d hired people to lay all the grass and to plant all the trees, even though he could have done it himself.

He’d have explained all the space around the house as being for the safety of the neighbors, and people would accept it because they wanted to believe that he, or I, rather was looking out for their best interest.

By hiring as many locals as possible for the reconstruction effort, he was stimulating the economy, something I approved of. I simply hadn’t known how to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles the way he did.

What bothered me was that I could have hired people who knew how to do it as well as he did; it simply hadn’t occurred to me. Hiring one lawyer was hardly enough. It might have taken an army of people, but I could have matched my grandfather if I’d created my own organization.

Had I been depressed, or simply overwhelmed with the weight of the world on my shoulders?

The feeling that not only could I have accomplished more, but that I should have weighed heavily on me.

The fact that my grandfather was a better dresser as a female than I was bothered me a lot too, even if he’d had to hire an image consultant. I could have done that, had I been interested enough. If I’d understood the importance of looks in terms of my long term plans I probably would have, but I hadn’t even known enough to realize that I didn’t know things.

There was a study that had been done studying just that. People who didn’t have much skill or knowledge in a field often thought they were better at it than they were; they didn’t know enough to
know any different. People who were highly skilled at something tended to think that tasks that were easy for them were easy for other people.

I was one of those people who had deficits. If I was just planning to be a warlord it wouldn't be so bad. With enough power you could accomplish anything.

However, I was trying to work within the bounds of the law. That meant that having the most money or the most power wasn't enough by itself. You had to deal with politics, with people's hurt feelings, with emotions.

Unfortunately that wasn't my strong suit.

I'd have to focus on what I was good at, and depend on other people to make up for where I was weak. It wouldn't be easy. Trusting people went against my nature. But if I was going to accomplish anything in the world I couldn't do it alone.

Tattletale alone wouldn't be enough. I had to gather other people loyal to me and not to my grandfather.

I could probably depend on my father, for what that was worth, but even people I'd thought were on my side, like Uber and Leet and maybe even Bitch I couldn't depend on for the moment until I figured out what my grandfather had done to the relationship in my absence.

It wasn't something I could put off either. My nature was to isolate myself and to become paranoid and insular. If I put it off I'd start finding more and more excuses to not go out and look for allies.

I needed people who were socially skilled, who could advise me and not antagonize other people the way Tattletale would. I didn't really need them for their powers, at least not people like Glory Girl.

People like my father and other thinkers would have the powers most useful, with Panacea coming in a close second. If I could use her healing as leverage that might get me political points, even if it wouldn't exactly make people like me that much.

A lot of political things happened behind closed doors, though, and if I could keep it quiet no one needed to know.

I needed people who could figure out my grandfather's plans. It was possible that he thought he was being totally honest, but he wasn't in control of himself. Parts of him probably cared for me, but there were other parts that were cold and that likely wanted to take over the world.

Just losing your entire people not once but twice would have been enough to break most people, but he'd also lost his reason for existing. His entire life had been dedicated to protecting mutants. What happened when there were no more mutants to protect?

He claimed he would be trying to protect humanity, but he'd spent a long time seeing humanity as somehow less than mutants. Recreating the mutant race might somehow restore his purpose, but I wasn't sure that I trusted him to not simply create mutants and then move them all to Mars or even some place further away.

After all, it had been humans who had created the things that had killed his people. He'd spent his entire life fighting the prejudice of peoples who couldn't accept mutants as part of their own tribe.

The fact that the people of my world were unlikely to react similarly wasn't something that would even occur to him.
My people would see mutants as one more defense standing between them and the Endbringers. Should the Endbringers be destroyed it was possible that might change, but we didn't have the technology to create monsters like those that had killed his people.

Scowling, I looked at the house he'd build for me. He hadn't asked for any of my input, and I doubted that he'd asked for Dad's. This place wasn't like Dad at all. It was cold and impersonal.

It represented everything about him. He'd done all of this without asking me because he thought he knew what I needed better than I did. He likely thought the same for everyone else.

In some ways I'd been guilty of the same thing. I'd steam rolled over a lot of people because I had the power to do it and I'd thought they didn't know what they were doing. Power was alluring, and it was corrupting too.

Maybe the politicians were right. Maybe we really did need the checks and balances over the power of an individual. It was too easy to make excuses to justify doing the things you already wanted to do anyway.

Scowling, I took flight.

My first visit was to Uber and Leet. Hopefully they hadn't moved their extradimensional laboratory or I'd never be able to find them.

Fighting my grandfather would require technology, and Leet was the one tinker in the world who could match my grandfather, assuming that his devices didn't blow up. He couldn't build things as fast as my grandfather could, but with enough time to prepare tinkers could do almost anything,

They'd built the lab in the one place the Protectorate would never think to look, right in the middle of the refugee camp. The one limitation was that they needed a hard wire leading into the extradimensional space, because apparently a wireless connection wasn't pure enough for Leet.

Personally I suspected that it had something to do with gaming.

It turned out that they had moved the extradimensional space to the outskirts of the camp, but I could feel the wire they'd run to the communications towers I'd set up.

This part of the camp was deserted now, like much of the camp. I spared a moment to wonder what would happen to it.

Should I destroy the metal huts and use the metal for something more useful, or should I leave them as homes for the homeless?

Would creating homeless camps like that just lead to drugs or lawlessness, or would it actually help things?

I'd seen research that said that providing homes for the homeless actually cut medical bills to the point that it was actually cheaper than leaving them on the street. I wasn't sure if I believed that, but it was something to consider.

Of course, if I wasn't careful the Merchants, what was left of them, would take over and the place would become a hellhole.

Creating a disruption in their Internet feed through the metal wire was child's play.
A moment later a small portal appeared in front of my face.

“What do you want?” Leet asked, his face appearing on a television screen only inches from my face. “You made it quite clear what you thought of us the last time we talked. Incompetent, worthless, a waste of space, isn't that what you said?”

“That wasn't me,” I said shortly. I looked around. “I need to explain what happened and I need your help to save the world.”

I could hear a muffled discussion on the other side of the screen; it sounded like an argument. Finally the portal opened.

While I could open portals myself, I had to have at least a general idea where something was. That was easy when it came to Pluto. That was a lot harder when it came to things in another dimension. Where exactly was something that theoretically shared the same space as you but... not?

From what I'd heard there were possibly an infinite number of dimensions, and finding their one pocket dimension would be like finding a single drop of water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Stepping inside, I felt the portal close behind me.

It occurred to me suddenly that I might be able to force the portal further open since it had to remain a little open at all times to let the wire through.

Stepping past the quarantine station, I stepped inside the lab.

They'd added to it in the month I'd been gone, although where they'd gotten the funding if my grandfather wasn't providing it, I wasn't sure. Maybe they were skimming off my metal transactions.

“Say whatever you've got to say.” Leet said, staring at me resentfully.

“I haven't been here for the past month,” I said. “My grandfather mastered me, taking over my body until he could build his own body and advance his own agenda.”

“You expect us to believe that?” Leet scoffed. “You've been you the whole time.”

“Um... actually I noticed that something was off about her for a while.”

“What?” Leet asked, turning to Uber. “Why didn't you say anything?”

“I thought she might just be stressed over all the responsibilities. You have to admit that she turned cold to us all of a sudden. It was like a switch was turned off.”

Leet frowned. “She used our lab a few times, then seemed to decide we weren't worth the effort. I'm surprised she didn't just kick us out of our own lab.”

“She doesn't really need a lab;” I said. “He can build his own. He's the Tinker, and he has all of my other powers too.”

“What, all of them?” Leet asked. “And he has your powers? What does he want?”

“To kill Scion,” I said.

“Well, that's not so bad. Didn't you say Scion was trying to kill all of humanity?”
“That's not the part I'm worried about. What I'm worried about is what happens after Scion dies. I think he's planning to take over.”

Leet frowned. “Isn't that some kind of comic book cliche? Taking over the world is so nineteen sixties. Who wants that kind of headache?”

“My grandfather does, and unlike any of the other crazies out there, he might be able to do it.”

“Are we sure he shouldn't have it?” Leet asked. “I mean, the guy is kind of a douche, but when I look at the city now and the way it was a month ago, you have to admit that he has a flair for governing.”

“My grandfather isn't... exactly from here.” I said. “And there was another villain on his world who was good at governing. His people loved him, even though there was no freedom. They had less freedom than the darkest of the African regimes, or even North Korea before it was consumed by the Chinese Union Imperial.”

“Freedom's overrated?” Leet asked.

“My grandfather may look twenty five, but he's over a hundred years old. Do you really want him making decisions about what kind of movies people can watch? What does a hundred year old know about Anime? Let him take over and it'll all be MASH reruns, westerns and Schindler's List.”

Leet stared at me, then his face closed up.

“That's a low blow.”

“I don't actually think he had time to watch much television, but you know how old people are. Why do you think he looked down on you?”

“You... I mean he said I should give up on childish things and face the real world,” Leet admitted.

“Some people are dreamers,” I said. “He's not. All he sees is how he wants the world to be and the steps it's going to take to make it that way.”

Leet scowled. “But what can we do? If he's as good as he seems to be, he might be our best chance to stop Scion and the rest of the Endbringers.”

“We don't attack him,” I said. “Not now. But I need you to build machines, machines that aren't like anything you've built before. I need you to make Endbringer killers, or at least as close as you can. Make something that blocks precognition; the Simurgh is next on the rotation for the Endbringers, and defeating her would give us a political edge.”

“Yeah, I guess running for president as an Endslayer would be pretty easy, and you've got twenty years before you can even be eligible.”

I turned to Uber. “I'm not really sure how your skills work, but are you able to do things with social skills the same way you can do with others?”

“Well, it's not like I get specific skills,” he said. “But yeah, I can probably do something.”

“I need you to help me to become popular. People need to see me as the person they will turn to instead of him, and if its going to happen it has to happen early. I have no doubt that he's already
working to woo people. I think he's already working on the Protectorate. He just gave them a clean power source that will solve the world's energy problems.”

Leet stared at me, and there was a look of yearning on his face. “Really? Is there any way you can get me a copy of the schematics?”

“I'll want both of you working with Tattletale on this; she has backdoors into the Protectorate computer systems. Since the power source apparently scales down it sounds like exactly the kind of thing that you might be able to add into the devises you make.”

Leet looked eager now, even though Uber looked less so.

“I've met Tattletale before. She isn't exactly easy to work with,” Uber said.

“Deal with it,” I said. “Fate of the world?”

If it meant the world would be saved, I'd have even worked with Sophia. I couldn't ask that they do any less.

“I suspect she might be able to provide you with plans for the other inventions he has been sharing with the Protectorate and keeping from you,” I said. “If they inspire you, go for it, but the precognition blocker should be the very first thing you work on.”

“Or the Simurgh will show up outside our door,” Leet said. “I understand what you are getting at.”

“It's not going to be easy,” I said. “But nothing worthwhile ever is. We're going to war with two or three other sides, and that means we have to plan strategies for all of them.”

“I could make my devices out of plastic,” Leet said. “Or out of a non-magnetic polymer.”

“You might as well aim a wooden gun at him and try to convince him that his powers are gone,” I said dryly.

“Would that work?”

“He'd use the iron in your blood to turn your insides into a blender. There isn't a lot of iron there, but move it around fast enough and you can turn someone into chunky salsa.”

He'd done it once; I'd seen it in his memories. The disturbing thing was that I knew how to do it now too.

“Leave any direct conflict with my grandfather to me,” I said. “I need you to be my Q.”

“Are you Jean Luc Picard in this analogy?” Leet asked, a confused look on his face.

“No,” I said, irritated. “Q from James Bond.”

“Oh.”

“We need to work together if we are going to win any one of these wars, much less all three,” I said. “Are you with me?”

Leet and Uber's agreement was there at least, even if it was a little less enthusiastic than I would have liked.
I hadn't even given them Legend's speech about how at least a quarter of us would probably die.
Although my powers seemed to be the same as my grandfather's, there was no guarantee that they actually were. Until we faced each other I had no idea how they would tack up against each other.

I couldn't even be sure that the powers given to him by Panacea's new body were as strong as those in his original body.

What I did know was that our powers were different on a fundamental level from those of most parahumans. Most parahumans had all the power they would ever have the moment they triggered. They learned to use the powers more efficiently, or to use powers in interesting way, but generally they didn't change.

Our powers were more like the human body. Exercise one part and it would grow stronger. Allow another part to atrophy and it might not develop at all. Allow a man to become a runner and his muscles would develop in a completely different way than if he was a weight lifter.

Some people had genetic predispositions to certain sports, but exercise and determination and focus was almost as important.

I suspected that my grandfather had focused on the magnetic part of his abilities because they were what came easiest to him. It had taken time to master various sciences and to develop organizations and groups to further his goals.

He'd used his control over the other kinds of energy to a greatly lesser degree, most likely because he simply hadn't had the time. Unlike in some of the comic books I'd seen, someone simply didn't learn a dozen languages or become an Olympic level athlete without giving up on other parts of their lives.

Becoming the best at something took focus, and I suspected that my grandfather had plateaued in his development as a parahuman because his focus was on other things right now.

That gave me an opportunity; I couldn't match his century of experience in the magnetic arts, but if I could grow stronger in the skills that he had let atrophy it might give me tools I could use when the time came.

To do that I needed to get stronger, to practice in what I was going to do without my grandfather looking over my shoulder. It probably wouldn't take him a long time to realize what I was doing, and if he was to start practicing too, or worse attack me before I or the world was ready it would be a disaster.

That meant that I had to get far away from him before I started using my powers.

I was already better at him at using wormholes. I still wasn't sure why he disliked doing it. It had a chance of disrupting electronics in the vicinity, but I was working on ways around that, and it was so convenient that I wasn't really sure why he wasn't using them on his daily commute to work.

Maybe he liked flying, even though it was painfully slow compared to a quick jump through space and time.

The fleeting thought that I might be able to use my abilities for time travel passed through my mind, but I'd seen what happened to time travelers in my grandfather's mind. They thought they were traveling back, but all they were doing was creating a new timeline while the one they'd left was undisturbed.
Time travel wouldn't solve anything, unless I simply dropped my grandfather off in the dinosaur age, and if I did that I'd probably come back to find the world ruled by insect people or something equally horrible.

All of this was why I was staring at Tattletale feeling like I was constipated.

“Not working, eh?” she asked.

“He can make it work, I can make it work,” I gritted.

Actual telepathy was an ability that didn't even exist in this world, so it wasn't like I could go to anyone to ask about how to activate it. I'd thought about asking my grandfather, but I hadn't wanted to give him a look inside my head.

The fact that Tattletale was the only one who knew I could do it didn't help. She was the last person whose mind I wanted to read, mostly because I suspected that I wouldn't like what she was thinking about me.

“I can see why you'd want to do this,” she said. “Even what I can do is pretty cool, and the way your powers work, you might not even get thinker headaches. Still, are you sure you can do it?”

“I did it once with Emma,” I said. “Ears, eyes, mouth... I don't even know what it meant, but it just about broke her.”

“It might actually help,” Tattletale said thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Having you able to see what you look like to other people when you are running all over them.”

I scowled. “You aren't exactly the picture of tact and discretion yourself. “

“Oh, you don't want me as an actual psychic,” Tattletale said serenely. “I'd rule the world in like, a week.”

“Right,” I said. “Like you are so much help with this.”

“This is new ground,” she said. “Most parahumans know how to use their powers from the time they get them. They don't need any help unless they are trying something weird with it. You don't exactly fit the usual mold.”

“Well, don't you have any ideas?” I asked.

“How did you feel when you were reading Emma's mind?” Tattletale asked.

“How did I always feel around Emma?” I asked tiredly. “Upset, excited that I finally had some control.”

Tattletale bit her lip.

“Have you considered that all of this might be useless? He's got a hundred years of experience on you, and unlike most people he's young again and isn't exactly likely to die any day now.”

“You think I haven't thought about that? How would you feel living in somebody's shadow like that, especially if you knew they were crazy and a villain at least half the time.”
“You've got the exact same powers,” Tattletale said. “And he'd better at using them than you. Even worse, he's an actual genius and you... aren't. I've seen your grades from school. Odds are he's going to see through anything you try and none of it is going to work.”

“I've got to try,” I gritted out.

I could feel objects in the room starting to levitate, and I ruthlessly tamped them down. Getting under people's skin was what Tattletale did; I wasn't even sure if she could actually control it.

“Why? Because he hurt your feelings? Because you aren't the biggest gorilla in the room any more? How does it feel to just be a sidekick?”

“How did it feel to find your brother?” I hissed, leaning forward and staring at her.

Her faced drained of color and it took me a moment to realize what I'd said. I'd had a momentary image of a silhouette on a wall, a feeling of horror and despair so great that it was the worst day of her life.

I'd seen inside her and I'd immediately turned on her.

“I... I'm sorry,” I said.

“I thought if I made you angry enough that it might jog something loose,” Tattletale said quietly. She wouldn't look at me, which made me feel even worse. “Do you wonder sometimes just how different you are from your grandfather?”

Was she calling me crazy or was she calling me cruel. My grandfather had a bad habit of surrounding himself with bad people, people that he could discard easily and without regret.

My lips felt suddenly dry, and I licked them.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I didn't mean to lash out like that, and I shouldn't have used that against you.”

I still wasn't entirely sure what it was; the image had been too quick. It was something that was deeply meaningful to her though; that much was clear. I'd once heard that trigger events were intensely private and I suspected that I'd just gotten a glimpse of hers.

“Apparently the first thing you latch onto is painful memories,” she said, looking like she wanted to be anywhere but here. She'd agreed to help me though, not least because she felt the way I did about my grandfather. “You'll have to practice a lot more before you can get to the good stuff.”

“Like people's ATM codes?” I asked.

“Hopefully you won't be having to deal with anything like that. Me either,” she smiled weakly.

“I really am sorry,” I said. “I think I've got a vicious streak somewhere that I wasn't even aware I had.”

She stared at me for a long moment. “Do you think? You've been de-limbing people and squishing people inside their armor for a while now.”

“There were extenuating circumstances,” I protested.

“What kind of person thinks... hmm...I could tie them up and turn them in to the authorities, or I could pull their limbs off in a horrible and grotesque fashion. De-limbing it!”
“I'm not like that,” I said weakly.

“Not like what, your grandfather?” she asked. “You don't seek petty vengeance, or even not so petty vengeance on people you think have slighted you?”

“I'm not crazy!” I said. “I'm going to be better than him!”

“That's what you say about everyone,” she said.

A sudden image came into my mind.

“Are you thinking about pork dumplings even while you are making me go through all of this?”

She smiled. “Can't blame a girl for being hungry. Also, it shows that you can see things that aren't deep, dark, horrible secrets.”

“They put that in the dumplings and you still eat them?” I asked, shocked by the image that came to my mind.

“Nope, I was just seeing if you were paying attention,” she said. “And it also means that you can see surface thoughts instead of just buried and repressed memories.”

I had a sudden, uneasy feeling that Tattletale was going to have fun with this; maybe as punishment for my comment earlier, or maybe simply because of her own nature.

Either way, I'd asked her to do this and I could hardly back out now.

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“So why do you want superpowers?” I asked.

The man, a dockworker stared at me over the table. His hat was in his hands.

We were in a conference room at a local Hiatt hotel, one of the few that had not been destroyed by Leviathan's wave and one where the rooms were finally going for prices that couldn't be considered gouging.

“I want to make a difference,” he said.

I reached forward to touch his mind. I frowned at what I saw there.

“You realize that the reason the Protectorate pays the way they do is because the work is dangerous,” I said.

His head snapped up and he stared at me for a moment before his shoulder's slumped.

“I need to feed my family,” he said.

“You realize that the reason the Protectorate pays the way they do is because the work is dangerous,” I said.

His head snapped up and he stared at me for a moment before his shoulder's slumped.

“I need to feed my family,” he said.

“And the construction work everybody is doing isn't enough?”

“The money is good,” he admitted, “but people are saying that there's only a year and a half of work left, at the rate things are going, and what's going to happen after that? It's not like I have any real skills.”

“There's no guarantee that this process would even give you powers strong enough for the Protectorate to be interested in you,” I said. “There's even a small chance that it might turn you into
something less than human, a freak of nature. Is that really what you are going to want for your family?”

He was silent for a moment. “It's a chance, anyway. The way things are going, there's going to be a lot of guys looking for jobs in a couple of years and only a few jobs. I need to help my family.”

I frowned. “We're working on that, setting up factories that have good paying jobs, trying to turn this city around.”

“It's a nice dream,” he said, smiling wistfully. “But even somebody like you can't beat the whole world.”

I sighed. “It'll be a few weeks before we're set up enough to give you an answer. In the meantime, remember the non-disclosure agreements you signed. The Protectorate might frown on what we're about to do, and they might stop it from happening at all.”

“I'll keep my mouth shut,” he said firmly.

A glimpse inside his head showed that he meant it too.

As he left, I sighed. I'd been suspicious when my grandfather had asked me to help vet his prospective new mutants, but it was giving me an opportunity to practice my new skills at telepathy, and my social skills as well. I was seeing a half dozen people a day.

I wondered how long it would be before someone spilled the beans, non-disclosure agreement or not. I'd only been at this for a week, but I was already waiting for the ax to fall.

My grandfather was going to have the final say anyway; I suspected that this was simply him trying to give me a sense of power while he continued to do what he always did, which was to rule from the shadows.

He was working on the virus, whatever it was. He was paying Panacea a lot of money that went into a trust that couldn't be touched by her parents to help him create the virus. He could have done it without her, but it would have taken months, mostly because biological material wasn't like machines.

He couldn't simply wave his hands and cause a virus to assemble out of pieces of metal. Bacteria and viruses had to replicate themselves, which took time and food. There was a reason that vaccines couldn't be made quickly after all, either.

I still hadn't gotten a chance to talk to Panacea; while nominally this was because he was keeping her too busy after school I wondered if part of it was because he considered her part of his team?

Her powers were a major prize for whatever team got her. The healing abilities alone would be enough to make her worth it, but her abilities as a bio-tinker made a pearl beyond price.

I hadn't read his mind because I knew he had a lot of experience with telepaths; most likely he'd detect my intrusion and he'd find a way to make me pay. However, I was practicing with other people, and that was giving me a clearer picture of what he was doing.

He had Panacea and a villain from Boston named Blasto holed up in an old factory in Boston. This was taking up a lot of his time; apparently the virus that had created mutants had originally been part of a super soldier project in another world, and while he didn't know all the details he did know the basics.
They were using his own DNA as a base for the project, and even so, it was coming more slowly than he liked. While he treated Panacea kindly, he wasn't as kind to Blasto, who was terrified of him.

That seemed like an oversight to me. Terrified tinkers are dangerous tinkers, especially if their specialty was biological. My grandfather would be able to detect any metallic weapon used against him, but what about a virus or a spore?

Abuse Blasto too much, and he might find that he'd caught something terminal.

There was a knock at the door, and I looked up. I wasn't supposed to have another appointment for fifteen minutes. That would give me enough time to write up my impressions of the last guy, to be sent to my grandfather.

Presumably my job was mainly to weed out the people who should never be given super powers. The psychopaths, the people who would use their powers to lord it over others; these were the kind of people who would ruin the reputations of the new mutants race before it even got started.

The last thing we wanted was to restart the mutant hatred that had existed in the past. On this, at least I and my grandfather were in agreement.

I wanted to create a race of heroes, or at least of rogues. It was possible that my grandfather's criteria were a lot looser than mine.

“Come in,” I said.

I froze as I looked up and saw Miss Militia walking into the conference room.

“Hello Taylor,” she said. “We've heard some disturbing things about what you and your grandfather have been getting up to.”

“We've got a lot of projects going on,” I said weakly. “Putting a city together isn't something simple after all.”

“We've been hearing disturbing rumors,” she said. “About unlicensed bio-tinkering, about promising to give people superpowers in return for being part of your own private army.”

“That's not exactly true,” I said. “We aren't creating an army.”

That was a lie, of course. The whole point was to create an army to fight Scion, after all. It was true in a sense as well, though. After all, we weren't planning to take over, or I wasn't, at least.

“We haven't made any promises to anyone,” I said. “We're just looking for experimental subjects for a clinical trial.”

“Has the FDA had a chance to look at this drug?” she asked.

“It hasn't even been invented yet,” I said.

“You do understand that creating viruses that are self replicating is a one way ticket to getting a kill order,” she said. “And to being considered an Endbringer level threat.”

“S class,” I said. “I know.”

“You and your grandfather are considered powerful enough to be considered that class. They keep upping your threat ratings. Something like that, though, that might tip the scales.”
“We're doing what we can to save the world,” I said.

“So are we,” Miss Militia said. “What happens if this process goes wrong? Have you ever seen a zombie movie? Our thinkers have looked at possibilities that make what happen in those movies look like a day in the sun. If we think you are about to set something like that off, we'll defend the planet, whatever the cost.”

A quick look in her head and I saw that she was deadly serious. They were even now coming up with plans to deal with the both of us, plans that mostly seemed to involve masters, bio-tinker devices and people with esoteric powers that we didn't have any particular defenses against.

“We're all on the same side,” I said.

“I wish I could believe that,” Miss Militia said. “Tell your grandfather that we want to talk to him.”

Apparently flirting with Piggot wasn't going to be enough to keep him on the Protectorate's good side. While part of me was all right with this, another part was upset. We all should be on the same side, at least until Scion and the Endbringers were destroyed.

“I'll let him know,” I said grimly.
Fallen

“We've completed the virus,” my grandfather admitted,”but we are not anywhere close to human trials.”

“You understand that this isn't something that can be allowed,” Piggot said. “The dangers of biotinkering alone would be enough to get you a kill order. But even if it is as safe as you think, do you really think the government would let you create your own private army of parahumans?”

“You act as though we're villains,” he said. “We're simply trying to make the world safer. Wouldn't it be a good thing to have more heroes in the world? More rogues?”

He leaned forward. “The very nature of the triggering process for parahumans is what has the heroes outnumbered by what, four to one? We intend to give powers only to people who are emotionally stable, people who have motivations that are not selfish or criminal.”

“There's no way to be sure of that,” Piggot said. “Even someone who is normal and honest can be seduced by the allure of power.”

Our telepathic abilities would make the judging process a little safer, I thought, but she was right about the tendency of power to corrupt.

“We have access to thinkers,” my grandfather said smoothly. “Even precogs if need be.”

“Even if you are right,” Piggot said. “Which I'm not agreeing to in the slightest. Do you really think that something like this should be left in the hands of an old man and a teenage girl?”

“We're the world's best defense against Endbringers,” he said. “Why not let us herald a new age? With enough new parahuman heroes, the government would no longer have to bow to the wishes of villains in hopes that they might show up to Endbringer fights. Isn't that something the Protectorate could get behind?”

“We live in a world of checks and balances,” Piggot said. “One where people don't get to shape the world the way they want to simply because they have more power than everyone else.”

“Isn't that what governments do?” I asked, interrupting.

Both my grandfather and Piggot looked at me.

“Governments are elected by the people,” Piggot said. “They represent the will of the people.”

“How much input do the people of Africa have?” I asked. “Or the people in the CUI? Even here... I don't think the people actually elected you, yet you're here trying to dictate to us what we are to do with our own inventions.”

“The public has an interest in safety,” Piggot said. “If you invented a nuclear fusion reactor and decided to put it in your basement, do you think your neighbors wouldn't have a right to know and maybe veto it?”

I carefully kept my face blank. My grandfather actually had put an arc reactor in the basement of our house, even though the PRT was still studying them for safety. He seemed pretty confident; apparently one of the heroes of his world had used them to power his suits for fifteen years with no cancer of other known ill effects.
“We're trying to save the world,” I said. “Why can't you see that?”

My grandfather was staring at Piggot, then he turned to me. “She has no intention of listening. In fact she is planning to destroy our lab and take the samples for the PRT.”

A quick glance inside her head showed that he was right.

He gestured, and a wormhole appeared inside the conference room. At this range it was going to play holy hell with their electronics, but I doubted that he cared. He stepped through and a moment later he was gone.

“That was stupid,” I said, turning to Piggot.

“So he's a Tinker and a Thinker too?” Piggot asked, staring at the place where the wormhole had been. The lights had gone out and the only lights were coming from a small window.

I could hear alarms blaring in the other parts of the Rig. I didn't particularly care.

“Do you really think that you can fight the entire United States government?” she asked.

“Do you really think we can't?” I asked.

My grandfather had taken on the government before, and while he'd lost, it was mostly because the technology of the world he had come from was substantially better than ours. His world had countermeasures that this world didn’t.

“How much of your equipment is made out of metal?” I asked. “How much of it can be disrupted by lightning or gravity or other parts of the electromagnetic spectrum? If you can't get behind us, at least get out of the way.”

I turned to the wall with the fewest electrical connections and I peeled a hole, stepping through. I turned to her and said, “You wouldn't like what will happen if you don't.”

I returned the wall to it's former self, and then I launched myself across the sky.

Meeting with Piggot had been a mistake. It had obviously been a diversion designed to let the PRT take the virus for themselves. I wasn't surprised that they knew where my grandfather's base in Boston was; they had enough thinkers and spies to make that reasonable.

What wasn't reasonable was what my grandfather's response would be.

He'd been playing nice so far, but I doubted that would continue in the face of an actual attack on him. His sanity was tenuous at best.

My phone rang.

“They've taken it and destroyed the lab,” my grandfather said curtly on the other end of the line. “I put a metallic element in the solution holding the virus preparing for just this scenario. It's the closest copy I could make to the element I showed you recently.”

Apparently the elements for adamantium didn't exist on my earth, but they did in the asteroid belt. He'd been collecting minute quantities from asteroids, hoping to create his own. He'd been trying to copy it for a while now, and I supposed that he'd found a use for his discarded experiments.

How that would affect the users of the virus I wasn't sure.
I'd heard that wine could be authenticated by the fact that the atomic tests of the forties and fifties had scattered nuclear material throughout the world, impregnating our food and our bodies. Wine that did not have those elements was older than the date the tests began.

Was he planning to put that element into the people who he gave powers to so that he could track them if need be? It didn't seem like them; it seemed like the kind of thing the government could find out about and use to track down his people.

Of course, it was possible that he might not consider them to be “real” mutants, in which case he'd only see them as tools.

“They have already left the city,” he continued. “I will check north of the city, and I want you to check the area between Boston and Brockton Bay.”

He acted as though there wasn't any chance that I would disobey. Of course, given that I understood the importance of this, I didn't plan to.

“What do I do if I find them?” I asked.

“Take it and make them pay,” he said curtly.

“That'll mean war,” I said.

“They started it,” he said. “We will finish it.”

I shook my head, even though there was no way he could see it. “Do you really want to fight the whole world?”

“We are doing what is best for them. They will see it eventually.”

I winced. I'd been thinking that way for a long time, and I was starting to have second thoughts. Hearing it from him only made it sound worse.

“I'll try to get it from them,” I said. “But I won't hurt anyone.”

The Protectorate didn't need to get the virus. Given how lax their operational security was, it would be only a matter of time before the villains got hold of it, and then there really would be armies of parahuman mercenaries and villains stalking the world.

The world was already on the verge of collapsing. Multiplying the number of villainous parahumans by a factor of ten would only hasten the collapse. We wouldn't even need Endbringers.

I suddenly wished I'd said as much to Piggot.

It was a little like all the times that I'd thought of the perfect response to Emma's gibes, only hours after the event when it was too late. I wished I was a little quicker on the uptake when it came to social events, but that was something I was working on.

I closed my eyes and reached out, looking for unusual magnetic signatures. I was getting better at this too; there had been a time when all the metal in buildings would have interfered with my ability to detect people; that wasn't the same kind of issue anymore.

As I floated north of Brockton Bay, I realized that I could detect a fleet of PRT vehicles just coming into town. Their vans were distinctive in interior design and were easily distinguished from similar vehicles because of all the extra hardware under the hood.
Furthermore, one of the vehicles was carrying something more; a metal signature that I didn’t recognize but seemed likely to be what I was looking for.

I shot through the sky, heading for their location. As I came close I realized that something was wrong. I could see smoke rising up into the sky and I could hear the sounds of gunfire.

It clearly wasn't my grandfather attacking the convoy and the gangs left in Brockton Bay were either under my control or gone. It had to be an outside interest, and they had to have had some sort of inside information that let them know how important the cargo was.

The one advantage of all of this was that I wouldn't be accused of attacking the PRT directly. I could simply make sure that the virus was “lost” and that no one got hold of it.

As I approached the scene, I saw that three of the vans were on fire and there were bodies on the ground.

The virus was moving rapidly away.

I flew after them. I saw a group of seven capes fighting the PRT. One of them was wearing white clothes that clung closely to their body. I couldn't tell if it was a woman or an effeminate man, not in the costume of the half mask they were wearing.

Another was wearing a costume that looked like it was made of Rhino plates. He was waving his hands, and whenever he did, PRT agents armor exploded in blood. I could see blades of wind slicing through the air, even though they didn't at all look like what Stormtiger had done.

The third was wearing a mask that looked like it was made of a horse's head. It was disturbingly realistic, almost as though he'd actually cut up a horse's head to use for his costume. He was covered in tatoos and was wearing chains.

He was businlly creating clones to attack the PRT.

A man wearing an oval face mask with multiple reflective lenses on it was staring up at me. I felt something pass by me; a wave of energy that seemed to have no effect on me.

From the look of the the man this was unexpected. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to do, but it didn't matter.

I reached out with my powers and I grabbed the guns from the fallen PRT soldiers. I launched them through the air, kneecapping all of the men below me except the man in white who somehow managed to avoid it. I heard screams of horror from the men, but a look at the dead and dying PRT agents below me left me with no pity.

I grabbed the vials holding the mutagenic virus and pulled them toward me.

“Blasphemer!” one of the men shouted at me.

It took me a moment to realize who these were. These were the Fallen, the Endbringer worshiping fanatics that had an unpleasant reputation. They weren't up to the reputation of the Nine, obviously, but they weren't pushovers.

The man in the Rhino armor sent a slashing wave of air up at me, but it splashed harmlessly against my shields.
“Whore of Babylon!” the man in the mirrored mask shouted.

“False prophet!” Another shouted. “Telling the lie that Leviathan is lost to us. The world will know the truth!”

The man in white simply stared up at me, and suddenly I found myself on the ground standing in front of him with no memory of how I'd gotten there. He was holding the virus that I had grabbed, and he was speaking to the others.

“We shall use their own whore against them. She shall tear down the walls of this place that has made a mockery of great Leviathan! We shall rain death and destruction on the heads of those who would shower the world with lies!”

I wanted to move, but I didn't want to at the same time. My body seemed to have a mind of its own. I'd felt this before, and I realized that I'd been mastered.

My grandfather would have been able to fight it off, but I didn't have that power.

I still had a trickle of my own power though. He'd made certain that I couldn't attack him or his apparently, but he hadn't thought to completely stop me from using my powers.

I reached through the crust of the earth, pulling up wires and other metals. I would apologize to the city later and repair everything, assuming that there was a later.

I carefully sent molten metal up the back of my legs, with a force field the only thing keeping my legs from being burned hideously. The metal was creeping up under my hair and around my skull.

I couldn't be sure that my grandfather's helmet would protect me from this world's mastering, but it was the only thing I had so I had to try it.

If I hadn't I'd wake up to find out just how much damage I could do to a city.

It would be so easy to destroy everything. The world was like cardboard to me, and there was always a temptation to lash out and simply destroy everything, like a child playing Godzilla in a town made of small boxes. Unfortunately if I let loose real people would lose not only their lives but their livelihoods.

The economy that I'd worked so hard to restore would be burned to ashes. The people might be as well.

I wanted to tell him he wouldn't get away with it; I was sure that some of the super heroes my grandfather had fought would have. However, I kept my face impassive. The last thing I wanted was to let him realize that his power wasn't total.

“The people of this city have claimed that they are the ones who have saved the world, that theirs is the city that sent Leviathan to an unearthly grave in between the stars. Thus they are the ones who will pay!”

The man seemed quite enthusiastic in his preaching, but the other capes on the ground didn't seem as enthusiastic, probably because I'd broken their legs.

He turned to me, and his eyes widened as he realized that I'd closed my eyes.

I'd finally remembered who he was, and how his powers worked. He had to look you in the eyes to master you, and that made you incredibly suggestible.
I could feel metal moving around my head in a crown of iron, a combination of metals that wouldn't give me the same kind of coverage my grandfather's helmet would, but that was all I could manage on short notice.

I could feel the pressure on my mind lessening. Whether the crown was working, or whether it would have vanished anyway I didn't know.

Either way, I felt a pressure on my mind, presumably from his former control and I struggled to overcome his last command.

I needed to attack them; they were going to ruin everything and everyone that I loved.

I told myself this over and over, pushing myself to overcome a control that felt like a three hundred meter tall wall; I could feel cracks in it, and I could feel the others trying to attack me through my shield, but nothing they did worked.

The moment that I broke through the control I sent shards of metal flying in their direction. I knew their signatures now; the unique bioelectric patterns that made them all up. Targeting them was easy. I heard screams and crying and I simply stood there with my eyes closed, listening to the wet, gurgling sounds of men dying around me.

In my former assaults on enemies I hadn't been standing two feet away; it was horrifying to hear just how wet death sounded.

Still, I didn't open my eyes for five minutes, until the man in white's bioelectric signature faded to the point that I was sure he was dead.

When I opened my eyes I looked down at his body, which was contorted. I'd filled him with metal.

Glancing at his hand, where he held one of the vials I froze.

The vial was open, and I could almost feel the wind blowing the uncontrolled virus in the direction of Brockton Bay.

It turned out that only the solution holding the virus had the metal permeating it. The virus itself did not. I couldn't sense it at all; it didn't have a bioelectric signature, and even with all my power I couldn't control the wind.

I stared helplessly as the mutant virus headed for the city, the Fallen's last vengeance on the city that I loved.
“Had the PRT used simple ordinary restraint this would never have happened,” Magneto said calmly. “

“So you deny being responsible for the horrors inflicted on Brockton Bay?” the reporter asked.

“I do. The virus was not ready for human trials and I warned the PRT to that effect. Trials were being held in a laboratory ten miles away from Boston, two hundred feet underground using every safety method known to man or Tinker. They chose to break containment and take the virus deep inside a major, populated city.”

“Some people say you shouldn’t have been working on it at all; the PRT certainly takes that position.”

“I was trying to distribute abilities to mentally stable people, heroes who would stand between humanity and the Endbringers. No one likes to say it, but we’ve been slowly losing ground for a long time. This had a chance to be a game changer.”

“People have been mutilated and maimed,” the reporter said. “Someone will have to pay.”

Magneto looked at her for a moment, something cold in his expression. “No one is denying that many people have lost their human form; most didn't even gain abilities. Had I had a chance to perfect that formula this wouldn't have happened. Even if it did, it would have happened to people who knew the risk instead of innocent people who are the victims of the gross negligence of the PRT.”

“There are going to be lawsuits for years,” the reporter said. “What do you say to people who are wanting to sue?”

“The PRT is responsible for this,” he said. “The formula would have been harmless if it had been left alone. If I’d even been on the premises I had measures that would allow me to destroy it the moment it escaped into the air, but I was deceived and led away by the PRT.”

He leaned forward. “As yourself this; if the PRT really believed the formula to be as dangerous as they say why didn’t they destroy it on the premises, or use a mover to transport it to a place where the danger would be less? Instead they chose to keep it; presumably to use it for themselves, denying the people the abilities that they deserved.”

The screen shut off, and the room was silent.

“It goes on like that for another twenty minutes. By the time it’s done he has her eating out of his hand,” Director Costa brown said grimly.

Director Costa Brown and three other members of the board were sitting at the end of the room. They had been particularly quiet and stone faced.

Armsmaster, Velocity and Assault and Battery sat on either side of Emily Piggot on the opposite side of the room.

“He had to have planned this. The interview happened less than ten minutes after the virus was released,” Piggot said. “There wasn't enough time to set it up, much less be prepared with all the answers.”
“What did you think you were doing?” Costa-Brown asked. “Policy on Hebert was that she should be left alone unless she actively attacked the PRT or civilians. Her “grandfather’s” clone or whatever he is seems to have her powers but more control and experience. What made you think it was a good idea to antagonize him?”

“We had creditable evidence that he was engaged in biological tinkering with a potentially worldwide effect. Protocol was clear.”

“You should have called us,” Director Costa-Brown snapped. “This wasn't Blasto or Bonesaw trying to create a bio-weapon, this was an ally trying to create a weapon that might be the key to fighting the Endbringers. You didn't think that was worth sending up the chain?”

“Hebert has a lot of supporters,” Piggot said. “Even here in headquarters. Operational security demanded that we give them no warning of what we were about to do.”

Director Costa-Brown turned to Armsmaster. “You led the raid on the complex. Was he right about the precautions taken to keep the virus from spreading?”

Armsmaster stared at her for a moment, then nodded his head grudgingly. “The methods he was using were impressive and actually better than the best the CDC uses.”

“If he was treating the virus with that much care, why drive it to Brockton Bay in vans instead of using Strider to move it to a secure location.”

“Strider was unavailable due to current operations against the CUI,” Armsmaster said. “And time was of the essence. We weren't sure of how long it was before he would complete the virus and begin distributing it.”

“Later in the interview he claimed that future iterations of the virus would have been made harmless, so that they only affected the user and not people around him. Is that your analysis?”

“Everything he said in the interview is technically true,” Armsmaster said stiffly. “Although he was carefully shading the truth.”

“Which a man under the threat of billions of dollars of lawsuits would most certainly be tempted to do,” Director Costa Brown said dryly.

“The man almost asked us to do it,” Assault said, speaking up. “He's capable of teleporting to the middle of the ocean, and he could build a base anywhere in the world, hundreds of miles away or thousands of miles away from anyone. Why build it in our backyard?”

“Convenience?” one of the other board members asked. “He needed the help of Panacea and perhaps it was for her comfort that it wasn't too far. Ultimately it doesn't matter if he intended this to happen or not. We're here to determine who is responsible on our end.”

Director Costa Brown looked down at her papers for a moment before looking up and sighing. “Why weren't there any parahumans guarding the caravan?”

“Valefor surprised us,” Armsmaster admitted. He flushed. “He'd gotten hold of a PRT uniform and had infiltrated the lead van before we had gotten there. He flipped up his visor and commanded us to take an extended visit to a business in Boston called the Pussycat Lounge.”

“Doubtlessly to foster the impression that the Protectorate is corrupt,” Piggot said, glancing over at
the others. Battery in particular was turning an interesting color of red.

“‘It’s hardly his normal method of operating,’” Director Costa Brown said.

None of the parahumans had been killed or mutilated, only ordinary members of the PRT.

“We believe they intended to damage the PRT and Protectorate as much as possible because of Leviathan’s defeat,” Armsmaster said.

“That’s only a theory,” Piggot said irritably. “Because Hebert conveniently killed all of them before they could be questioned. They certainly didn’t leave a manifesto.”

“Valefor took the time to dress up in costume,” Armsmaster insisted. “Which meant he wanted to be recognized.

“How did it turn against them, then?” Costa Brown asked.

“We were under radio silence,” Armsmaster said. “But Kid Win called and I wasn't answering, so he hacked my visual feed. He got a good look of a dancer named Candy before I managed to shut him out.”

“That probably would have raised some alarms,” Battery said, her face even redder than before. “If he hadn't seen me in the background.”

“I'm sure that the Youth Guard will be thrilled to learn about this,” the first board member said.

“It took a while for word to get around that we weren't at our posts, and once people who knew about the operation learned about it, the alarm was raised.”

“None of this would have happened if you’d contacted us,” Director Costa Brown said coldly. “We aren't responsible for the many many leaks that your branch seems to have, and we would have been able to field people who would not be compromised. That's assuming that we even chose to go forward with such a risky plan in the first place instead of simply convincing the Heberts of the need for oversight.”

“They've worked with us successfully on other projects,” the second of the board members said. “It's possible that they would have been amenable for having PRT agents as the first in line for the new project. We could have increased our numbers in the Protectorate by a factor of ten.”

“Now we've got ten thousand people running around with frog eyes and lizard tails and God knows what else and a thousand random people with super powers. Maybe a tenth of those are actually useful in a fight. Given the nature of Brockton Bay, how many of those do you think are going to actually be heroes instead of people who resent the fact that we let three major gangs rule the city for decades?”

The last board member looked disgusted.

“This isn't the usual kind of cluster fuck that you can sweep under the rug, Emily. Someone is going to have to seen to pay for this, and we still have need of the people in your team.”

Director Costa Brown stared at her for a moment before saying, “It's time to step down, Emily. Your... opinions of parahumans have been known for a long time, but as long as they didn't affect your judgment they were tolerated. For a time they were even useful if they kept you from idealizing
the people who worked for you.”

She took a deep breath. “But people are going to think you did this because of a personal grudge against the Heberts. That because they wouldn't bow down to your personal mandates that you intended this as an object lesson. I think he said as much in the interview.”

“Um... I don't think he's actually named Hebert,” Assault said. “He goes by...”

Director Costa Brown stared at him, and he was silent suddenly. While he normally would have been cracking jokes, no one in the room was in the mood for humor.

“You are gone,” Director Costa Brown continued. “Step down for the good of the organization and you might be able to keep your pension. Fight us on this, and it's possible that jail time might be involved.”

Piggot's face was frozen. She stared at Costa Brown, then nodded slightly. “You'll have my resignation by the end of the day.”

“As for the rest of you, it's clear that this chapter of the organization needs a thorough spring cleaning. We'll be sending someone in to take over as soon as we've made the decision. In the meantime, Armsmaster is temporarily demoted as acting head of this branch, with Battery to take his place. This is only a temporary placement until we can determine the best course of action.”

Director Costa Brown and the other board members rose to their feet.

“We've given this branch a lot of latitude, considering that this was where Leviathan fell, but the entire organization is at risk because of this. You've heard of a Coyote chewing its own leg off to get out of a trap? Consider yourself to be the leg.”

With that they stepped out and were gone.

“That... could have gone better.” Assault said weakly.

Piggot ignored him, rising slowly to her feet and leaving the room without saying a word. Armsmaster followed him.

“We could have at least held Panacea's feet to the fire for all of this,” Velocity said. “She should have known better than to get involved with something like this.”

“Hebert can be quite persuasive,” Battery said. “At least recently. Her grandfather seems to be cut from the same mold.”

“A lot of people are suffering because of this, and nobody knows what the end results are going to be,” she continued. “They'll blame us just because we're the ones on the scene.”

“We could have said no,” Assault said.

“And what if Hebert and her grandfather had been wrong and the virus was deadly instead of just a mutagen? This could easily have ended up as the kind of nightmare that keeps all the thinkers up at night.”

“The news keeps showing the same pictures over and over; people in line at the hospital suffering. It's almost as though the reporters are trying to make us look bad.”

“It's their job,” Battery said. “To pull heroes off their pedestal and show that they have feet of clay.”
“It's not as though we haven't all made some questionable decisions in our time,” Assault said. “Me more than most. But it's frustrating that just when things seemed like they were starting to actually turn our way that they start falling apart like this.”

“Were they, really?” Battery asked. “Or were they turning in the Heberts' ways and we just happened to be going in the same direction.”

“You don't really believe Colin's theory that Lenhsherr actually wanted us to break into his facility?” Velocity asked incredulously. “You make him sound like some kind of chessmaster.”

“He's some kind of thinker who is good at judging people,” Battery said. “He finds out what people want and he gives it to them. What did Piggot want?”

“Control,” Velocity said. “I've looked into her past, and Nilbog changed her. I think it made her afraid.”

“It made her afraid of us,” Battery said. “It made her think that every single one of us had the possibility of becoming Nilbog if we just had one bad day, and that meant that she never really trusted any of us.”

“So all he had to do was make her think that bad day was coming,” Assault said. “And what she was going to do was pretty clear.”

“How did he know she wouldn't bring Legend or Eidolon into this?”

“I'm not sure he really cared if she did,” Battery said soberly. “Powers don't work well in space, at least not ours. Everybody heard what happened to Lung. How well do you think even Legend would do if he got the Leviathan treatment?”

“You make it sound like he's a villain,” Velocity said.

“Isn't he?” Battery asked. “He intentionally released a bioterror weapon on American soil, and instead of a kill order he's walking free. He's managed to make it sound like we're the villains, and there are a lot of people who are going to listen to him.”

“His granddaughter has done a lot for the city,” Assault said.

“Al Capone started one of the first soup kitchens during the Depression. There have been times when the Tongs rescued people in Japan during natural disasters, even all the way up to the end. Villains have always used charity to make themselves look like heroes, and he's doing this for the same reason.”

“I think he cares about the city because Taylor does,” Assault said. “She might be the only one he'll really listen to.”

They stepped into the elevator headed down. Assault leaned against the wall while Battery stared straight forward. Velocity fidgeted as he stood on the other side of her.

“She's certainly the only one other than Eidolon who can match him,” Velocity said.

“My question is about how the Fallen knew what was going to happen,” Battery said. “We were keeping tight operational security and they knew exactly where to target us. Either we've got a leak somewhere, or this “Magneto” is actually in league with them.”

“Do you think he'd risk his granddaughter?”
“Is anyone really sure she is his granddaughter? For all we know he actually mastered her and she's in his thrall right now.”

“She did change a couple of months ago,” Assault said. “Quite dramatically. Armstmaster said it was almost like she was an entirely new person, and he thought she might be having a psychotic break.”

“Still, having all of her powers, being a Tinker and a Master? That doesn't seem likely. Powers just don't work that way,” Velocity argued.

“They don't work in outer space, but neither Hebert nor her grandfather seem to have any problem with it. They don't fit the mold we're used to, which means that we have to be very careful around them.”

“Doesn't it seem weird that someone who has been in a coma for thirty years is this... lively?” Assault asked. “Shouldn't he be more confused about cell phones and Britney Spears and computers?”

“Tinkers and Thinkers don't follow ordinary rules,” Battery said. “Even usual ones. For all we know Magneto can read minds.”

The elevator slowed to a stop. They'd reached their destination, even if none of them were particularly anxious to be out in the lobby. The lobby was filled with reporters who had questions about what had happened and while Armstmaster would be making the official statements they all were expected to be there.

“That's impossible,” Velocity said. “Besides, if he could do that we wouldn't stand much of a chance.”

The door opened and they stepped out into a sea of flashing lights. The reporters would have their pound of flesh and the next thirty minutes were likely going to be almost as uncomfortable as the last thirty, even if for different reasons.

All they could hope was to do damage control while those higher up dealt with things in their own way.

Hopefully they wouldn't end up like the coyote's leg.
“I'm not supposed to talk to you,” Panacea said. She scowled. “I'm already in enough trouble. Mom says I'm lucky not to be in prison right now.”

“The fact that you are the only one able to reverse the cosmetic effects of all of this had no impact on that, I'm guessing,” I said dryly.

The waiting room was full of what would have once been called Case 53's. I saw at least twenty of them, some with forms that were horrifying. One man had skin that seemed to be continuously sloughing off onto the floor. Another man seemed to be on fire, and I wondered how Panacea was even going to touch him to heal him.

“It's going to take at least a year to get to everyone,” she said. “And I can't always make things better. Especially if I can't tell what they originally looked like. That's why I have them bring pictures of what they looked like before. They've got me working on the worst ones first.”

The man on fire had apparently brought a metal folding chair. Even so, he was scorching the tiles on the floor, and several nurses were visibly dithering about what to do with him.

“I'm not sure why you weren't supposed to talk to me,” I said. “I'm not part of this shitshow.”

“You were the one who talked me into working with your grandfather,” she said. “Carol thinks you are a bad influence.”

“I wasn't exactly myself,” I said. I looked around. “Maybe we can talk about it during your break?”

“'What break?'” she asked. “People aren't particularly sympathetic to me right now. I had people throw a soda bottle at my head yesterday. I can't exactly heal myself you know.”

“How are you going to heal fire guy?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don't know, but if we don't do something he's going to set off the sprinklers.”

“Maybe I can help,” I said.

“How?” she asked suspiciously. “The last time I accepted your help I ended up on a Protectorate watch list and being grounded for the next two years.”

“Fire needs oxygen, right?” I asked. “I've got force fields I can use to cut the oxygen to a small part of his skin. If it works, maybe we can get you close enough to touch him.”

She stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

“You! Matchstick! You're up!”

The man stood and grabbed his chair. He walked toward us being very careful to avoid the walls.

Panacea led us to a side room, and moments later the man set down again.

“If you don't do something about this, I'm going to end up hurting someone,” he said quietly.

“We're going to try,” Panacea said. “I can't promise anything more than that. My track record on all of this has been... spotty.”
The man mumbled something, and Panacea glared at him.

“I could have my friend here throw you into the Bay,” she said. “That might cool you off.”

He quieted down quickly.

“Do I have permission to treat you?” she asked.

He nodded curtly.

It took me a little bit to get the force field right, but I eventually got his arm to go out once the oxygen within the force field was used up.

Panacea glanced at me, and I surrounded her arm with a force field, tight enough that she could feel it.

Connecting the two without letting any oxygen in was a little tricky, but a moment later Panacea's hand was on his arm. She closed her eyes, and things suddenly became very dull.

Unlike many capes, Panacea's power didn't have any outward manifestations, at least not if she was doing internal healing. After the first five minutes I found myself grabbing my Smartphone and checking it for any news.

The news media was mostly falling my grandfather's way, although the conservative channels seemed to be taking the viewpoint that both my grandfather and the Protectorate were corrupt. Surprisingly, I sort of agreed with them.

It shocked me a little that he'd essentially mutilated thousands of people, something that had gotten a kill order for Nilbog, and he was somehow getting away with it.

He hadn't been that smooth when he was younger. In the past he'd been more apt to believe that force was the most persuasive thing. I'd seen enough glimpses of his past to know that he had once essentially been a terrorist, apt to grandiose plans that never seemed to work out in part because he insisted on fighting his world's greatest telepath.

I didn't really understand his world's obsession with New York city. In my world there were places that had fewer parahumans, but you were never more than a hundred miles from one, unless you were in the Arctic or Antarctic or something.

But their world had a fraction of the number of parahumans ours did, at least in terms of people who actually put on costumes and got into fights.

The parahumans all seemed to go to New York, the one place where there was a parahuman on every corner. If I'd been a supervillain, I'd have gone to one of the cities where there were no parahumans, and I'd have had free reign.

The man's flames suddenly went out.

“The part of your brain that controlled your power was damaged,” she said. “I fixed it.”

The man stared at his hands, and he started to cry.

“You can set fire to yourself again if you want, but personally I'd just go back to my normal life,” she said.
He stood up and left the room quickly, without even any thanks.

“I thought you didn't do brains.”

“I never wanted to,” she admitted. “Because if I screw up with an arm, well, I can always grow somebody another arm. If I screw up with their brain they aren't them anymore.”

“So why now?”

“I've hurt a lot of people,” she said. “Also, your grandfather showed me a lot about the parts of the brain that control... whatever this is that we've created. I try not to mess with anything else. People sign waivers before they come in here just in case I do something irreversible.”

“I doubt that guys signed anything,” I said.

He hadn't even bothered to take his chair with him.

“There's emergency laws to deal with that,” she says. “Verbal consent is enough when someone is unable to give written consent.”

I nodded. Most likely the guy would have burned any paperwork he'd been given.

The Protectorate was covering everyone's medical bills, probably in an effort to reduce whatever lawsuits eventually made their way down the courts.

Everyone knew Panacea didn't have any money, which was likely why she wasn't being sued.

My grandfather WAS being sued, but only by a fraction of the people that were suing the Protectorate, probably because they didn't know how deep his pockets were getting. However, from what I was hearing his lawyers thought he had a good chance of weaseling out of most of it.

“If you are serious about helping there are several other patients that I can't get close to.”

I nodded.

The next three hours were horrifying. I hadn't realized that there were so many ways that the human body could be twisted. These weren't people that had been granted powers, even if they came from giant space worms.

These were people whose entire lives had been derailed; they couldn't ever live a normal life the way they were supposed to. One man had cilia growing over his entire body that infected those who touched them with a deadly poison. I had to use my abilities to superheat a blade so that we could shave those away, and even so Panacea had a medical team waiting in case she was poisoned.

Another man had pulses of gravity emitting from his body that were deadly to those trying to come close to him. Everything in his room was bolted down, and the things that came close to him were continually distorted.

Treating him had actually been enlightening. Gravity control wasn't something I had a lot of experience with, and the fact that the pulses weren't continual had forced me to anticipate the pattern.

A third man had simply had his body covered with mouths with continuously snapping teeth. He was unable to control them, which was why Panacea had been unable to get close enough to try to work on him. Holding a mouth closed so that she could touch him on the lips had been easy.

These weren't isolated cases, even though they were some of the worst ones. Panacea could work on
the simpler cases; the man with a frog's head,.the woman who had suddenly grown a beard. However, the medical staff was evaluating cases and ordering them so that the worst cases got treated first.

This meant that the man stuck with an elephant's nose was probably going to have to wait a long time to get treated.

These were the majority of the people, those who'd gotten cosmetic changes or powers they couldn't control. There were probably people who wouldn't even bother to go to Panacea; people who had just gotten strange colored hair or eyes, or who had gotten very minor powers that wouldn't be much of a problem for anyone.

I'd heard about one man who had minor telekinesis, just enough to change the roll of a dice. Unfortunately for him, Las Vegas was filled with thinkers who were in a continuous war to stop each other from cheating. Other than cheating on gambling, his power was virtually useless. He couldn't even get a beer from the fridge with it.

Others had powers that were only a little more useful. There was a woman who could heat metal; she was using it to cook because she couldn't affect more than a frying pan's worth. Another man could double the speed of anything he threw. He wasn't particularly good at throwing things, however, and was unlikely to ever be able to use it for something useful.

None of these people were likely to put on costumes and go out and try to fight crimes. The world was probably better because of it. Nobody wanted frying pan woman to go out and start maiming criminals.

By the end of the day I was exhausted, more mentally than physically. Panacea had been able to fully save only half of them, although she'd been able to make some of the other's conditions somewhat better. The man with the mouths could now control them; Panacea thought she'd be able to fully fix him but it wasn't going to be an easy process.

She admitted to me in private that it might be easier to simply amputate his limbs and then start over from scratch, although she doubted that he'd agree to it.

Still, I'd helped a lot of people and I'd gotten her to listen.

We'd finally gotten a break, slipping out onto the hospital roof. I stared at Panacea, who was pulling out a cigarette. Her hands were shaking.

“The person who convinced you to work with my grandfather wasn't me,” I said. “This isn't something that I like to talk about, but my grandfather possessed me for a while.”

“Possessed you?” she asked. Her voice was skeptical.

“How do you think his mind got out of his old body and into his new one. He took over mine.”

“There's a Cape in Las Vegas who has a power like that, but it seems unlikely that someone would have that many powers,” she said. “Grab bag capes are weak.”

“Like the way I can control electricity and gravity and magnetism and some other things that I don't talk about?”

“That's different,” she said. “Those things are all related, I guess. The weird thing is that you don't
Limitations Scion and his partner had deliberately introduced. I didn't tell her that because she wasn't part of the conspiracy. Telling the world would only introduce panic and possibly alert Scion, hastening the end of the world.

I reached out mentally. Practice was making it easier, although I doubted that I'd ever be able to match any of the telepaths from my grandfather's memories.

What I saw there was shocking, but I carefully kept my reaction off of my face.

Stepping close to her, I leaned toward her ear. She flushed and tried to step back, but the wall was behind her.

“He's a telepath,” I whispered.

“What?” she asked. “No. That doesn't exist.”

“If it doesn't how would I know about how you feel about your sister?”

Her face turned white.

“I'm a telepath too,” I said in a low voice. “I'm not that good at it yet, but things that are really shameful or traumatic are easier to pick up on.”

“You... you don't know what you are talking about,” she stammered.

“I get it,” I said. “She's not really your sister and you like girls. Being around her aura all the time probably doesn't help.”

“I'm immune to her aura,” she said.

“Are you really? Or have you just been around it so much that you don't notice anymore?”

She stared at me wordlessly.

“Are you trying to blackmail me?”

“You know a secret about me that I don't want anyone to know,” I said. “Same as I know about you. How threatened do you think people would feel if they knew what I could do?”

“It's not the same?”

“Isn't it? I can read every corrupt politician's mind, find out about every dirty deal the Protectorate has made. I can uncover cheating spouses and all the horrible secrets that everyone has. Who would want to be around me if they knew what I could do?”

“I don't want to be around you,” Panacea said. She stared at me as though I was a cobra about to strike her.

“I already know your big secret,” I said. “What else am I going to uncover, the fact that you like to read romance novels?”

“Stay out of my head!” she snapped.

“My grandfather and I don't work by the same rules as everybody else,” I said. “You've just spent
the day looking at people with powers like ours. Do they even have the same sort of brain structures that every other paranormal has?"

“Not all paranormals have the corona in the same place,” she protested. “Some Case 53’s actually have them broken up throughout their brains.”

“Our powers come from a different source than everyone else because my grandfather isn't from here,” I said. “In his home world he was one of his world’s top three villains.”

I wasn’t counting extraterrestrials, of course. Apparently his homeworld had been invaded at least once a month, which was probably why the heroes there were so powerful. Our heroes and villains had long periods of peace followed by occasional pitched battles. The heroes of his world seemed to be fighting all the time, having major battles weekly that destroyed New York over and over again.

She stared at me in horror.

I'd had a glimpse of her home life, and apparently her adoptive mother was particularly judgmental toward villains. She'd spent much of Amy's life pounding in the idea that villains were evil and worthless and only existed to be fought.

“He's gone to the side of good sometimes,” I admitted. “But other times he's been something of a terrorist.”

She glanced back to the door of the hospital.

“I was supposed to help people. This was supposed to be something that would help against the Endbringers.”

“It still might,” I said. “It's just that it's a mistake to put your trust in my grandfather.”

“So won't he know that you are telling me all of this?” she asked suddenly. “If he can read minds, I mean?”

I shook my head. “He doesn't like to use a lot of his powers, not the way that I do. He might not bother looking inside your head unless he gets suspicious. Of course, he's really good at reading body language, so my suggestion would be to stay away from him.”

“Carol already told me that I couldn't see him anymore,” Panacea said. “Or you either.”

“Do you really want to make up for all of this?” I asked.

She nodded.

“There may be a point where you have to go against what your mother tells you. If it gets to the point where your life at home gets too unbearable, I can set up a trust fund administered by someone else. It won't be enough to make you rich, but it'll be enough for you to live on your own.”

“So you intend to get my help by blackmailing and bribing me?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I'm not smooth and charismatic like my grandfather, and I don't really know how to deal with people. What I do know is that my grandfather may or may not be the greatest threat to the world since the Endbringers. He might choose to be a hero, in which case I don't have to do anything.”

I took a deep breath. “But if he is planning something else, I have to be ready for him. There's
nobody else that can fight him on an equal footing, and even so he has a lot more experience than I do. That means that I'm going to need people on my side that I can trust.”

Panacea was quiet for a moment.

“What will you need from me?”

“Maybe to create viruses that can put someone to sleep. Maybe other kinds of non-lethal biological things. Whatever you can think of really.”

She took a deep breath. “I can do that. I've been feeling kind of good since I started working with your grandfather. It's almost like my power wants to be used to make things.”

“I also want you to go for therapy about this sister thing,” I said.

She scowled.

“Of all the parahumans in the world, you are the one person who might be able to cause more damage than me or my grandfather. You could make diseases that would kill everybody on the planet if you wanted. What happens if you aren't mentally stable?”

“I get a kill order,” she said quietly.

“The world needs you too much for something like that.” I said.

She nodded.

“Welcome to the team,” I said.
“I'm going to pay you twice what the Protectorate pays,” I said to the group of people in front of me. “And we've already gone over benefits.”

“Having access to Panacea means a lot,” one of the older men in the group said. He was a former Dockworker, well known by Dad.

Unlike parahumans, mutants didn't seem to skew by age and gender. Parahumans became what they were because of trauma, which tended to happen more often to the young and to females. Mutancy seemed to be truly random.

I'd had to dismiss an eighty year old woman, not because her powers weren't useful, but because Panacea told me that her body wouldn't stand up to combat.

It also affected children, although mostly here it seemed to affect those who had at least reached puberty. My policy here was to not hire anyone younger than I myself was.

The Protectorate might not have a problem with ordering twelve year olds into combat, but I did.

“Yeah, she already healed my mom. She was going to have to get a kidney transplant and now she's ok.” This was said by a man in his early twenties.

I knew my grandfather was recruiting his own team, so I looked for people who had powers that seemed to break the parahuman limits.

The dockworker was a master of cold, able to cover himself in ice and turn himself into a brute. The limits of his powers hadn't yet been discovered, but experimentation outside of town showed that they were vast. I intended to work with him on innovative uses for his powers.

“I think I'm going to call you Frost,” I told him. “Parian has agreed to work with us on designing costumes that don't look like they are made by a Kindergartener. You'll all still need to wear masks when you see her though.”

As their employer I knew all of their identities, although they didn't know each others. I could have found out easily with telepathy even so, another reason that letting the world know I had that power wasn't smart.

The younger man could control the Earth, lifting masses of earth that even I or my grandfather might find daunting. I was particularly impressed with the versatility of his power. He was able to do things that weren't just about combat, things that could actually help the city.

“I'll call you Stone,” I said to him. He nodded and didn't complain. It was simple, descriptive, and best of all, it wasn't taken. Most of the simple names already were, given the sheer numbers of parahumans in the world.

Fortunately, many of them were foreigners with names in their own language, which did leave opportunities.

The third was a Latina woman. She had powers over the weather, something that could do a lot more for the world than just petty combat. I fully intended to use her for bringing water to parts of the country that were stricken by drought and for putting out fires.
My grandfather had agreed to me having my own team on the condition that I did everything possible to make mutants popular. His experiences on his own world had convinced him that labeling his own people as home superior had been a mistake. He needed mutants to be seen as heroes, and that meant neutralizing villains as quickly as possible and highlighting the good mutants could do.

“I'll call you Zephyr,” I said.

“Isn't that already taken?” she asked.

“There was a hero with the same name in Chicago,” I said. “But she didn't last very long. It's OK to reuse names as long as the last person wasn't too famous.”

“No Hero, or Legend, you mean,” Frost said.

“It's like retiring a number on a Jersey, a sign of respect,” I said. “Also, it'd be kind of hard to live up to a name like that anyway. You need to make the name your own.”

The strongest of the four people I'd selected was a sullen teenage girl. She could transmute one material to another in massive amounts and she could move things. Her powers had almost unlimited applications, and they would be tremendously useful in making the world a better place.

Unfortunately she had an attitude problem and she wasn't very educated. With my grandfather's brain she'd have been able to make anything, any tinker gadget or any other object over and over. She'd be able to feed nations if she understood what she was doing.

Right now she was limited by her imagination, which didn't seem particularly powerful, and her knowledge, which was similarly limited.

“I'm calling you Alchemy,” I said. “If you don't understand it, look it up.”

She gave me the finger, and for a moment I considered showing her why talking back to me was a mistake. However, making enemies this early wasn't a good idea, especially those that were this powerful.

I'd have to find a way to make her obey in private. Telepathy and Tattletale would probably be helpful.

So far my team consisted of these four, Panacea, my dad and Tattletale. The Protectorate had no idea that my grandfather and I were forming teams, and I had a feeling they wouldn't be happy when they found out.

They'd be even less happy when they found out that I intended to make money using them. There were laws intending to restrict parahumans from certain profession, rules that had to be skirted in order to make money using powers.

The fact that we'd be able to deliver services no one else could helped. Being able to deliver rain into drought starved reservoirs for example was a service that no judge would keep us from doing. I had my lawyer's assurance about that.

Confusing the lines between rogues and heroes wouldn't go over well either. Heroes were supposed to be above making money, and rogues weren't supposed to fight. It was an artificial distinction as far as I was concerned, one that I planned on breaking as soon as I could.

It wasn't that I needed the money, so much, although the lawsuits that were currently going toward
the Protectorate and my grandfather might one day fall toward me. It was that I wanted to make change, and seeing what had happened to Panacea, I saw that people didn't value things that were free.

The simple act of charging money for something gave it value, and I wanted my people's actions to be valued by the public and not taken for granted. We'd still do free things, but not often enough for them to be taken for granted.

We would also fight not to be seen as money grubbing, probably by donating heavily to charity. I had no doubt that the Protectorate would start defaming us in public, and I wanted to head that off before it gained any traction.

“So are we all going to get matching uniforms, like on that Earth Aleph movie?” Alchemy asked. She was staring at me challengingly.

“It's up to you and Parian. This isn't the Protectorate. I'm not going to make you pretend to be something you aren't just because it'll poll well with the 13-18 demographic.”

Alchemy relaxed as I said this.

“On the other hand, what you all are is something new, and it would be easy for people to start to be afraid of new things. Some people might start to argue that you aren't really parahumans, that you are just science experiments gone wrong. We want to head those people off at the pass, prove to the world that we are heroes no matter how we got our powers.”

“People can get ugly,” Alchemy said.

Her real name was Kelly Henderson, and her family had lost their home when people had set fire to it for reasons I didn't yet understand. What I did understand through the glimpses I saw in her head was that she had a strong need to prove herself, but an equally strong need to not be seen as weak.

“There's another member of the team,” I said. I gestured and the door to the Warehouse we were in opened.

Bitch stepped into the room, three of her dogs already grown to full size.

“These them?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Play nice.”

I could see the others already tensing.

“Isn't she a villain?” Frost asked.

“She was recently pardoned of her charges,” I said. “She's being given a second chance, helping train dogs for the Brockton Bay Police department and run an animal shelter. She has also graciously agreed to help me train you.”

“What do you think she can do to teach us?” Alchemy asked, sneering.

I glanced back at Bitch and nodded slightly.

She gave a little whistle and a gesture, and a moment later the dogs were rushing toward them.

“They won't kill you, but they'll make it hurt,” I said. “Let's see what you've got.”
“They're strong,” Bitch said. “But clumsy.”

Alchemy lay on the floor panting, covered in dog drool. She glared up at us and gave us both the finger.

Frost and the others weren't as overt about it, but I could tell that they weren't happy either. The warehouse was largely destroyed; pillars of earth had collapsed half of the building and ice was covering much of the other half.

“Why do you think I did that?” I asked.

“Because you're a bitch?” Alchemy asked.

“Because real fights are chaotic, and sometimes unexpected. You can train for martial arts with people who will dance with you and pretend to fight, but if you're in a real fight your partner isn't going to do any of the things you expect.”

“They drooled all over me!” Alchemy said.

“Whose fault is it that it's still on you?” I asked sweetly. “Considering that you can always turn it into something else.”

She blinked, and a moment later the drool melted away, turning into rose petals.

“That's the kind of thing that you have to learn. When people panic they tend to get stupid. It's like the primitive part of their brain takes over and they can't think. That's why panicked crowds are so dangerous; no one can think rationally.”

I hesitated. “The reason soldiers train like they do is so that when they panic and can't think they fall back on the training.... so that they do what needs to be done without even thinking about it. You saw how chaotic that just was; that's what real combat is like. Any one of you should have been able to stop all of her dogs easily; you have the power. What you need is the skills to go along with that power.”

“And you have the skills? From what I've heard you haven't been in that many fights where you didn't just curb stomp people because of your power.”

“I didn't curb stomp Leviathan,” I said. 'Which is why I know what I'm talking about. Don't think this training is going to be just for you. I'm going to be called on to fight Endbringers in the future, and if all I've fought is just people who can't resist me, I'm not going to do very well. Every one of you are people who have enough power to challenge me in one way or another. I need the practice as much as you do.”

Alchemy slumped back, nodding finally.

The funny thing was that I'd seen battles my grandfather had been involved with in his own world. I knew how chaotic they could be. I'd also seen how his enemy ran his team through a special room that put them through various scenarios they were likely to face.

I didn't have near the tinker budget to come up with something like that. I had no idea how they'd had the money to keep repairing robots on a weekly basis. What I did have was the ability to hire mercenaries to come in and train my team.

“I don't want to lose anyone,” I said, staring at them. “This isn't supposed to be like an Endbringer
fight where losing one person in four is a good day. I want you to be able to go back to your families and have them be happy that you are working for me.”

I scowled. “If we aren't better than the Protectorate, we might as well sign up with them. That's going to be our first rule... don't die. Our second rule is that we work together for the good of this city, for the good of other people like us, and for the good of the world.”

“In that order?” Frost asked.

“It depends on the day,” I said. “Hopefully the world thing won't come up that often, but you have to understand that it might. There's an Endbringer fight that's likely to come up soon, and some of you might choose to go. I want you to be as ready as possible.”

“You aren't going to order us to go?” Alchemy seemed a little anxious.

Considering that the next fight was likely to be the Simurgh, she had reason to be. Any one of the people in front of me could be a city destroyer if they were given the right motivation. The Simurgh excelled at providing that motivation.

Facing the Simurgh worried me a little; the thought of being turned against my friends and family wasn't an academic concern. I wasn't someone who could just be restrained and tasered and locked up inside a city wall with all of the other crazies.

If I turned, they'd have to do everything they could to kill me. There wasn't a facility in the world that could hold me. Even the Birdcage wouldn't be able to hold me because I could make portals.

“Nobody gets ordered to Endbringer fights,” I said. “That's why those people who do fight are heroes.”

Alchemy looked down at the floor and nodded. For once she didn't make a snide comment.

“It's possible that none of you will ever feel the need to go,” I said. “But I'm going to train you as though you will anyway. If you get strong enough to fight the Simurgh or Behemoth, then you are strong enough to take on any human supervillain.”

“So we can expect more sessions like this?” Zephyr asked.

I froze for a moment at the question. This was more than a training session. It was also a test to see if they were willing to follow me into dangerous situations. If they weren't willing to even bother with training I couldn't use them.

The thought occurred to me that they could all easily walk out of the room, and I'd be left with nothing.

I took a deep breath and nodded.

“Good,” Zephyr said. “I was afraid you'd just turn us in into show ponies, putting us out in front of people, but never doing anything that helps anyone.”

I smiled for the first time.

“I've got plans for all of you. Fighting isn't even the main reason I wanted you all here. There are things all of you can do that can make a difference in people's lives. I've gotten a contract with Strider that he'll help move us to sites where there are emergencies that we can help with.”
My grandfather's greatest enemy had traveled by some kind of jet. I had a mass teleporter on hand.

Suck on that Xavier.

One of my grandfather's greatest weaknesses had been that he'd hired people for their powers, or because they would bow down to him. He'd hired sociopaths and people who would stab each other in the back.

His enemies had worked together like a team, and at least in the memories that I had seen, they'd worked together smoothly. That was what I wanted; a group that was made up of good people who worked as one unified unit.

I was in talks with some parahumans who had once been in the military. Their powers weren't impressive, but their knowledge of group tactics was.

Tattletale was going to help me figure out all the things that were needed to have these people get along smoothly.

There was one thing that I didn't need her help for.

Groups tended to work best when they did a lot of things together. It was hard to remember an abstract principal like patriotism when people were shooting at you. At those times the tendency was to fight to protect the people who were standing beside you; and if you cared about them you tended to fight better.

“How does everyone feel about going out for a wings and a beer?” I asked.

Alchemy sat up quickly. “What?”

“Not me or you,” I said. “It sucks to be a teenager. It'll just be wings for us.”

She scowled.

“We're a little sweaty,” Zephyr said.

“There's showers set up in the back, men to the left, women to the right,” I said. “They're the temporary kind and fortunately nobody knocked down the walls on that side of the warehouse.”

Stone and Frost had the grace to look ashamed. I didn't tell them that the warehouse had been condemned and that knocking it down had been part of the plan all alone. I intended to build a state of the art headquarters here as soon as I got the money, something to make New Wave green with envy.

The Protectorate I had no intention of letting within a mile of my complex. As angry as they were with me they'd probably come up with a thousand reasons that the elevator wasn't up to code of something.

Building code violations were the death of a thousand cuts, and I had no intention of facing that again.
“My God,” Jacob said. He felt a sudden crushing weight of despair as he realized that he and all the men who had become his family over the past five years were going to die.

Flames surrounded them, and even through their fire resistant clothing the heat was almost like a living thing. It was getting hard to breathe or even see.

Their last avenue of escape had just vanished, as a burning tree had exploded and fallen, blocking them off from the cool unburned area on the other side. All it had taken was a sudden shift of the wind for their safety zone to vanish in the space of a moment.

Jacob looked around quickly. There wasn’t any ditches or depressions to lie in, and this area hadn’t been cleared yet of the massive amount of underbrush that a hundred years of bad fire control policies had let build up.

The sound of the fire was deafening. It was hard to hear the others as they tried to shout suggestions for getting out.

He could see the knowledge in their eyes that this was the one that was going to end them.

Jacob suddenly found himself regretting all the things he hadn’t said to his family, all the things he hadn’t yet gotten to do. He knew these men's families, and he regretted the thought that there would be nine funerals.

Still, he wasn't dead yet, and he owed it to all of them to do everything he could to survive, no matter how unlikely it was to work.

Jacob scrambled to set up one of the emergency shelters, the last ditch protection of the hotshot crew. He knew though that it wasn't going to help. It was always a crapshoot using the shelters; set them up too early and the heat inside became suffocating. Deploy too late, and the fire was on top of you.

Lying on the ground underneath the shelters, a hundred percent of the heat from the flames and ninety five percent of the radiant heat would be blocked.

It didn't matter, though. These flames were burning hot enough that they'd cook before they passed.

He’d heard that there were tinkertech versions that worked better, but they were too expensive to be handed out to the usual fire crews. Only parahumans had access, as though they needed it.

Jacob had never seen a parahuman lift a finger to help common people.

He scowled and muttered a short prayer, not for himself, but for his family. It was the greatest fear of every firefighter, leaving family behind to grieve unprotected.

The sound of the fire suddenly faded away to nothing, and the heat vanished as well. Jacob looked up, and he saw a group of people wearing black leather with H's on their armband. The outfits weren't Protectorate, but they were obviously well made.

“It looks like you need some help,” a gawky teenager said. She was staring out at the fire like she'd never seen one before. She was the only one not wearing a costume. She looked familiar, but it took Jacob a moment to place her.
Taylor Hebert, the Endslayer.

People were talking about her like she was the next Eidolon, except that she'd accomplished what even Eidolon, Legend and Alexandria together hadn't. He'd seen speculation about her powers and about how she was going to do against the other Endbringers.

The one thing that was clear was that she was powerful, and everyone seemed certain that she meant well, even if she was sometimes a little clumsy and tended to cut the limbs off of villains.

Considering the extent of the fire, Jacob wasn't willing to be picky.

Jacob glanced at the other members of his crew, all of whom had frozen in their frenzied effort to lay down shelters.

“Zephyr,” Hebert said. “I'll protect you. Take care of it.”

A Hispanic woman nodded curtly. She raised her arms, and suddenly she was in the air. A moment after that the formerly cloudless sky began to roil.

The flames that were battering along the outside of what had to be Hebert's force shield suddenly shifted in the opposite direction as the winds suddenly turned in the opposite direction.

“Who are you?” he asked the others.

Hebert was staring up at the other woman and didn't seem to hear him.

A teenager scowled. “We haven't picked a name yet. Nobody liked the name I picked, so I guess we're Team Hebert for now.”

“Alchemy?” Hebert asked without looking. “Please don't make any more Twilight references. It tends to give adults headaches.”

The girl scowled.

“Also, you're up.” Hebert said without looking at them. She seemed to be concentrating on the Hispanic woman in the sky, presumably protecting her with some sort of force field, because without protective clothing even reflective heat would have been like being in an oven.

Alchemy nodded and walked to the edge of the force field. She put her hand against it, and Jacob could suddenly feel some of the heat returning.

A moment later the burning underbrush outside the force field rippled and changed into something else, something red and foamy.

It looked a lot like the fire retardant foam that got dropped from helicopters, even though there was rarely enough of that to make much of a difference. The changes were spreading out in every direction, though, moving outward as fast as Jacob could run. He could only stare.

A moment later it was raining, water pouring down in such a torrent that the steam misted against the walls of the force shield and no one could see anything.

He looked up and saw that the Hispanic woman had her hand's raised, and the sky was suddenly dark with clouds. Water was pounding against the force field, which he could now see was a large dome.

It would take a flood to actually stop a fire this size, but that seemed to be what this parahuman was
trying to provide.

“Thank you,” Jacob said to Taylor Hebert. “I wasn't sure we were going to make it.”

She looked back at him and shrugged. “It's what we're here for, right? Parahumans shouldn't be out fighting each other; they should be out helping people and making the world a better place.”

Jacob stared at her for a moment. That wasn't the impression he'd gotten from the Protectorate “heroes” who tended to stay in their ivory towers, only emerging for the occasional villain fights or press junkets.

He'd even gotten into bar room arguments with other members of his team about parahumans; some of them were fans.

“Even with all the water, there's going to be hot spots that may turn into fire when everything dries out,” he said.

There was with every fire, which was why crews had to go back out and check for every ember. A lot of times there were layers of unburnt materials that could burn for a long time before suddenly restarting a blaze.

“Don't worry,” she said. “We've got it covered. Frost?”

The rain vanished as suddenly as it came. Jacob felt like protesting. Despite the force of the rain, it hadn't been nearly enough time to cover everything.

A large, muscular man stepped forward and lifted his hand.

The rain on the ground turned to ice, spreading as fast as a fast car.

Ice and snow tended to work a lot better at stopping fires. Jacob stared at the group in front of him. Who were these people?

A moment later the force field vanished, and steam hit him in the face. The humidity was massive.

The forest around them had turned into a winter wonderland, and Jacob spared a moment to wonder how many trees would be killed by the frost. Fortunately summer hadn't started and many of the trees hadn't gotten all of their leaves yet.

They meant well, at least, which was more than he could say about most parahumans.

Jacob forced himself to smile. He knew he wasn't thinking clearly yet, his mind overwhelmed by adrenaline. Once he crashed, he'd crash hard.

A man wearing a blue and black uniform with a cap suddenly appeared. He looked around, then tapped his watch.

“Well, gotta go,” Alchemy said. “People to save and heroing to do. No rest for the wicked.”

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It was too late to run.

People had gotten a little complacent since Leviathan had left, forgetting that mother nature could sometimes cause almost as much damage.
Saito stared at the wall of water coming toward them, and while the people around him on the beach were starting to run, he knew that it wouldn't matter. He'd been in Japan when Leviathan had struck, and he knew what a wall of water like that meant.

A woman suddenly obstructed his view of the water. She was tall for her age, and she was an occidental; possibly European or American.

She looked up at the approaching wave and shook her head. She said something to other people who stepped forward.

A muscular man stepped forward, and the waters along the shore suddenly exploded with pillars of stone, pillars that were growing together like crystal to form barricades forty foot thick.

Another man stepped forward, and ice began to spread behind the barricades, creating massive buttresses that stretched for the entirety of the three miles of beach in both directions.

Saito wasn't sure that it was going to be enough, but he felt a sudden sense of hope. He didn't know who these Gaijin were, although the girl looked somewhat familiar. Possibly she was some kind of western pop star.

What mattered was that they were here to help.

He glanced behind him and saw that other members of his community had stopped and were staring back at the scene in front of him.

The first girl raised her arms, and Saito suddenly felt himself being pulled forward slightly, as though gravity itself had changed direction.

He struggled to keep his feet, when a young looking teenager put her hand on his shoulder and steadied him. She smiled at him.

A low thrum filled the air, so low that it made his teeth hurt, and suddenly he saw the air ripple as something exploded from the girl's hands, heading in the direction of the wave, which was still growing higher.

For a moment it looked as though it hadn't had an effect.

However, the wave began to collapse on itself the moment afterward, although sheer momentum continued to push it forward.

The gawky looking westerner raised her hands again, and again there was a burst of sound that made Saito feel the fillings in his teeth. Again, the tidal wave collapsed a little more.

Again and again she did it. By the time the wave struck the barrier it had collapsed into a chaotic mess, but it still had the weight of millions or billions of tons of water.

The sound of the water hitting the wall and the cracking as the wall was strained made Saito hold his breath for a moment.

The wall held.

The westerners looked at each other and grinned. A moment later they were gone.

Saito stared at the remains of the beach and wondered who was going to remove the barriers. The beach had been a major tourist attraction, a source of income for his small village of Japanese
transplants.

Well, at least they weren't dead.

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“She’s been stumbling all over the world like a bull in a china closet, and you’ve been helping her. That’s going to stop now,” Renick said.

Strider shook his head. “My contract specifically says that I'm allowed to use my powers in the case of emergencies, even if it's to help people or groups outside of the Protectorate.”

“You can't seriously consider this to be a charitable cause. They're paying you!”

“I've made more money in the past two weeks than my salary with the Protectorate for the past two years,” Strider said.

“You are accepting money from the enemy. That's going to get you in serious hot water,” Renick said.

“It's all aboveboard. I had it checked out by Protectorate lawyers before I signed it.”

“And they agreed to it?” Renick asked incredulously.

“They seemed to think it would help to encourage inter-agency cooperation. Your team in Brockton Bay works with New Wave regularly.”

“New Wave is a bunch of heroes, not a bunch of jumped up mercenaries.”

“You don't think the drought in the southwest was an emergency?” Strider asked.

Renick shook his head. “They charged money to cities to fill their reservoirs.”

“Money that went to Hebert's charity,” Strider said.

“That she administers as she sees fit, without any oversight,” Renick said. “It's another way for her to try to create a cult of personality around herself.”

“I think you've got her wrong,” Strider said. “I've spent a couple of weeks with her, and she really does seem to want to help people.”

“By creating ecological disasters everywhere she goes?” Renick asked.

“By saving people's lives,” Strider said. “People complain, sure, but they complain about everything. They used to complain that Panacea wasn't healing people enough, or that Narwhale was running around nude even though nobody could see anything.”

“Panacea is still working with Hebert, even though she has been warned to avoid that whole family.”

“She's not doing anything with her grandfather, and he seems to be the dangerous one, the biotinker,” Strider said. “Everything she's built has been standard tinker fare, and she hasn't even built anything in the last few weeks.”

“This whole thing is a headache,” Renick said. “Dealing with Hebert and all the freaks who are coming out of the woodwork means that this promotion was a punishment and not a reward.”
“I’m sure you’ll do a great job,” Strider said.

Renick scowled. “I don’t need a suck up. I need people who will actually do their damn jobs and stop consorting with the enemy.”

“Are you sure you are seeing the right enemy?” Strider asked. “I get the impression that Taylor seems to be as worried about her grandfather as you are. Have you ever considered trying to ally the Protectorate with her?”

“We’ve tried,” Renick said. “Nothing seems to convince her that we aren’t out to get her.”

“The fact that we’ve rotated new faces here and rotated others out might help,” Strider said. “And having individual Capes making friends with her and her crew on a one on one basis might be easier to sell than trying to get her to accept the organization.”

Renick stared at him witheringly. “Is that how you sleep at night? Thinking that you are taking dirty money hand over fist and that you are actually helping the Protectorate?”

“You don’t think I am?”

“Her grandfather has caused more damage to the reputation of this agency than any supervillain in history, including the Slaughterhouse Nine. We are losing membership because people are blaming us for this whole mess here.”

“That’s her grandfather,” Strider said. “I’ve never agreed to work for him, and I kind of agree with you that he’s an enemy. Taylor isn’t her grandfather, though. For all her power she's still an impressionable young girl, even though she likes to pretend that she's a lot more mature than she really is.”

“Can you at least agree to give us any actionable intelligence about her and her group?”

“I signed an NDA,” Strider said, looking apologetic. “It has a rider that I am allowed to break the agreement in cases where not revealing information would be dangerous to people.”

“Her group is dangerous!” Rennick barked. “Our thinkers have only gotten partial samples of the formula that they used to cause all this chaos, and they think that he deliberately engineered it to create as many parahumans with very strong powers, even though that also meant the risk of worse physical mutations in everyone else.”

“He’s gearing up for the Endbringers,” Strider said. “Of course he doesn't want weak Capes.”

“That team of Hebert's... every member has the potential to be top tier, maybe even Triumvirate level. That's not just a statistical aberration. They were chosen to be able to do the most damage to us, to send a message that Hebert isn't to be trifled with.”

“After what happened to Lung do you really think she needs to send that kind of message?” Strider asked. “You are stuck in thinking about the last war. Even Alexandria needs to breathe, and powers don't work out in space. Is there a cape in the world that she couldn't curb stomp, except maybe Masters?”

Strider shook his head and he stood up.

“The mistake you are making is thinking that she cares about the Protectorate, that she wants to damage us somehow. I can tell you that the Protectorate barely even crosses her mind. She's focused on the Endbringers and her grandfather, and on making the world a better place once the
Endbringers are gone.”

“You're a fool if you think this isn't a PR stunt to win people over,” Renick said.

“It might be,” Strider said. “But not by Taylor. I think her grandfather might be playing some kind of long game, one that requires that the Protectorate be out of the way.”

“And you are helping her make us look like fools?”

“I'm helping her help us to become better. Did you know that the Phoenix Branch is helping in a Mexico earthquake, Alaska branch is helping to rescue some Russian sailors in a submarine, and at least four branches are helping put out forest fires?”

“Those things aren't what we were chartered to do.”

“Everybody who joined the Protectorate wanted to be a hero at some point in their lives. Heroes help people,” Strider said. “It's just a pity that it took a fifteen year old girl to remind us of that.”
“Melbourne Australia is gone,” Tattletale said. She grimaced. “One of the tourists, a new mutants attacked Scion when he tried to rob a bank. It didn't go as well as he'd hoped.”

I stared at her, horrified.

“Scion is moving on, attacking other cities in Australia,” Tattletale said. “The Protectorate is mobilizing, and everyone expects you and your grandfather to attend.”

“Can Dinah see anything?”

“Scion is mostly immune to thinker powers, although we can see what happens to the people around him.”

“Ripples in a pond,' I muttered. “Crap. We were supposed to have another couple of years at least.”

“The mutant apparently injured Scion more than he expected, which alarmed him into starting the endgame early,” Tattletale said. She scowled. “I doubt there's anywhere on earth that will be safe, and I doubt that being out in space will be that much protection either.”

I’d told her about Cauldron, of course, both her and Dinah, hoping that together they would be able to find a solution to the Scion problem. So far their investigations had proven fruitless.

Suddenly, wasting Dinah's answers on people who were paying for them seemed like a foolish choice. I should have put them on Scion duty full time.

I should have spent more time thinking about how to deal with Scion instead of how to deal with my grandfather. It likely had happened because I couldn't think of anything to do to Scion, while my grandfather was someone who I could at least understand.

“Call the team together. Explain that they aren't obligated to go, but tell them what the likely outcome is if Scion isn't destroyed. Call every powerful mutant that we looked into, even the ones that didn't want anything to do with us.”

I shook my head. None of it was likely to matter. My team was composed of the strongest mutants that I'd been able to find that were willing to work with us. The others were strong, but none of them would be strong enough to take on Scion alone.

I doubted that even as a group any of us would be able to work against Scion. I'd seen the simulations from Cauldron, the confidential estimations of his true strength. He'd designed parahuman powers not to be a threat to him, and while mutant abilities weren't under the same restrictions his powers would still be almost impossible to beat.

His body wasn't even his real body. It was just a small part of his body projected onto the world. He looked like he was regenerating quickly because he shifted undamaged parts of his body to whatever Earth he'd hidden his body on.

He was like the Midgard serpent, a massive creature covering an entire planet. It would take massive amounts of damage to destroy all of him. It would take more damage than anyone was capable of, and in the meantime he would be destroying cities.

Cauldron knew all of this, but they didn't know which dimension he was hiding in. Apparently their
clairvoyant could see anyone in any dimension, but not him.

He could kill us all he wanted, but none of us were going to be able to get to the real him.

We were going to have to find out if there were any thinkers among the mutants; in retrospect it should have been my first priority. They wouldn't have the artificially imposed limits parahumans had, and they might have insights that we could use.

If they were any good they were probably on their way already. They'd know that no place was safe.

“I'm going to need Dad to organize the mutants. He's got a massive ability to multitask, and he'll be able to separate them out into usable categories. My guess is that Scion hasn't figured out that Brockton Bay is the mutant epicenter yet. Once he does, he'll be coming here.”

Tattletale paled a little.

A doorway opened in space. I wasn't surprised. Cauldron had to be having fits about this; it was the nightmare they'd spent decades preparing for.

“Get everything ready, and I'll have them send a door for you. I don't doubt that they'll have a lot of thinkers holed up in their extradimensional space.”

I hesitated. “Call Uber and Leet and tell them it's time. Code Omega Red.”

That was at least one thing I'd actually done right. I hadn't been using Uber and Leet much lately because I'd given them an unlimited budget to build every Scion buster they could imagine up. While it was certainly possible that nothing we had would work, we had to try.

I stepped through the portal and into the white room. My grandfather was already there, waiting. I ignored my minor irritation that they'd picked him up before they'd picked me.

The Triumvirate was there, looking grim. So was a woman in a Fedora, another woman and several people I didn't know.

In the corner was a little girl I immediately recognized.

Bonesaw.

The little girl waved cheekily at me, and I was tempted to rip her skeleton out before anyone could do anything.

My grandfather put his hand on my arm and shook his head slightly. Apparently he'd been able to feel what I was about to do.

“We're going to need her before this is all over,” the woman in the fedora said. “We've got her under control.”

“It's our funeral,” I said. “I'm going to have my people gathering mutant thinkers; hopefully they won't have the same restrictions parahumans do, and they might be able to give us what we need.”

What we really needed was Scion's home address. If we had that we could take the fight to him and do some real damage instead of him fighting by proxy from the safety of his own dimension.

The others nodded. For once there wasn't any condescension in anyone's expressions. All I saw was
worry and tension in the set of everyone's shoulders. Even my grandfather looked tense. Presumably there were mutants on some of the parallel worlds who hadn't died out and Scion planned on killing all of them.

“I'll have Uber and Leet bringing in the weapons they've been building,” I said. “For what good they are going to do.”

“We've picked up a new bomb tinker, recently triggered,” Alexandria said. “If it's possible to set her up in Leet's lab that would be very helpful.”

“You don't have a lab set up for her?”

“She just triggered, and from what we know, the equipment we've tracked going into Leet's lab is the best suited for her talents.”

I'd thought I'd been discreet in the equipment I'd had shipped to their lab; I'd had it shipped through several proxies before being sent out to the old refugee camp. Apparently Cauldron was better at tracking things than I'd thought.

I spared a moment to be bitter that they hadn't bothered to use those skills against the Slaughterhouse Nine or against the gangs in Brockton Bay. However, from their viewpoint anything that made new cannon fodder to throw into the final battle, the better.

My guess was that their only regret about the mutant formula being released wasn't that it had been used, but rather that it hadn't been released worldwide.

If we'd had thirty million mutants like my grandfather's world had once had, we might have stood a chance.

I pulled out a memory stick and handed it to Alexandria. “This is a list of the two hundred mutants I interviewed before selecting my team. None of them are as strong as mine, but some of them have unique talents, and some of those might be useful.”

Some of them had personality problems that had made them inappropriate for my team, but that didn't matter at the moment. We had Bonesaw on our team, and nobody was even blinking.

“I've investigated many of the others,’ My grandfather said. “And I have an idea of exactly who we will need.”

“Get your list to Doormaker, and we'll gather them together. Do you have a strategy in mind other than just throw people at him and watch the bloodbath?”

“I have been thinking about how to deal with him since I've been back on my feet,” my grandfather said. “But I haven't been able to come up with any foolproof plans.”

He must have been more agitated than I thought, because I could feel regret in his mind. A stray thought about not knowing how to build something called an Ultimate Nullifier passed through his mind.

“There's a risk we may have to take, certain items from my homeworld that we may have to acquire.”

“We've discussed this. Letting those robots onto our world is a recipe for disaster,” the woman in the fedora said. “I'm not sure any artifact is worth that.”
“I would not allow those abominations onto any world inhabited by humans, much less mutants,” my grandfather said. “But there are artifacts on my world that are much more powerful than anything your world has ever known. My people were used to dealing with Entities even more powerful than Scion.”

“Give us the information and we'll see what we can do. It sounds risky,” Alexandria said.

“If we lose this, all the worlds will be destroyed,” my grandfather said. “Are you not the ones who said no risk is too great?”

Reluctantly they nodded.

My grandfather gestured and a face appeared on the screen on the wall behind them.

“I will need this man,” he said.

“Who is he?” the woman in the fedora asked.

I didn't recognize him, and from what I could tell, none of the others did either. He certainly wasn't one of the few parahumans who had public personas.

“Major Ellis Bell,” my grandfather said.

“Is he a parahuman?” Alexandria asked.

“He's not even a mutant,” my grandfather said. “But he is crucial to my plans nonetheless.”

“Is there something special about him?” I asked, confused. As far as I'd been able to tell, people who weren't mutants really didn't rate in my grandfather's considerations unless they somehow were impeding him.

“He's an actual good man,” my grandfather said. He had a wistful smile. “Surprisingly, that's something that is even rarer on your Earth than it was on mine. He also once attempted to lure Leviathan away from an Endbringer shelter, attempting to sacrifice himself to save the life of many others.”

Alexandria snapped her fingers. “I remember him. I saved him from that. It was incredibly brave and foolish for a man armed with a rifle to attack Leviathan.”

“He knew what he was doing,” My grandfather said. His voice had a degree of certainty to it. “This is a man who reminds me of another soldier from my time, one who surprised me with the purity of his heart.”

“We can get him,” Alexandria said, glancing at the others. “If he is who you say he is, he won't resist.”

My grandfather hesitated. “There is another thing that might help.”

“Anything. This is for our survival.”

“There was a drug in my home world. It was created from a sentient virus that was actively attempted to destroy my kind. However, Panacea was able to create a non-sentient variant.”

“What does it do?”

“It enhances powers,” my grandfather said. “By an amount of up to five times?”
Eidolon leaned forward, his face suddenly flushed. “Why haven't you told us about this before?”

“It's highly addictive, and in large doses can cause psychosis. Worse, it can irreparably damage its users powers.”

“Would it work on parahumans?” Eidolon asked.

Magneto shook his head regretfully. “Mutants only, I'm afraid.”

An inhaler floated out of his pocket and toward me. I looked at it as though it was a venomous snake, but I eventually took it.

I'd seen how addictive my own father's powers had been, and imagining my own being that way caused an instinctive surge of revulsion.

“There is another device that can increase a mutant's powers a thousandfold,” My grandfather said. “But it leads to uncontrollable power incontinence and eventual death. I will hold off on using it until it becomes apparent we have no other choice.”

“I have a plan,” my grandfather said. “Get the right people in place and we will win this.”

“I wish we had your enthusiasm,” the woman in the fedora said. “But there isn't any clear Path to this, and we understand that your track record in your homeworld was less than stellar.”

“My track record as a hero was much better,” my grandfather said. “And what could be more heroic than this. I'm not going to lose another world.”

They nodded.

The others didn't have much to add., and the remaining discussion lasted less than five minutes. Apparently their own plans were already set and didn't involve us. As soon as it became obvious that there was nothing more to be said, my grandfather said, “Gather the thinkers here, and send us any information that you manage to glean. We will use that information to modify our strategy on the fly.”

“Send us to Danny Hebert,” he said.

The others were already turning away from us, busy at whatever tasks they were going to be involved in during the final battle.

A moment later we were through a doorway which appeared where we had originally stepped in.

I blinked in surprise as I saw my father lying inside what seemed to be an Endbringer shelter that had been abandoned. Three barely pubescent girls were standing around him.

“You understand what you are going to do?” my grandfather asked the girls. He didn't bother looking at me or explaining anything that was going on. He seemed focused and precise.

“Amplify and project,” one of the girls said in a monotone.

He nodded. He reached out and touched my father's forehead, and my father began to convulse. I stepped forward, but by the time I did, it was over.

“What did you do?” I asked, racing to my father's side.

“I've given him my tactical knowledge,” my grandfather said. “A copy anyway. He'll need it for
what's to come."

My father opened his eyes. “Is this really going to work?”

Had my father and grandfather been planning all of this behind my back? While I'd been conspiring about how to take my grandfather down, had he kept focused on the real threat and had been working on solutions?

It shocked me that my father was in my grandfather's confidence, even enough to be a part of his plans on saving the world.

“It will work,” my grandfather said.

He handed the girls an inhaler each. Each hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath of the drug.

Their bodies stiffened and their pupils expanded to an amazing degree. They each put a hand on my father, and a moment later I fell to the floor as I felt my father's mind rolling over my own. It was as though I had no will of my own, as though I was part of something vastly greater than I was.

My grandfather placed a helmet on my head, a copy of his. I had no idea of how long it had been.

“What just happened?” I asked faintly.

“Each of the girls acts as a telepathic amplifier, able to increase a signal by a factor of twenty five.”

“So what does that even mean.”

“With the Kick, each of them multiplies your father's power by a hundred and twenty five times in turn. Together they increase his power by a factor of almost two million.”

His range had already been fairly large. I tried to do the math in my head, but it was still ringing from being controlled.

“It’s strong enough to control not just every animal on earth, but every parahuman, every mutant, and every human,” my grandfather said. “In this moment, the entire world will finally act as a single organism, a group mind for as long as the drug lasts. The girls will keep taking the medication until they physically no longer cannot.”

Until they died or went insane, apparently.

“They are volunteers,” my grandfather said.

All of them were Vista's age; how could they consent to anything? Of course considering that failure meant the deaths of everyone they loved, it probably hadn't been a hard decision.

I had a moment of confusion. If they were able to enhance powers that much, why not enhance my powers or my grandfathers?

“It only enhances telepathic abilities,” my grandfather said without looking at me. I had my helmet on, so he presumably couldn’t look directly into my mind. “And yes, despite common lore on this world, your father's abilities are telepathic.”

I felt the inhaler in my pocket. Would I make the same decision?

If it came down to it, I wouldn't have a choice. Better addiction of losing powers than the death of
my entire planet and all of humanity.

“Why not us?” I asked.

“We've got another role to play.” My grandfather said. He looked down at me. “We are not cannon fodder.”

“Is my father going to be safe?”

“This will be a signal bounced from person to person. I cannot predict what powers Scion has, but he will at least be as safe as every other person in the world.”

In other words, he wouldn’t be safe at all.

“Do we have a chance?” I asked my grandfather.

“If I was forced to rely on a single plan I would doubt it,” my grandfather said. “But I have four or five plans. The odds of at least one of them working are better than doing nothing at all.”

Somehow I didn't feel particularly reassured.

“It's time to fight,” he said.
“How in the hell did you let this happen?” I snapped at my grandfather. “Letting one of the mutants attack Scion?”

I’d held my tongue throughout the meeting with Cauldron because one of the things I’d learned from his memories was that you always put up a united front against the opposition. While I’d spent a lot of time thinking of my grandfather as the greatest threat around, Cauldron was second on my list.... after Scion of course.

After all, unlike the Protectorate, they actually had people who might be able to kill both of us and they had no qualms about doing anything that helped bring them closer to their goals.

“I designed the formula to give the maximum power to the maximum number of people,” he said. “Because I knew this was going to happen sooner or later. Unfortunately, the people of this world aren’t particularly stable.”

“After years of Endbringers attacking, I wonder why?” I asked sarcastically.

“My people weren’t always stable either,” he admitted. “But they didn't give up hope. Your Endbringers attack a few times a year, but my world was always under attack.”

I scowled at him. His people had died in the end, and I didn't like the look in his eyes that said he suspected that might happen here.

“Still, attacking Scion. Was he suicidal?”

“Power is heady,” my grandfather said. “He was admittedly one of the more powerful of my mutants, but I flagged him as being unstable.”

“And you didn't stop him?”

“I can't unmake his powers,” he said. “What other options were there? Send him to the Birdcage because I thought he looked unstable?”

I looked down. People were moving below us in an intricate dance, more like schools of fish than people. It was strange and off putting to see them move like that. My father was doing what he could to get them out of the city, because our mutant thinkers were telling us that this was where Scion would attack next.

He'd already devastated Australia, focusing on the major cities and ignoring the interior deserts and less inhabited places. From what I’d heard he almost seemed to take a vindictive pleasure in drawing the whole thing out, although that could simply be people anthropomorphizing him.

“He's dead now, though, right?” I asked.

“Regrettably,” he said. At my look, he said, “He was powerful enough to hurt Scion enough to trigger him to... all of this. The only reason for that would be that he decided that mutants were a bigger threat than whatever new information he could get from us.”

“Which meant that his power was particularly effective,” I said. “What could he do exactly?”

Before he could reply, we were interrupted by Dragon's voice on our coms. Somehow she'd
managed to avoid being controlled by my father the way every other person on the plant had been.

It was eerie. The airwaves should have been filled with chatter, panicked people crying out for help, others asking for advice or for status update. Instead there was only radio silence, broken up by Dragon.

It was the same way all across the world. All of the radio stations had gone silent, all of the television stations, the Internet. Today no one needed anything other than their own minds, and they were all fleeing the cities of the world, in hopes that Scion would find it harder to kill people when they weren't bunched up and easy to kill.

It should have led to traffic jams as people ran into each other, to fights, to looting, all the usual things that happened when people panicked and lost sight of the real objective.

Instead in cities all across the world people were moving out of the cities in a perfectly ordered fashion. They were scattering into the countryside, nobody clumping up for fear of being a target.

People who didn't have cars were getting into the cars of perfect strangers without question and without argument. The sick were being moved as well as they could, with only those who were completely unable to move remaining, watched over by people who would have helped anyway.

If Scion destroyed the world it wouldn't matter, but if there was a world to come back to, there was hope that he wouldn't be interested in empty cities.

“He's finished with Australia,” she said. “He's stopped by several cities since then, but he seemed disappointed to find them deserted. He's now making a beeline for Brockton Bay. His estimated time of arrival is two minutes.”

I glanced at my grandfather and grimaced. I suddenly wondered whether we should be floating above the city, obvious targets.

It occurred to me suddenly why we were. The longer we kept Scion occupied, the more time people had to evacuate. It made sense; this was the home of most of his mutants and these were the people I'd sworn to protect.

I could see a golden glow on the horizon, and it took me a moment to realize what was happening.

“Crap,” I said. “He's here.”

He was glowing like the sun, and he looked every bit like a superhero. For a moment I let myself think that it had all been a dream, that he really hadn't turned against us.

For a moment he stared at us, stopping almost a mile away. He floated closer slowly.

People were still being evacuated, so we needed to stall for time, even though Scion had never been known to speak to anyone.

My grandfather floated closer to him, and I followed.

I'd have expected him to make some kind of grand proclamation, like I'd seen him make in his memories.

Instead he simply stared at Scion for a moment before saying, “This will not end well for you.”

Scion didn't look as though he'd heard him; he simply looked around, obviously aware that people
were rapidly leaving the city, but confused about their unnatural movements.

“Leave this world alone, and you will be allowed to live,” my grandfather said. “Otherwise, we will end you.”

Scion looked at me and my grandfather, and for a moment I could almost swear that he smirked.

Before either of us could react energy exploded downward, striking the center of the city. I was blinded and thrown back head over heels as light and pressure washed over me.

He hadn't even struck me directly, simply lashed out at the city below us and the Earth itself had collapsed. The crater was at least fifty feet deep and the sky was blotted out by the detritus from the explosion.

There had been still people remaining in the city, even with everything my father could do. He himself had been hidden somewhere away from any cities, showing that my grandfather had anticipated even this.

Still, I felt a sudden rage. I'd spent months trying to fix this city, to protect it's people. My father had spent years.

He'd destroyed a massive chunk of it without even a thought, as though we weren't anything more than bugs to be swatted.

My grandfather was already sending a swarm of metal pellets toward him. I grabbed every piece of metal I could as well and started throwing it toward Scion.

He was fast, and somehow even though my grandfather had better control of his metal than I did, Scion was fast enough not to be hit.

Or maybe he was precognitive enough to know where not to be.

Simply because mutants could see him and his future didn't mean they couldn't be seen. It was like the Simurgh fights that I'd seen, where she'd been impossible to hit. My grandfather had told me that the times she had been hit she'd been faking.

Scion wasn't faking now. Even though none of the metal was likely to be doing any damage to him, he avoided them anyway.

Apparently being hurt by whatever that mutant had done to him had scared him.

A moment later there was another blinding flash of light and my grandfather went flying over the horizon. That left me alone facing Scion.

Crap.

Panic gave me strength, and I pulled every piece of metal I could find in the city, lashing out with a cloud of metal that covered the horizon. It surprised me that there was this much, and it surprised me even more that I could control so much of it. I hadn't even taken my grandfather's dangerous drug.

A beam of light slashed out at me, but I was warned at the last minute by the slightest change in his expression. I dodged, and the beam went straight by me.

I almost shrieked as I realized I could feel something crawling under my clothes.

Insects, not many, but they were apparently distributed on my body and I hadn't even noticed. I felt
one craw on my right shoulder, and instinctively I dodged to the left.

It was my father!

He didn't just control all of the normal people in the world, he had control over the thinkers that Cauldron hadn't stolen, and some of the mutant thinkers could see Scion as easily as he saw us.

I dodged left, warned by my father's bugs, and the ickiness suddenly didn't bother me anymore. I couldn't hear him in my head, but this was a way he could still be with me in spite of that.

I counterattacked, and I could feel my grandfather coming back over the horizon at a high rate of speed. Every piece of metal I could find shot toward Scion like he was the black hole. He was fast enough to avoid some of them, but not all of them. There were tens of thousands of pieces, after all.

I knew how to make a black hole, but even with the danger to the Earth I doubted it would work. He'd simply not be there when I made it, and he might even shove me inside. It's what I would have done.

Only the fact that it was my power moving me, and not my human reaction time saved me from being blasted in the face. My grandfather told me that I most likely had better than human reaction time, even though I'd never really noticed it.

This was putting all that to a test. I felt pain as I wrenched my body downward, avoiding being blasted again.

I couldn't keep it up forever; even though my body was inside my shield, the movements I was having to make were putting a lot of g-forces on my body. I was probably injuring myself every time I dodged.

My grandfather was suddenly there beside me.

“Fighting a girl?” my grandfather asked. “Pick on someone your own size.”

A moment later the earth beneath us exploded upwards, and I stared, flabbergasted.

Forty five feet tall, with gray leathery skin covered in cooled magma, one of my worst nightmares stood on the location where Winslow had once been standing. Behemoth roared, and a moment later a blast of light almost as powerful as Scion's blasted upward, taking Scion by surprise.

I could hear a shriek, and I saw the Simurgh flying overhead. She was launching buildings at Scion, masonry that I couldn't easily affect. She was even lifting blasts of water to blast him.

Another creature I couldn't recognize exploded from the ground. He was smaller than Behemoth, but bigger than Leviathan. He had features like leaves or fins.

My grandfather was suddenly beside me.

“It's time to go,” he said. “this one affects time.”

Before I could respond, he yanked me away, pulling me to the edge of the city. Scion was battling the three Endbringers, and I saw more and more of them attacking him.

I hadn't realized there were so many; no one had ever seen most of them before.

It suddenly occurred to me. My father was controlling them, his power strong enough to control even Endbringers.
There was a flash of light and I realized that Scion had just torn Behemoth apart.

“Why aren't we helping them?” I asked.

He glanced at me, and I saw him let a small device drop from his hand. It shot toward the combat.

“Do you think your father could really fight the way he should if he was worried about your survival?” he asked. “Besides, should we win this, having the Endbringers gone will make the world a better place.”

“What did you just do?” I asked.

He'd sent the device flying to the combat, avoiding all of the Endbringers at superhuman speed. I could feel it hit Scion and then disappear as he regenerated.

My grandfather smirked. “We've got him.”

“Package delivery confirmed,” Dragon said. “The location has been determined.”

I blinked, my mind suddenly racing. Scion rotated parts of himself back to the greater whole once he'd been injured. If whatever device he'd just launched was back in Scion's home dimension, it was possible that it could be tracked even if he himself couldn't.

The Clairvoyant and the Doormaker never forgot a dimension either.

“It's not taking him as long to finish them off as I thought,” my grandfather said dispassionately. “It's time to go.”

I nodded.

A moment later a doorway appeared behind us and my grandfather pulled me inside.

“There are weapons being prepared,” he said quickly. “But it is going to take time. In the meantime I have to ask you to do everything you can to survive. He will be here in a moment and we can't afford to be separated in case he decides to take us on individually.”

The bugs inside of my clothes suddenly took off. We were apparently out of my father's range, something that worried me more than a little. His warnings had been all that had kept me from being hit.

We were on another world. I could smell ash in the air, and the skies were red. The place looked like it had been destroyed worse than Brockton Bay, with the skeletal remains of buildings the only sign that life had ever existed. There were skeletal remains of trees but it was clear that this was a world devoid of life.

“Don't breathe the air unfiltered,” my grandfather said. “That's human ash, still floating after more than a quarter of a century.”

“What?”

“Welcome to my home,” he said.

I stared at him. I'd seen his home in his memories, and from what I'd seen it was a hellscape that made Brockton Bay look like a paradise.

This was the world that had been designed to kill our kind, the one where we were the ones who
were the prey and the predators had already eaten the entire world.

“Just remember that they all share a group mind,” he said. “Once they’ve seen a tactic or been exposed to it, they adapt. Not just one of them, but all of them.”

“Where are they?” I asked, looking around anxiously.

“They’ve been asleep for a long time,” he said. “Decades, since the last human fell. They’ve been waiting for one of us to return, and now that we are they are waking up.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shoved me with his magnetic ability and I flew backwards. A moment later a blast of golden light flashed between us.

Scion was here. He could jump worlds, and he could track us between worlds. Why this surprised me I wasn't sure.

The ground underneath us exploded, and I saw hordes of metal monsters, all of them at least as large as Leviathan clawing their way out from underground. Most of them were humanoid, but some of them were in the shape of giant animals, reminding me of Hookwolf. Others were simply balls of moving blades.

They looked more sophisticated than my grandfather's memories from a quarter century ago. Had they been improving themselves since then? If so, why when there was no longer an enemy to fight?

“TARGETS IDENTIFIED. TERMINATE ALL UNITS.”

The horizons suddenly darkened, and for a moment it looked like a swarm of insects massive enough to blot out the sun. It took me a moment to realize that all of them were metallic, versions of the machines below us.

In a way they looked like the humans my father had controlled, a swarm controlled by a single mind moving like glittering fish.

I reached out to try to control them, but there was something wrong. Something twisted whenever I tried and it was like trying to hold onto a fish covered in oil. I could sense them but I could not affect them.

“MEET MY ROBOTIC ARMY, MONSTER!” my grandfather shouted.

Scion stared at us for a second, and then at the robots beneath him. He contemptuously blasted some of them out of existence. The earth below use exploded, leaving a fifty foot crater.

“TARGET REACQUIRED. TERMINATE! TERMINATE! TERMINATE!”

The voices came from a thousand loudspeakers, loud enough that if I hadn't had my force field my eardrums would have burst from the noise alone. As it was I could feel the vibration down to my bones. I strengthened my force field just in case.

Scion blasted the Sentinels who had shifted to fight him, and this time their forms shimmered and they were not destroyed.

A moment later they were on him like a pool of piranha.

My grandfather smirked. “He really is an idiot.”
I stared at him. Had he really put us in the lion's den in order to have his foes destroy each other? The Sentinels were ignoring us now and focusing on the threat that could actually hurt them.

“It's time to go,” my grandfather said. “While they are distracted. We have things to do.”
Slipping through a doorway, my grandfather and I found ourselves in the ruins of a skyscraper.

The walls were simply gone and the wind whistled as it passed through on it's way to the other side. The entire structure swayed in the wind, and I wondered how long a skyscraper would last without maintenance.

The floor we were in looked like some kind of a lab. It had equipment that looked more sophisticated than what I'd seen in Leet's lab, even though the place had been destroyed more than twenty years before.

The doorway behind us remained open, and my grandfather was sending bits and pieces of computer equipment and strange devices that didn't look like anything I could recognize.

“This was the home of Reed Richards, widely considered the greatest Tinker in my world,” my grandfather said. He sneered slightly. “Most people don't understand that he stole most of his inventions from the Skrulls and other alien species he encountered. He was a genius at reverse engineering, however.”

“I thought the man with the Arc reactor was the greatest inventor?” I asked.

“One of them,” my grandfather said. “At least his inventions were mostly his own. Still, Richards was able to singlehandedly advance my world's technological level.”

“So that they could build those things?” I asked.

“I'm sure that some of his inventions ended up inside of them,” my grandfather said.

I could feel metal approaching. Apparently being this far from the fight with Scion, the hive mind felt free to come after us.

My grandfather grimaced. “I was hoping there would be more. Your world will need more after all of this, assuming there is an after.”

“Doormaker,” he called out. “Location three.”

We stepped through the doorway just as the monsters were reaching the base of the tower.

I stumbled as I stepped through into a rubble strewn field. We were in a massive crater, bigger than those that Scion had been creating. This one was at least three hundred feet deep. The wind and ash was if anything worse here.

In the center of the crater was what looked like a massive sledgehammer made out of stone. It was square headed and gray, with a handle wrapped in brown leather. It had an inscription on it that I could not read.

Unlike everything else I'd seen on this world, this hammer looked new, as though the elements were incapable of wearing it down.

“Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy shall possess the power of Thor,” my grandfather said softly.

He reached down hesitantly, and grimaced as his hand wrapped around the hilt. He pulled, and it
was as though the hammer was anchored to the ground.

“Would you like to try?” he asked.

I stared at him for a moment, before shrugging, and reaching out. Was this some sort of Excaliber thing? I certainly had no illusions that I was going to be some kind of king.

The hammer was immovable, even when I tried to cheat and lift it with my power. I probably could have moved it had I been forced to, but it would have required at least as much energy as lifting a battleship. I doubted that would have counted as wielding it anyway.

My grandfather was staring at me with a look that made me a little uncomfortably. Finally he sighed. “It would have been more convenient. Fine. Doormaker, bring Major Ellis.”

The man I'd seen on the screen staggered through the doorway, looking confused. “What's going on?” he asked.

If he'd been under my father's control until just a moment ago it was possible that he might not understand anything.

“Scion has turned against humanity,” my grandfather said. “He is planning to kill billions.”

Ellis stared at him, gaping. He obviously didn't recognize my grandfather. He turned to me, and stiffened.

“You're the Endslayer,” he said.

I nodded. “He's right. The Endbringers are gone. We need your help to fight something far worse than any Endbringer ever thought about being.”

He was silent for a moment, then stood up to attention. “Major Ellis reporting for duty.”

We weren't exactly in his chain of command, but that didn't exist right now anyway.

“Pick up this hammer,” my grandfather said.

Ellis nodded.

He stepped forward and wrapped his hand around the hilt. For a moment it looked like the hammer wasn't going to budge, but then it did.

Lightning exploded less than three feet from me, and while my force field protected me from the sound and the heat, I was blinded for a moment.

When I was able to see again, I stared.

Major Ellis hadn't been a big man, standing maybe an inch shorter than me. The man who stood before me was barely recognizable. He had to have grown almost a foot in height and gained a hundred pounds in muscle.

He was wearing a costume that looked almost as ridiculous as my grandfather's helmet.

A silver helmet made of a kind of metal I'd never felt before had wings on it. His hair had suddenly grown at least six inches. A flowing red cape whipped in the wind. He wore some kind of metal circlets on the front of a blue costume that left his sides bare. A bright gold belt and boots that were
black with gold straps completed the ensemble.

It should have looked gaudy, like something Leet would have come up, but there was something noble about his expression that made it all seem to work.

“Welcome God of Thunder,” my grandfather said.

The ground beneath us began to shake.

“It looks like Scion has finally lost patience,” my grandfather said. “This world is done.

I could see a massive golden light on the horizon, coming toward us at a thousand miles an hour. I could feel the metal in the earth beneath that light disintegrating, along with the planet beneath it.

“When he is done all that will be left is rubble,” my grandfather said. He grimaced again. “I'd hoped that we'd have had more time. There are other places I'd have liked to have visited.”

“Door,” I said nervously. I wasn't sure that even my force field or my grandfather's would survive whatever was coming.

“I'm still not sure what's happening,” Major Ellis said, staring down at his arms which were now massive and muscular. There was no sign of the army fatigues that he had been wearing.

“You've been given great power,” my grandfather said. “Because we need your help to save the world.”

“You've got it,” Major Ellis said.

The doorway opened behind us, and I was relieved. At least they weren't only listening to my grandfather. There might be a situation where he was incapacitated or something.

I stepped through, and we were suddenly on a featureless plane. It looked like we were in the desert.

Another door opened before us, the woman in the fedora stepping through.

“Scion seems fixated on you,” she said. “We don't dare bring you to anywhere that is mission critical. We've put you in Australia to reduce the damage that might occur if he returns early.”

The last thing we needed was for Scion to stumble upon Cauldron. Losing Doormaker and the Clairvoyant would be the worst thing that could happen to us.

I noticed that the lady in the hat wasn't stepping outside the doorway.

“I suppose the creature's dimension is locked the way I assumed.”

“We can't access it despite knowing where it is, no.”

“Bring me the Clairvoyant,' my grandfather said.

She nodded, and a moment later a pale man in his twenties stepped through the doorway. His eyes were burned out, looking like twin ash trays.

I wondered why they hadn't gotten a healer to repair his eyes. As important as he was I'd have given him every comfort and every luxury.

“Taylor, take the location of the dimension Scion is in from his mind without touching him. He can
show you by touching, but that will leave you unconscious for a week.”

“There is no need,” the woman in the hat said. “Mr. Hebert is taking care of that as we speak.”

I realized that Major Ellis had been standing frozen. I hadn't realized he was under my father's control. No wonder the woman had refused to step outside of the doorway. Secure in another dimension she wasn't under his control.

“You know the plan,” my grandfather said. “Are the weapons ready?”

“The new recruit has been making bombs since the moment you left. There hasn't been much time though. Leet has been working, and so have the other Tinkers.”

“Have him deliver whatever you make,” my grandfather said. “We'll do everything we can to hold the rift open and protect him.”

Major Ellis began to spin his hammer, lightning crackling as he did so.

“There were other ways, but all of them would take time we didn't have,” my grandfather said. “What we've done until now has been easy. The real fight is about to begin. Are you ready?”

I swallowed, then nodded.

I was going to have to be, wasn't I?

“It's not working,” the woman in the hat said.

“He's locked the dimension,” my grandfather said. “It doesn't matter.”

He pulled something from his pocket and threw it into the gateway that was trying to form.

“Something created by Victor Von Doom, who probably was our world's greatest Tinker, from designs stolen by Kang from the end of the universe.”

There was an explosion and suddenly the gateway stabilized.

My grandfather grinned humorlessly. “My people had weapons that destroyed entire dimensions. You didn't think we could break into one?”

A moment later he stepped through the portal, and I followed him, cautiously dodging the spinning hammer. I had a feeling that getting hit by a god, even accidentally wouldn't be good for me.

I almost fell as I stepped into empty sky. I caught myself with my power, and I stared down at the planet below me.

We were supposed to fight that?

For a moment I couldn't see anything; the scale was too massive. It almost looked like the sea, but then I realized that it was writhing.

It covered the entire planet in all directions and I was surprised to see that in some ways it was almost beautiful.

How were we going to destroy something like this? It would be like fighting the ocean; no feat that I or my grandfather had ever managed could match something of this size; battleships and aircraft carriers would be tiny pimples on the flesh of this behemoth.
It was a gigantic parasite devouring the Earth I realized suddenly, less human than the cockroaches I'd seen in Winslow's cafeteria. At least we'd shared a common ancestor; this thing was completely alien.

My grandfather was pulling metal through the portal, constructing something.

“Keep him off of me,” he said. “Long enough for me to build this.”

I stared at him. He thought I'd be able to stop Scion from doing whatever he wanted to do? Even with my father's help I'd only been able to dodge him, and I suspected that he hadn't really been trying.

Depending on me alone was bad planning.

“How can I stop him?” I asked.

“Find his brain and you will end him,” my grandfather said. “Unfortunately, there's no way to know whether it's even on this side of the planet.”

A moment later several devices were thrown through the portal. Instinctively I grabbed them with my power, and I realized what they were; the devices that Leet had been building, along with others of an unknown design.

“Maybe he doesn't know we are here,” I said.

“He knows,” my grandfather said, nodding.

The sea was moving beneath us, contracting massively. A moment later the humanoid figure of Scion appeared before us, for the first time looking actually concerned.

I activated the Singularity bomb, and I dropped it, simultaneously opening five different portals at the same time to drop the other weapons on spots across the planet.

He vanished with a flash, presumably to grab and deactivate the weapons. I saw a massive black blast on the horizon, and the Earth rumbled with a sound of agony.

That weapon Leet had made had been a city buster, capable of wiping out a city the size of New York or Mexico city. While it had to have hurt him, none of the other bombs had gone off.

Pain exploded all around me as Scion punched me from behind, throwing me down into it's mass.

It was suddenly gripping me from all sides, putting on more and more pressure, unendurable pressure unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It wasn't the pressure of being at the center of the Earth; it was something closer to a black hole.

My mind suddenly cleared and I gritted my teeth.

I couldn't depend on my grandfather to take care of this monster for me; I'd spent far too much time doing that, to my detriment. I would never become my own hero, my own person as long as I depended on other people to do my work for me.

This world had a huge amounts of metal, untouched by human hands. All it needed was for me to reach down and take it.

I remembered an old story I'd been told once.
“Please don't throw me in that Briar patch,” I muttered.

Scion was too fast for me to hit, but now the whole world was nothing but him, and there was no way he could dodge.

I reached down into the mantle of the Earth and I ripped as hard as I'd ever ripped before. This wasn't the kind of power that would rip a boat, or even an aircraft carrier. I pulled every piece of metal I could from deep within the crust, every piece in a radius of at least ten miles.

Each piece of metal I made sharp, and as I pulled them from the Earth I had them begin to spin.

Each piece was it's own miniature Hookwolf, cutting away at the flesh of Scion with him having no way to get away from any of them.

The pressure on my force field suddenly vanished, and then the sea of shards around me that looked almost like crystal convulsed, and I found myself being forcefully ejected up into the air.

I could see my grandfather fighting Scion, his device still being built behind him.

Doubling the speed of the metal I had control of was easy now that I didn't have to contend with the force on my shell.

Scion turned on me and a moment later pain exploded all through the front of my shield. I found myself flying backwards head over heels, the world spinning around me for what seemed like an eternity until I smashed into a mountain that rose above the sea of monsters below.

I'd lost control of my metal somewhere along the way, dizzy and sick, and I felt bile rising in my throat.

My head was spinning and I wasn't sure which way was up.

A moment later I felt pain again, and Scion was there, his face frozen in a rictus of anger. He was pushing, now, pushing me through the mountain with enough force that I couldn't stop him.

Every time I tried to get control and stop my backward slide, he hit the shield again. The world around me would have been completely dark, leaving me blind if he hadn't been glowing. I could see rock and stone all around me as he pushed me toward the center of the planet.

Could I survive being trapped at the Earth's molten core?

It was getting hotter; we were moving faster and faster through solid rock. I guessed that Scion was hoping to break my force field, leaving me burning to death in an instant.

His power flashed, and I realized that he was probably trying what Behemoth had been known to do, negating my powers.

I grimaced and I shifted frequencies on my shield. It left me vulnerable for a moment, but he didn't follow up on it.

I realized suddenly that I could feel more metal than I'd ever felt in my entire life. It was a sea of metal, and endless supply that seemed to extend in all directions.

Had we already made it through eighteen hundred miles of mantle?

There was a layer of metal underneath that which was fourteen hundred miles deep of liquid metal, thousands of degrees.
A plan suddenly appeared in my mind, even as he continued pounding on my shell.

Behind me I gathered my energies. It was hard, but I strained. This was the place where my magnetism was created, my place of power. I opened a warp.

We were suddenly in the space above the planet. Scion paused and I pulled away from him, but I didn't close the portal, which was massive.

It was growing, as big as Winslow at first. Under unimaginable pressure the molten metal exploded out of it, propelled like a bomb, raining down on the Earth below which was spinning at a thousand miles an hour.

Scion screamed in agony as the portal spat hot death out onto his unprotected real body.

I pushed to make the portal larger, twice as large, four times as large, eight. It was growing geometrically harder to hold the portal, but I was doing damage to large swaths of Scion, so I couldn't stop.

The inhaler in my pocket seemed to call to me. If there was ever a time to use it, this would be it.
For a moment I thought I had it. My hand tightened on the inhaler as the molten steel rained hell down on a wide swath of the monster below me. It wasn't nearly enough to destroy a creature of this size, not at a thousand miles an hour, but it wasn't doing him any good.

The projection of Scion was screaming, but a moment later everything shimmered, and the projection and the monster underneath us vanished out of existence.

I stared. Had I somehow won?

The portal I had made collapsed and I sighed with relief, letting go of the inhaler in my pocket.

I knew that I hadn't; according to my grandfather the other Entity had left behind a corpse when it had died, which meant that this one should have as well.

“He moved to another universe,” my grandfather said from behind me. “It doesn't matter though; the device I used to track him has nanomachines designed to replicate itself, feeding on dead particles of the monster and lying unnoticed.”

“He's going to be back,’ I said.

“As soon as he catches his breath,” my grandfather said. “I don't think it will take long.”

Behind him, the device was continuing to be constructed. My grandfather was now pulling from the molten metal left behind on the ground, and the device was growing larger.

“He won't have had time to seal off the universe he's in now,” my grandfather said. “It'll take him a little time to settle in. It won't matter in the long run. I've got a plan.”

He always did. Unfortunately his plans hadn't worked so well in his home universe, which was why I was a little sceptical.

I didn't complain that he'd left me alone to fight off a monster that could have wiped out the entire Protectorate without blinking an eye. I wasn't sure I'd be able to survive another onslought like that.

The monster had the power to shut off powers. It hadn't encountered powers like mine in the past, which was why it wasn't working yet. However, it seemed unlikely that those creatures hadn't met other species that had powers, and I had a feeling that it was only a matter of time before Scion had my measure and that of my grandfather, at which point it would be all over.

If I were him I'd have simply left us here and went back to destroying Earth. After all, why attack difficult creatures when you could do all the damage in the world and simply jump away if they got too close.

I doubted he was going to do that though. I'd hurt him, and it had been at least thirty years since he'd really been hurt. It might have been much longer. I doubted any of the races it had encountered before had done any real kind of damage; a race that was able to do massive damage probably would have been able to keep it from getting off the planet, even if it had resulted in mutual destruction for the creature and the race.
My grandfather's universe had many alien species, an entire universe filled with them, uncountable as the stars. The powers and knowledge Tinkers had came from other races in my own universe, so there had to be others out there.

My grandfather looked back at the device, and he nodded, apparently satisfied. I felt him using his power and a moment later the device itself shimmered.

It was gone, and he started building another, different device.

“What are we...” I began, when my world exploded into pain again as I was hit from behind.

This time Scion was blasting me with those golden beams of light, and blasting at my grandfather as well. My grandfather's second device disintegrated into nothingness, and both of us went flying.

I found myself going through a doorway, my grandfather appearing beside me a moment later.

We were back above the planet, with Scion below us. Apparently whatever dimensional lock he'd used to keep us out was gone. My grandfather had thought it would be a matter of time, but I had to wonder if perhaps I'd destroyed whatever piece of the monster that allowed it to do so.

The metal from before was gone too; we were in a truly different universe.

It took me a moment, but I saw the shattered remains of familiar machines floating in space above us. I could feel them now, even though I hadn't been able to affect them before. We were back in my grandfather's original world, and I wondered if he'd somehow arranged for Scion to come here or if this had been Scion's way of taunting us.

“Is there any way of identifying his brain?” I asked.

If there were, we'd have a chance. After all, it wouldn't matter if he was as large as the sea if his brain was something we could target.

My grandfather shook his head. “If we had more time, or if we knew more about how to discriminate one Agent from another.”

He was silent for a moment. “There is a way to end this, but it will take both of us, and it will take time that he will not give us. We will need help.”

“Who?” I asked, my heart sinking as I realized who he meant.

I hadn't known my team for long, but I'd already grown fond of some of them. They had been the first people to have depended on me while still being able to take care of themselves.

“Door?” he said. “Send in the team to the top of the mountain over there.”

There was a mountain that reached above the living mass of Scion. My grandfather gestured, and the top of the mountain sheered off; there was a lot of metallic ore inside.

Onto the plateau stepped my team. They stumbled as they passed through the door, released from my father's control. Major Ellis followed them, but they didn't seem to notice him, too disoriented.

“What's going on?” Alchemy said.

I pointed down at the roiling mass below us.

“That is Scion's real body.” I said.
They stared at it with expressions of revulsion and horror.

“He put little pieces of himself into parahumans, giving them powers and forcing them to fight for his own amusement. He did this to all parahumans, giving them powers designed so that they could not fight against him.”

I took a breath. “All parahumans get their powers from him, and none of them can stand against him. Fortunately, you aren’t parahumans. You are mutants, and you have powers that he is not prepared for.”

They stared up at me. I couldn’t tell how they were taking what I was saying. Having my grandfather’s skill at reading people would have been useful.

“Scion’s trying to destroy the world,” I said. “All the worlds. I know I said you wouldn’t have to fight, but all bets are off now.”

They weren’t even in costumes, simply in their civilian clothes, caught unaware while going about their civilian lives.

It seemed to take them a moment to understand what I was saying. As far as they were concerned Scion was the world’s greatest hero; hearing that he planned genocide would be like hearing that Legend planned to kill all the puppies.

Major Ellis stepped onto the platform behind them.

“We have to fight,” he said. “For our families, our friends, our country, our world. If we don’t we are dead, and there is no one else who can do what we do as well as we can.”

They all stared at him, this gaudily dressed stranger, but there was something compelling about his voice. I wondered whether it was a power, or if he was really just charismatic.

Scion suddenly appeared beside me, but before he could smash me again, the hammer flew by my face, smashing into him and sending him flying into the next mountain range. The hammer returned.

“We’re trying to save the world,” I said. “Keep him off of us.”

They nodded.

Scion was already flying back toward us when Alchemy gestured.

The air covering Scion’s real body turned into something that burned. The world turned into a sea of fire and Scion froze and screamed again.

Frost sent shards of ice flying toward him, and Stone was already pulling the earth up.

I didn’t have much hope of them actually doing much damage, or even slowing him down for a long time, but hopefully it would be enough.

“What are we,” I began, and then I saw my grandfather reaching for his inhaler.

My eyes widened. He nodded at me, and I reached for mine.

The moment I took the first puff into my lungs the world exploded into colors. I could feel my powers expending exponentially, and I suddenly felt at one with the universe.

I could feel what my grandfather was doing, and I felt a sudden excitement. It was something bigger
than anything either of us had ever attempted. Even if we failed, it would be something for the ages, and if we succeeded we might actually win.

My power was growing, but my whole body felt like it was on fire, and it wasn't the fact that the air was actually on fire from whatever my team was doing, I could barely hear them or even see.

All I could focus on was joining my powers to those of my grandfather, forcing the universe to bend to our will.

Still, the universe tended to want to stay the way it was. On a small scale changing was easy, but on a scale like this...

My power was growing, and I could feel my grandfather's power joining my own, but it was the hardest thing I'd ever done. It was like trying to open the hardest jar in the world when there wasn't the least bit of give.

It wasn't working.

I looked back, and I could see my team fighting. There was a look of fear and resignation on their faces, the knowledge that no matter what else happened they were almost certain to die. They were dodging a being who couldn't be dodged, fighting someone who couldn't be fought, and as I watched I saw Stone hit by one of those golden beams of light.

He disintegrated into a flash of light, so thoroughly destroyed that not even ash remained.

I turned back to my grandfather and gritted my teeth. My team was dying for me, and soon I would be the one who was dying. After that it would be Dad and the dockworkers and everybody I'd ever cared about in Brockton Bay and the entire world.

The lid to the jar gave a little, and a moment later it began to give a little more.

I pushed myself harder than I'd ever pushed myself. And I could feel the portal opening up beneath us.

It was massive, covering most of the face of the planet.

A moment before it opened I could see doors opening beneath each of my team members, pulling them away.

We'd opened a portal into the heart of the sun, and a moment later nuclear fire covered the entire face of the Earth.

Scion's physical form froze, struggling in agony as the fire of a star washed over the half of his body on this side of the world, burning his flesh and his powers away, diminishing him with every second that passed as the planet rotated beneath us at a thousand miles an hour.

It was what I had done before, but on a massive scale beyond anything I could have comprehended.

Scion was frozen and didn't seem able to move. I forced myself to grin, even though it was taking all of my augmented power to keep the portal open.

We were winning.

Scions form began to shimmer, and I groaned. He was going to leave the universe, again, ducking out before we could finish him.
My grandfather's device shimmered into existence beside him.

“It won't work!” he shouted. “The nanomachines have reached a saturation point, and they have trapped you here.”

Indeed, the shimmering stopped and the mass of Scion settled back on the planet.

I wondered what would happen when we'd burned enough of the nanomachines away. Would a greatly diminished Scion simply fade away, no longer able to destroy all the worlds but still able to destroy one world at a time?

That would still be better than the alternative.

I felt a fire growing in my chest. It was getting harder to breathe. Something was wrong.

The power inside me was overwhelming me, and I felt myself wavering.

The sea beneath me turned white and I suddenly saw Scion's flesh ripple and change into something else. Suddenly instead of burning away the flesh was simply there, unaffected by the fire.

He'd adapted.

It was too much for me, and I lost my grip on the portal, which disintegrated. I felt my power flickering, and a moment later my shield was gone and I was falling toward the flesh of Scion far below. All I could hear was the wind, and no matter how I tried to assert my will my power felt like it was gone.

His flesh was undoubtedly still thousands of degrees, so I had little doubt that when I hit it I would die. The impact would probably kill me long before I burned to death though.

All I could hope was that we had done enough damage to cripple him, to have made him unable to complete his plan. We had burned a lot of him away in the short time we'd had, at least half of him having burned away to nothingness.

I grunted as I slammed into something. I struggled to open my eyes, wondering if Scion was going to torture me before finally killing me.

Instead I stared up into a face that was made of silver.

It didn't make sense and I blinked. A moment later I realized that we were on some sort of surface of flowing silvery metal, even if I couldn't feel any of it.

The alien that was holding me was already holding my grandfather, who was grinning like a madman.

“He can feed all he wants,’ he was saying. “Without guilt, without qualm. This is a world where feeding is just.”

The alien stared at us and nodded.

Looking above him I could see something. It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing. It seemed like I was seeing some kind of artificial structure that eclipsed the sky.

What didn't make sense was that I could also see the moon, and the moon was in front of the structure, which meant that it had to be so large that it was incomprehensible.
My hair was rising, and I realized that whatever it was was so huge that it had its own gravitational pull.

“Come Galactus!” my grandfather shouted. “Feed to your hearts content!”

He looked almost hysterical, exhausted and as powerless as I did.

I realized suddenly; the device he’d built hadn’t been the thing that had locked Scion into this dimension. It had been a beacon, one that had sent out a message, an invitation to something that was more ancient and awe inspiring than Scion had ever considered being.

I could see it now, a being who was dropping from space to land on the scorched Earth beneath us.

He wasn’t any larger than Leviathan, but his face shifted and changed, switching from that of one alien race to another.

I felt a sudden terror in my bones. This was an ancient britches entity, the Cthulhu of this world.

A machine much larger than he was levitated downward, plunging into the surface of the Earth.

Scion was there suddenly, blasting away at the abomination, but the creature simply ignored him, adjusting his machine as it sank into the Earth.

My grandfather grinned at me. “How to do you kill an unstoppable bear? With a bigger unstoppable bear!”

I tried to smile, but the pain in my chest grew too great.

The last thing I heard were Scion’s agonizing screams, shouts that would have boiled my bones and melted my face off if I’d been anywhere close to them.

Somehow, his pain didn't bother me at all. We'd done what we'd come to do, after all. Dad would be safe, the city would be safe.

The Endbringers were gone, which meant that the world could start the process of rebuilding. Humanity could start reaching for the stars again, and if they met Scion’s kin, this time they would be ready.

If it cost me my life, it would all be worth it.

In the end, even if I hadn't wanted to admit it, I'd always dreamed of being a hero. That's what it meant to leave the world a better place than it was when you'd gotten it.

Maybe Dad would take up politics. Maybe Brockton Bay would become a new shining jewel, the crown of the country. Maybe it wouldn’t. But at least everyone would get to live.

We'd won, and that was all that mattered.
“You both had heart attacks,” Panacea was saying. “I told Eric that the formula wasn't ready, but he didn't listen to me.”

“It was never going to be safe,” my grandfather said. “And there wasn't time to tweak it until it met some hypothetical point of approval. One can't simply increase powers without there being a price.”

“You both almost died,” Panacea said. She leaned forward. “An ordinary hospital would not have saved you. I can't emphasize it enough.”

We were both lying in hospital beds, in a place I did not recognize. Cauldron had undoubtedly supplied them, which meant this might not even be on my Earth.

That was probably for the best considering that neither I nor my grandfather could use our powers at the moment. Apparently the strain of what we'd done had been too much, and they'd simply shut down.

Panacea assured us they would return in time, but even with her abilities it wasn't going to happen immediately.

In the meantime we would be vulnerable to every crackpot and villain who held a grudge, from former Empire 88 members, to ABB members who resented me supplanting Lung as top dog, to others who simply thought I might be a threat someday.

After all, we'd just changed the dynamic for the entire world.

Villains were tolerated in part because the Endbringers needed bodies thrown at them, and because they outnumbered the heroes three or four to one. That was over now, and I suspected that a lot of villains would have a rude awakening when they discovered that the revolving door from prison was suddenly closed.

Some people were likely to resent that and blame me.

Others would undoubtedly want to take me hostage, try to get control over me while I was still weak. They'd use masters or other powers, maybe try to brainwash me.

That was the argument the lady in the hat used, although I suspected that Cauldron wanted to use us for their own ends.

The thing was, I had the strangest feeling that Cauldron wasn't sure what those were. After all, they'd spent decades sacrificing their lives and morality to the cause of preserving the human race. Now that they'd accomplished it, what else was left?

I saw the uncertainty and confusion on the faces of Legend and Eidolon. Alexandria was better at hiding it, but I knew it was there.

Once I was well enough, I planned on telling them what I thought they should do with the power they'd accumulated.

First, reversing the damage that they themselves had done. Find ways to heal and restore the Case 53’s, something I had no doubt my grandfather might be able to help with, although even on his own world there had been a noted Case 53 who hadn't been curable permanently by their world's greatest
Tinker.

Second, reversing the damage that the Endbringers and Scion had done to the world. Helping economies, encouraging Tinkers who had devices that could actually make life better to come forward and actually change the world.

Third, helping us develop our defenses so that the next time a creature like that came back we would be ready. My grandfather's world had been attacked by aliens almost on a daily basis. We'd been ridiculously lucky on our world.

It was possible that the death of Scion might have sent out an alert to other members of his species. While I had no reason to believe that, I didn't have any reason not to, and we couldn't afford to assume that it wouldn't have happened.

The same trick was unlikely to work again, so we needed every technology that we could find, with help from mutant minds to break parahuman technology down and get rid of the artificially imposed limits the Entities used to protect themselves.

We needed to work on interstellar travel, so that even if the Earth and all its iterations should be destroyed humanity would continue to exist somewhere.

Looking into exploring other universes and borrowing whatever technology humans had created there to make our world safer seemed like the only smart thing. We'd only won because my grandfather's world had stolen technology from aliens and turned it into something even better.

“Neither one of you are listening to me,” Panacea said, staring at us. “It's like I'm talking to the same person. Why do I even bother?”

I fought not to smile. I felt fine except for my lack of powers.

She stood up. “I'd like to say not to expect me to help you again, but we all know that would be a lie. Next time, though, I'm going to charge you some real money.”

My grandfather chuckled. “I can't think of any better use for it.”

She scowled and without saying anything turned and left.

“I'm proud of you,” my grandfather said.

“You're an ass.”

He hadn't shared a quarter of his plans with me, which meant that he hadn't trusted me. Of course, it was possible that he'd known that I was spending the last few weeks plotting against him, which probably hadn't made trusting any easier.

He shrugged. “Sometimes I am. I like to think that the things I have done are justified by the circumstances I have been in, but I'm sure that not everyone would agree.”

“So what now?” I asked. “Are you planning to take over the world?”

“I don't see why I should, as long as the world is moving along an appropriate course.”

A course that he approved of, he meant. I wondered if he realized just how arrogant he sounded. Was that what power inevitably led to?

I was glad that unlike him I was totally reasonable and open minded.
“And what would that course be?”

“Acceptance of our people,” he said. “A lack of bigotry and hatred even among humans. A future that will lead humanity to the stars.”

“That sounds nice and all, but it sounds a little unrealistic.”

“It won’t happen in a generation,” he said. “Even though your world doesn’t have a quarter of the prejudices mine did. The Protectorate has done a fine job of promoting the idea that people with powers are heroes.”

I stared at the bed sheet.

“Do you think they’ll keep doing that now that the Endbringers are gone?”

“That’s why we have to work as advocates. Your team is an important part of that, convincing people that mutants are heroes too.”

He was silent for a moment. “I think that was one of our mistakes. We allowed prejudice and bigotry to make us insular. We focused inward, which allowed people to hate unrestrained.”

From what I’d seen in his memories, his people had done a lot more fighting of each other than they had actually helping people. That probably hadn't helped.

Of course, some of the terrorism my grandfather had enacted hadn't helped either.

“You scare me sometimes,” I admitted. “I've seen inside your head, and you need help. As powerful as both of us were... and will be again, neither of us can afford to be anything less than completely sane.”

He stared at me, then chuckled. “No one is completely sane. Allow an old man a few failings.”

“I mean it,” I said, forcing myself to sit up in bed. “You've got all the power that I have, which is bad enough, but you also have all that Tinker knowledge from your world. You've got things in your head that could wipe out countries.”

“Entire universes,” he admitted softly.

“So don't just laugh it off. People like us don't get to be crazy. The world can't afford for us to be.”

“Why do you think that I pushed you to form your own group?” he asked softly.

“What?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“You think I don't know that there might be a time when I need to be stopped? Who in this entire world can I trust to do it?”

“I don't think I can,” I admitted. “You've got all the experience in the world, and I'm just a fifteen year old kid.”

“You held Scion off without any help from me,” my grandfather said. “Do you think I would have trusted you with that if I didn't think you were capable?”

“It might have been nice to have gotten a little more warning.”

“Would it have helped, really?” he asked. “Or would your own anxiety have crippled you?”
I scowled.

He didn't even notice when he was making plans for other people without consulting them. He just assumed that he knew better.

While I was fairly sure that I wasn't like that, I'd have to work to keep from getting that way.

“We're going to have to be ready in case more like Scion come back,” I said. “That's going to take technology.”

“It's actually a project I'm planning that's going to keep me too busy to take over the world,” my grandfather said. “Building star ships to take mutant kind off this planet.”

“Just mutantkind?”

“Humanity will benefit from all the subsidiary technologies involved,” my grandfather said. “And once all of us have a foothold to other worlds, the odds that we will go extinct will be much less.”

I nodded.

Hopefully having saved humanity would keep all the lawsuits to a minimum. Somehow when money was on the line people lost track of the big picture.

The door opened suddenly, and my Dad stepped into the room. He looked haggard and broken, as though he hadn't shaved in a week. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked as though he'd been crying.

“Taylor!” he said. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “Thanks for all the help. If you hadn't done the things with the bugs I'd probably be dead right now.”

He stopped suddenly, his shoulders slumped.

“It's gone,” he said. “All of it.”

“What?” I asked.

I'd heard a lot of people had survived in the rural part of Australia, even if the major cities were gone.

“My powers,” he said. “I can't feel any of them.”

I was quiet for a minute. My own powers weren't particularly up to snuff at the moment.

“Do you have any idea what it was like to control every power on the whole planet all at once?” he asked. “It was like being God. I knew everything and I was everyone.”

He hadn't known me. I couldn't help but think that it was a good thing that he'd lost his powers. He hadn't exactly been very involved before he'd gotten his powers, but afterwards he'd been a shell of a man. It had almost been like an addiction for him.

“Maybe it'll come back,” I said lamely.

He shook his head. “These people... Cauldron told me that I drained every last bit out of it. It's not coming back.”
They'd studied powers more than anyone, so they'd know. I struggled to keep my relief off my face. Maybe this meant that I would actually get my Dad back.

“Is that such a bad thing?” I asked. “It's been a while since we've just been Taylor and her Dad.”

He was quiet for a moment, and then he sighed. “I haven't been the best father, have I?”

“I wouldn't mind seeing a little more of you,” I admitted. “I'm going to need help when I start to put the city back together.”

He nodded. “Well, at least you'll never have to go back to Winslow.”

Now that it was a crater in the ground, nobody was.

“I've got plans for the world,” I said. I glanced over at my grandfather. “We both do. I think we'll need all the help we can get, and I'd love for you to be part of it.”

He sighed and sat down next to my bed.

“I'll do what I can.”

There was going to be an unending list of things to do. Hopefully I still had a super team to lead, assuming that thing with Scion and losing Stone hadn't scared them off. There was all the work that putting the city, and the country and the world back together, to bringing people's lives to a place where they weren't defeated all of the time.

My grandfather's ideas about reaching for the stars seemed almost unimaginable, but his people had stolen that knowledge from aliens.

With a little luck it would only be a matter of time before we were reaching out to other species in the universe, warning them about the Entities and helping them build up their own defenses.

Furthermore, we couldn't just explore the other planets on our universe. We had an infinity of other universes on our own world to explore. It was going to be a massive undertaking, more than enough for a hundred lifetimes.

I likely wouldn't ever get to see the end result of what my grandfather and I were planning, unless he had some kind of longevity tech or a time machine or something.

Even so, incremental change was enough.

People needed hope; throughout my entire life it had been a unspoken understanding that the Endbringers were going to end things, that hope did not exist.

People had lost their way, and sometimes that meant they needed something to follow, a guiding star. While I hardly thought I was worthy of something like that, no one else seemed ready to pick up that mantle.

I'd have to do my best.

Watching my grandfather, using my team to actually help people, advising Cauldron... even if I didn't go back to Arcadia my plate was going to be very full for the foreseeable future.

Somehow, though it didn't bother me. I actually felt optimistic that things might actually get better.

It took me a moment to recognize the feeling I was experiencing as my father clasped my hand and I
looked over at my grandfather, my family as complete as it had been in a long time.

I had my family, and I had a purpose in life. I had a chance of actually accomplishing my goals. For once, life didn't feel like a storm waiting to rain on my parade.

Was this what happiness felt like?

If it wasn't, it was close enough.

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